

“WOMEN IN REVOLT! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990”

*Now, more than ever, we need to be aware not only of our achievements but of the dangers and difficulties lying in the future. We will need all our wit and courage to make sure that women's voices are heard, their work seen and written about. That is our task for the future.*

- Linda Nochlin, 2006

*As the exhibition presented over 100 artists, my article does not mention many artworks and artists that deserve recognition and artworks which moved and inspired me.*

Tate Britain's "Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990" which was on display November 2023 - April 2024, presented a comprehensive and versatile display of works related to the second wave feminist movement in the UK. Mapping the personal as the political, the exhibition explored the works of more than 100 artists spanning over two decades, and showcased issues ranging from equal pay protests to inequality in the domestic sphere, exploring women's lives and protests in and outside the home. It showcased works in various mediums and styles, like video installations, photographs, collages, sculptures, sociological surveys, protest posters, performances and many more. It is one of Tate Britain's biggest exhibitions to this day and conveyed what it means to be a woman in protest. Other topics included the lesbian and black feminist movements, excluded from the initial second wave feminist groups. Some of the artists in the exhibition are well-known and famous in the world of art, like Margaret Harrison, Sue Richardson, Mary Kelly and Bobby Baker, but it also explores some lesser-known artists.

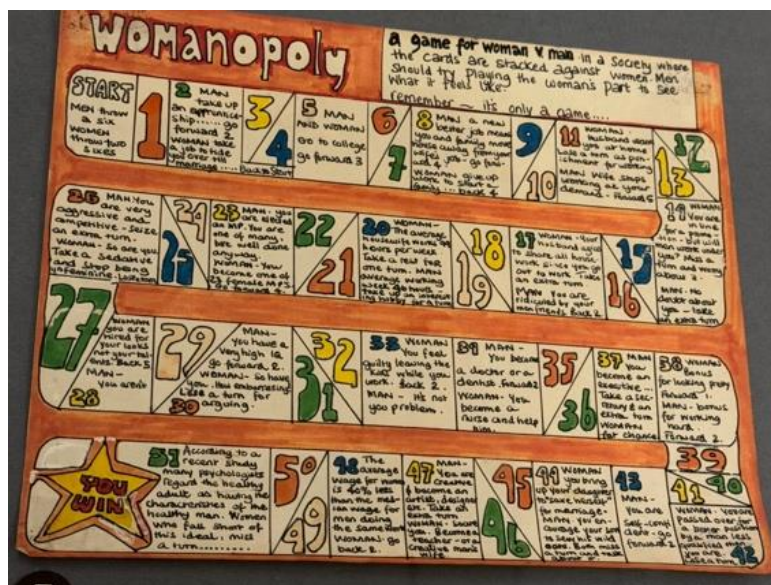
Because of the variety of artists, themes, issues and movements, this exhibition allowed all visitors to find an artwork that resonates with them, an artist to connect with and to explore what it meant to be a woman whose silence was unrecognised and considered normal. The exhibition was an excellent exploration of the social scene of the second-wave feminist movement, a comprehensive display that presented the history of the movement. However, it felt like the power of some of these works had been diminished. In a space that was all about protest and taking power, it felt like the scream of fury against injustice in the space was heard through noise cancelling headphones — it was there, yet barely heard. In an exhibition that is all about women's voices, does their fury remain unheard once again?

I went to see the exhibition twice - once with two friends from my course, and once by myself. What I thoroughly enjoyed about the exhibition was the vast research that had been done for it and the amount of information it provided the visitor with. From the wall text to the six-part podcast series made by Tate Britain with artists from the exhibition, what fascinated me was the abundance of knowledge that the exhibition cultivated and made accessible. The entry to the exhibition had not only information about the display and the artists we were about to see, but also resources for women if they need information and support (like "Fertility Network UK", "Refuge", "Scope" and others). The goal of the exhibition appeared outlined from the very beginning - to spread awareness and knowledge and to literally talk about women.

