"She is Beautiful, and She is Laughing"

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***Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990*, Tate Modern, November 8, 2023 – April 7, 2024.**

The recognition that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone, and that it delimits me in a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers me in certain unanticipated ways.[1]

Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990 is one of the most ambitious exhibitions ever curated at Tate Modern in terms of its scale and inclusivity. The exhibition showcased works of over one hundred artists in diverse mediums, including textile, film, photography, painting, sculpture, and historical archives. Starting with a collection series of photographs from the first Women's Liberation Conference in 1970 at Ruskin School of Art, Oxford, the exhibition spans two decades of works on art and activism in the UK. It acknowledges not only prolific artists but also the marginalized and forgotten.[2] By presenting the history of art as an integral part of political protest and social reform, the exhibition's dispersed engagements allure ecstatic and embodied responses that challenge the disinterested aesthetic judgment of taste and the "art for art's sake" play of form under a sterile exhibition space. Despite its unprecedented scale, the curator Linsey Young noted that partiality and inaccuracy are inevitable parts of the narrative-forming process, therefore critical reflections on the exhibition are welcomed for the nuanced conversation between curators, artists, beholders, and artworks.[3]

With the Racial Relation Act of 1965, the Sexual Offense Act of 1967, and the 1975 Equal Pay Act, British society was not only installing new legal boundaries but starting a long and unfinished quest to combat institutional injustices. By framing the period of the 1970s to 1990s with a retrospective examination of social reforms, feminist activism, and feminist art history, the exhibition does not encourage a singular cohesive narrative. Still, it gestates an intersectional discourse on class, race, sexuality, and the punk subculture. The diversity of aesthetic styles or materials testifies to how artworks within the exhibition are treated with an intersectional approach, transcending the physical taxonomy in which they are placed. The idea of non-restrictiveness is concretized by Gina Birch's *3 Minute Scream* (1977) as the sound of defiance penetrates the rectangular walls (Fig. 1). Throughout the exhibition, the scream keeps reminding us that feminist artworks are created out of painfully true female experiences, with the messy entanglement of desires that refuse cultural hegemony, from the hilarious Red Women's Workshop's *YBA Wife* (1981) (Fig. 2). This poster portrays the housewife in her wedding gown to advocate for legal and financial independence for married women, to the explicit documentation of *Birth Rites* (1977) by Robina Rose, where she explored women's agency and subjectivity during childbirth, as well as Roshini Kempadoo's photographic imagination of the Caribbean diasporic experience of everyday life, memories, and history. These artworks examine personal experiences within public discourses. Therefore, the exhibition resonates with Judith Butler's assertion that "the Personal is Political." Each artist and activist contributes to this dynamic by sharing the intimate aspects of their experiences with a wider audience, thereby transforming their creative agency into politically engaged initiatives.

The radicalization and destabilization of the exhibition space form an ironic juxtaposition with the

1 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519–31, 522.

2 Linsey Young, "Introduction: The Personal is Political," in *Women in Revolt! : Art and Activism in the UK 1970–90*, ed. Linsey Young (London: Tate Publishing, 2023), 16.

3 Young, "Introduction: The Personal is Political," 16.

Figure 1
Gina Birch, *3 Minute Scream*, 1977. Shown as digital video; color, sound. 2 min, 50 sec. Photo by Youxi Chen.

Figure 2
A visitor confronting the *YBA Wife* poster. Photo by Youxi Chen.

Figure 3
A visitor sitting in the exhibition room *Beauty as Protest*. Photo by Youxi Chen.

solemn and stable neoclassical environment of Tate Britain. During my visit, my thoughts constantly drifted to the permanent collection directly above dedicated to the arts and crafts of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Entitled *Beauty as Protest,* this room establishes an intriguing intertextual link with the idea of "Women in Revolt!" (Fig. 3). When I meandered my way through the exhibition, I was haunted by the fact that one of Tate's most treasured collections above me is one of the most notorious examples of the exploitation of female models. In John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1852) (Fig. 4), the talented artist Elizabeth Siddal lies in her golden sarcophagus, perpetually frozen in cold water, serving as a sacrificial offering for the artistic and intellectual revolt of the Brotherhood. She remains perpetually framed in the image of a tragic victim, an offering for the masculine cult of genius. Conversely, *Women in Revolt!* counters sounds with a thundering voice. Looking at the exhibition poster

Figure 4

John Everette Millais, *Ophelia*, 1852. Oil on canvas, 76 x 112 cm. Tate Britain, London. Image released under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 DEED.

with Gina Birch's dramatic facial expressions, she haunts and disturbs, even without the screaming soundtrack. She is also the Medusa that laughs back at us, as women's words fall silent upon "deaf male ears," one that destabilizes the *truth* with waves of laughter and screams.[4] The transhistorical spatial and temporal dialogue between the exhibition and the legacy of Tate Britain creates a moment of great pathos, prompting reflection on how far women have come, and lightening the perilous journey before us.

Bibliography

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4 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 1 (1976): 875–93, 881.