## RISING WITH FURY

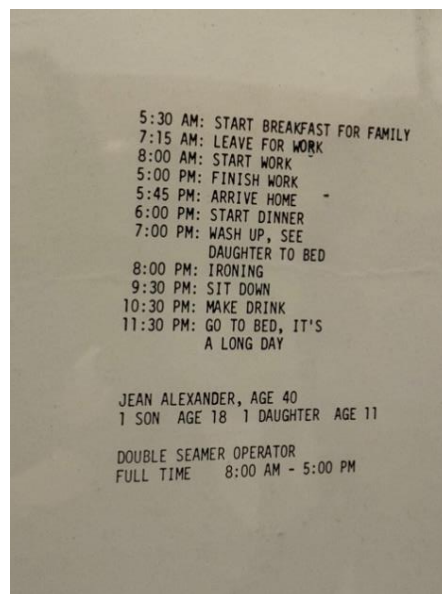
Entering the space, one is greeted by a bustling abundance of works. The walls of the gallery were filled with photographs and posters, alongside a glass display of magazines and zine publications. This room captured the beginning of the second wave of the feminist movement, with the protests for equal pay and equal rights. The “fury” in this room was portrayed through the collection of works that protest women’s place in society, such as the posters made by the group See Red Women’s Workshop - for example their poster *Protest* (1974) which protests against the mass media image of women, in which a green woman with red hair, and furrowed brows, appears to be “vomiting” images of women that were likely to be seen in art and the media, like a woman wearing a bikini with a sash that says “Miss Cute”. Next to the poster stand Chandan Fraser’s photographs of the Women’s Liberation Workshop’s march against the anti-trade union, and Sue Crockford’s film *A Woman’s Place* (1972) which documented the women’s liberation movement first national conference and march. The film echoes across the room and alongside the photographs presents the passion and fury of the protest for equal rights. I was fascinated by the two works, because they were not staged or drawn or crafted. They were representations of women getting together to speak about something considered secondary, unimportant, unspeakable - women’s rights.

Alongside that, there was a display of different magazines and zine publications of the time - the one that caught my eye was a drawing of a made-up game called *Womanopoly* in which the rules for men and women are different. One space on the “board” reads: “MAN - You have a very high IQ. Go forward 2. WOMAN - So have you, how embarrassing! Lose a turn for arguing”. Reading this board game was quite amusing, however also bittersweet. The made-up game, with rules that sound absurd, is sadly very believable and true. Women and men can possess the same qualities, yet those qualities are perceived differently for each gender. It makes one think that even though today there are laws against gender-discrimination, the same “rules of life” seem to apply, and women and men continue to be treated as fundamentally different.



Womanopoly, zine publication, c.1970s, Tate Britain, photo taken by author.

The room finishes with Margaret Harisson's, Kay Hunt's and Mary Kelly's incredible project *Women & Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-75* (1973-5) which presents the working conditions and women's labour at a metal box making factory in Bermondsey. The artists gathered data through interviews, archival research and observation, with over 150 women taking part in the project. On the wall, there were cards that document the daily life of women working in the factory in a very report-like way, with the name of the woman, their occupation, hours of work and the times of day and their activities. For example, one of the cards reads:



A plate from *Women & Work* illustrating a woman's daily routine, Margaret Harisson, Kay Hunt and Mary Kelly, 1973-75, Tate Britain, photo taken by author.

The rest of the cards are similar. In their simple language and blunt scientific-like observations, this data portrays the women's labour as not confined to the spaces of unequal pay, but also very much present in the domestic space where responsibilities were unequally distributed. Above the row of data is a row of women's roles in the factory, with the number of men and women currently holding that position. And most of those jobs were practiced only by women, like for example fork packer or line quality inspector. Next to that are videos with further data and research, and for the visitor of the Tate there were books outlining women's labour, their pay and men's position and salary in the same space and job position. The work expects the viewer to be as thorough in their reading and analysis as the artists were. To grasp its impact the viewer must spend a while with the artwork, with the data, analysis, audio clips and video material. Thus, the first room of the exhibition set the tone for the exhibition as an exploration of the socio-political scene of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **THE MARXIST WIFE STILL DOES THE HOUSEWORK**

This theme continues onto the next room which explored the inequality in the household after women had asserted their right to equal pay and to work free from discrimination and harassment. With Gina Birch's *3 Minute Scream* (1977) echoing across the room, there was a feeling of discomfort and fury against unjust misunderstanding. I focused particularly on the first part of the room, which had artworks dealing with fertility, the prejudiced medical system, and what "reproductive labour" means. On the left wall of the entrance, one faced Cosey Fanni

Tutti's performance *Woman's Roll* (1978) in which the artist cut her clothing and created artificial wounds with make-up and berries. The performance is captured in thirty photographs which show Tutti in various poses, laid on the ground or on her hands and knees bending her back with tape around her waist, fully nude. There is something intimate in the images, with the original audience completely excluded from the photos. It feels like it is just you and the artist, and witnessing her fake blood, which in the black and white images looks almost real, makes the various poses and processes her body goes through look painful, slow, like she is entrapped by them.

After Tutti is Judy Clark's *Cycle* (1973), a piece that explores the menstrual and lunar cycles. Using materials such as wood, contraceptive pills and menstrual blood, Clark attempts at presenting a woman's cycle in an "organised and ordered manner" so as to not appear as dangerous as media and medical industries make it sound. There is still to this day a stigma surrounding a woman's cycle, as well as misconceptions about the contraceptive pill and how it affects a woman's body, so this piece appears relevant even today, and made me linger on a while longer. Next to it are photographs of Catherine Elwes's performance *Menstruation I* (1979) in which she wore a white dress and as she bled on a circular white sheet, she moved about, drew and wrote. Elwes writes "I wanted to dislodge the negative value associated with biological femininity" - by showing menstruation as a natural process, rather than something that must remain hidden or taboo, Elwes tries to dismantle the view of period blood as inappropriate, disgusting and revolting. The performance is uncomfortable to watch, and confronts how women feel when they are judged and have to hide what they biologically cannot control.



Shots of *Woman's Roll* by Cosey Fanni Tutti, 1978, photographs, Tate Britain, photos taken by author



Judy Clark, *Cycle*, 1973, wood, Perspex, contraceptive pills, menstrual blood, Tate Britain, photo taken by author

## **OH BONDAGE! UP YOURS!**

The next room transports the viewer into the punk and post-punk movement, and the DIY method's multidisciplinary approaches and challenge to the status quo. Being able to explore other methods of protest and art, these artists were freed from the expectations of what a woman should be and what art should be. They did not want to be labelled as “feminist”, they just wanted to live and to be themselves, no labels necessary. Jill Westwood's photographs *Transparent-Female* (c.1983), *Sovereign-Female-Subaltern-Male* (c.1982), *Hermetic-Female* (c.1982) and *Alpha-Female Triptych* (1983) explore her fetish as a dominatrix, subverting the “normalised” sexual relationship of male-dominant, female-subordinate. By exploring her identity, her sexual desires, her sexual relationship with her husband, the artist, covered with latex, seated in powerful and dominating poses, explores the subversion of the status-quo and the possibilities that underground bars and clubs allowed to explore their true self.



Jill Westwood *Transparent-Female* (c.1983), *Sovereign-Female-Subaltern-Male* (c.1982), *Hermetic-Female* (c.1982), *Potent-Female* (c.1982), *Alpha-Female Triptych* (1983), photographs, Tate Britain, photo taken by author



Next to her works are seven photographs of Tutti's *Incognito* (1979-2021) series, which documented some of the artist's striptease outfits. In these photos, the viewer sees Tutti in a white overall, with holes going from her ankles all the way to her lower back. In the photographs, the artist appears to be stripping, taking off the leotard. Next to them is the actual costume. Looking at a striptease piece captured in still images, it feels like the feeling of eroticism is now reserved only for the artist, for the self, rather than for the pleasure of the viewer. As a viewer, we seem uninvited in this space of pleasure, we are merely observing a woman knowing her own body, her own desires, a woman in full control.



Cosey Fanni Tutti, part of *Incognito*, 1979-2021, photographs, Tate Britain, photo taken by author

These works were mentioned at length in a panel discussion at Tate Britain I attended in March, "The Erotic Self", in which Westwood and Tutti discussed their art with Rebecca Maybury. With *Incognito*, Tutti explained, she could explore her own life as a professional striptease artist, and the leotards actually reminded her of different experiences, emotions and triggers from her past. Both artists commented that their works include a lot of the erotic, showing how charged female sexuality is part of life, and how intimately and truly their life is their art. For Tutti, the erotic is always within, it is about knowing yourself and the power you hold. The two artists, put next to each other in the exhibition, dismantle the view on female sexuality as something shameful, as something that had to remain hidden, something that must be censored. The exhibition brings in the question of censorship of authentic female sexuality and erotic artworks. As Westwood commented in the talk, society does not "like empowered women doing things that make them strong". The artworks reveal the authenticity of the female erotic self as something that should be discussed and brought forward.

This room revealed the lost of inhibitions, the rejection of self-censoring and the reveal of the true authentic female self through art.

## **GREENHAM WOMEN ARE EVERYWHERE**

From exploring erotic self-portraits and punk protests, the exhibition next takes us to an actual protest and the documentation of it. It presents the women's march from Cardiff to the Royal Air Force base at Greenham in Berkshire on 5 September 1981 against the housing of 96 nuclear missiles at the site. Quite a significant transition in terms of themes, this room explores

women's lives in the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, the sense of community created in protest sites, and the women's self-proclaimed feminist anti-nuclear position through banners, collages, sculptures and newsletters created by the Greenham women.

The most powerful artwork for me in that room was the sculpture *Greenhamp Common* by Margaret Harrison. A metal fence was erected in the middle of the room, with a mirror behind which reflected not only the items on the fence, but also allowed the viewer to see their own reflection and created a sense of the room as extending indefinitely. On the fence, there were different items scattered, mostly connected to womanhood and motherhood – items of clothing, a baby stroller, pans, photographs, and baby clothes. Above the fence is a quote by Virginia Wolf “We can best help you prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods”. By combining signs of womanhood and motherhood with the metal fence, a sign of separation and war, the artwork comments on the way the women of Greenham protested against future nuclear wars and battles through creating a community, allowing open conversation to flow and escaping the restrictions of heteronormative society. These women created a new method of battling wars – in opposition to the death and separation of war, they embraced the creation of life and community. In the room there are also photographs of the camp and protests, alongside replicas of banners from the march from Cardiff to Greenham. The room clearly embraces the exhibitions title of “revolt”.



Margaret Harrison, *Greenhamp Common*, 2023, sculpture, Tate Britain, photo taken by author

However, it feels very disconnected from the previous rooms – from the medical, the personal, the sexual and erotic, to the communal and specific nuclear protest, it feels like you are thrown into a completely different arena, and the continuity of the exhibition appears to be broken.

## **BLACK WOMAN TIME NOW**

Moving into the next two rooms, the exhibition addresses the issue of black feminist artists, who had been previously excluded from the feminist movement. The room explores artists from the 1980s onward, and their sense of communal revolt against discrimination, institutional racism, hostile media and police brutality. It explores the collective approach taken up by some artists, and their artistic networks which allowed them to work together against such discrimination in the art field.

Many important women artists of colour are present in these rooms, and information about the first UK exhibition exclusively organised by and featuring women of colour is given by the introductory wall text. As I walked about, I was confronted by works with no particular common aesthetic, but rather one common topic – discrimination. As black women were excluded from the second feminist movement, these artists had to create their own circles, their own movement so to say to speak their truths, which were similar and universal, as women, yet completely different.

As the exhibition moves chronologically through time, it makes sense that this room is second to last. However, I believe this exclusion and inequality could have been mentioned and further discussed in some of the previous rooms, to create better awareness and address the issue even further.

An important artwork was Marlene Smith's *Good Housekeeping III*, a reproduction of the lost 1985 original. The work is a portrait of Dorothy 'Cherry' Grace. The work is created on the wall of the gallery, with the woman's portrait made of plaster, white mesh, cloths and gauche. Next to the woman there is a framed photograph, and above her on the wall is written in big black letters "MY MOTHER OPENS THE DOOR AT 7AM. SHE IS NOT BULLETPROOF". According to the label, Grace was shot by police during a raid at her home in 1985, and was left paralysed, which led to her death in 2011. The artwork is filled with guilt – by including a photograph, and by calling Grace "my mother", the artist has made the topic of police brutality both real and personal for the viewer. She invokes motherhood and the personal familial connection to illustrate the horrors that discrimination leads to, to portray a portrait of police brutality that is still an issue and an important topic of conversation today.

I was also particularly fascinated by Mona Hatoum's performance *Roadworks* (1985). The video is only 6 minutes long and shows the artist slowly walking barefoot with Dr Martens boots tied to her ankles. In the actual performance, Hatoum walked for an hour through the streets of Brixton, in response to the Brixton uprisings in the early 80's. The action of walking is slow, calculated, the artist has to step in a way so that the boots do not fall far behind, and follow her footsteps closely. Watching it, I was entranced by the repetitive and slow motion, and there is an eerie feeling of a duality, of two people being present, rather than one. The artist is quoted saying that a group of builders, observing her during their lunch break, were perplexed at what she was doing, until a Black woman passed by on the street and commented "Well it's obvious. She is being followed by the police." When I read that in the label, it became clear to me why there was this feeling of uneasiness in the piece, of a ghostly presence that you cannot shake, as it is always one step behind you.

In the next room, Lesley Sanderson's *Time for a Change* (1988) challenges the notion of the exotic, the "ethnic" Malaysian woman as exotic, on display, readily available to the gaze, as her oil nude self-portrait stares intently at the viewer, while standing in front of a copy of *Princess Saw Ohn Nyun of Burma* by GERAL FESTUS KELLY. The woman in the painting seems to be interacting with the artist, whilst the artist's self-portrait seems to be interacting with the viewer. The juxtaposition between the woman's elegant clothing and styled hair with Sanderson's naked, yet concealed and not readily available body and her buzz-cut hair, shows the new subject as empowered and openly confronting the viewer's gaze.

There are many more artists in these two rooms that I could not mention in this article. The room was an abundance of topics and styles, including motherhood, colonial rule, the male and



the colonial gaze, fight for independence, for equal rights and against discrimination. However, the two rooms seemed considerably less crowded than the rest, perhaps due to the fact that they were at the end of the exhibition, after many of the visitors had already consumed so much of such different artworks, and had grown tired and were just rushing off to get to the end. Thus, as much as I enjoyed the fact that the exhibition was so comprehensive, it made me realise that many of the messages of the individual works were lost in the swarm of works and artists.

## THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS SOCIETY

The last room deals with issues of gay women's rights under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government and the changes and challenges that it had brought to the artworld, with the growth of the commercial art market. The artists in this exhibition turned to the personal to address the AIDS crisis, the amendment to the Local Government Act which prohibited "promoting homosexuality" and led to many protests by the British gay rights movement, as well as the challenges of the art industry, such as finding funding or spaces to promote their art.

Questioning the acceptable, challenging the norms, this room continued the mission of the exhibition – informing the viewer of the socio-political situation of women in protest in Britain in the late 1980s. With Pratibha Parmar's 35-minute video *Reframing AIDS* (1987) positioned next to Tessa Boffin's photographs *Angelic Rebels, Lesbians and Safer Sex series Untitled 1-5* (1989), the exhibition addresses the AIDS media crisis in a personal way. Parmar reframes the crisis by interviewing activists and cultural theorists and juxtaposing the media's depersonalization with real feelings and experiences. She creates a safe space for conversation, a community where AIDS could be discussed freely, by both lesbians and gay people, contrary to some discussions of AIDS that omitted lesbian communities at the time. Boffin's photographs show a girl, dressed as an angel, who in the course of the photographs discovers safe sex practices amidst the AIDS crisis when lesbians were often left out of campaigns for safe sex. In the images, we see the angel's progression from sad to liberated and ecstatic, and she is portrayed amidst various objects, such as newspaper articles about AIDS victims, magazines, as well as dildoes. In the third image, there appears a second figure, the angel's lover, who is wrapped in cling film, struggling to get out as the angel is engulfed by her reading. In the final image, they are intertwined in ecstasy, joy and liberation.



First photograph of *Angelic Rebels, Lesbians and Safer Sex series Untitled 1-5*, Tessa Boffin, 1989, Tate Britain, photo taken by author

The other images in the room deal with the struggle of self-acceptance and issues of representation.

The last theme/room, *AFTERWORD*, wraps up the exhibition with images of motherhood and women's struggles. With Kate Walker's *Art of Survival – A living Monument* (1987, remade 2023), and Bobby Baker's installation *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home* (a recreation of the original from 1976), a house covered in newspaper in which the children and father figures were edible, and a hostess (originally the artist) serves tea to visitors, the exhibition concludes that women's struggles in the art world extend beyond their occupation, and infiltrate their domestic and daily lives. The struggle for acceptance, the struggle for independence and self-portrayal were what made the feminist art movement so diverse, so different and experimental. With the need to express feelings and needs unknown to the world of art before (as it had been dominated by men), women had to protest and show who they were in new, innovative, and unconventional ways. Their voices had to be heard, and they were loudly expressed – both as a collective, and as individuals.

Leaving the exhibition, I had a peculiar feeling. Thoughts and images were flashing before my eyes of different artworks, glimpses of video installations and zine magazines, the rooms becoming blurry in my mind. However, I felt the feeling of protest linger on for longer. Of injustice and pain that some of the issues persist to the current day. It is why I started the article with a quote from Linda Nochlin. Not much can be saved in the misogynistic past of the world of art. No matter how many exhibitions of just “women” artists we make, that will not make up for the decades of discrimination and exclusion. Even the term “women” that we add in front of artist is still an issue that cannot be resolved. However, what we can do, and must do, is keep people talking and thinking about it. By making sure that women's voices are heard, that their stories remain known, we move towards a future that could resolve these issues.

The exhibition is an excellent way to see the variety and vastness of British women artists that were active in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps in certain rooms we do not hear every woman's individual voice, their scream against their struggles. But we do hear the collective voice for the fight for change. And isn't protest all about the individual and personal turning into the collective?

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