

# Interpreting Art in the #MeToo Era

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Bullied by conservative commentators, many academics no longer stress the importance of critical thinking for an engaged citizenry, and, dependent on corporate sponsorship, many curators no longer promote the critical debate once deemed essential to the public reception of difficult art.

– Hal Foster, *Bad New Days*

Since the mid-twentieth century, the formal analysis of art has dominated museum interpretations and art critiques alike. Rather than taking into consideration an artist's intention, or the social, historical, and political context in the reading of an artwork, formal analysis places importance on the surface qualities of an artwork; how it *looks*, or makes one *feel*. However, the #MeToo movement has recently challenged the hegemony of formal analysis. #MeToo encourages women to share their experiences of sexual violence on social media platforms as a way to counter the culturally accepted 'norm' of sexual harassment, which has only been deemed illegal since 1964. This movement has influenced a shift towards the inclusion of artist biographies in museum interpretations of art after important artists like Chuck Close had been accused of sexual misconduct by several women. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, museums can no longer rely solely on the formalist qualities of art that modernism has long held as the measure of quality.

The #MeToo movement demands a new way of interpreting artworks. It demands that the shield of modernist formalism be dissolved. This shield protects artists whose less-desirable histories are covered up, if ever known. This shield also serves to protect the myth of the genius artist. The #MeToo movement has brought about re-considerations of the work of contemporary artists, and it has also led artists and art historians to reevaluate the lives and work of historical artists like the French painters Balthus and Paul Gauguin. Their depictions of underage girls in provocative poses became controversial after the #MeToo movement's reckoning on sexual assault – and individuals have called out museums for being complicit with exhibiting works that objectify children. Certainly, museums had not focused on the personal histories of artists since the interpretation of their works tends to focus on their innovative formal qualities. Although the #MeToo movement has sometimes encouraged the censorship of art by artists who have been

accused of sexual misconduct or worse, the social media movement has been instrumental in shifting contemporary curatorial practices towards biography to demystify the aesthetic alibi that has enabled artists to abuse their power in the past and to address the overarching issue of sexual harassment in the art world. The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the National Gallery in London exhibit two ways curators have worked to address the #MeToo histories of artists.

The #MeToo movement has been the first massive undertaking to combat sexual harassment since the 1964 Title VII of the Civil Rights Act legally defined sexual harassment as a form of sexual discrimination.<sup>1</sup> Although the #MeToo movement is primarily driven by social media rather than by litigation, the implementation of the 1964 law is vital to the movement's success<sup>2</sup>. Beginning with activist Tarana Burke in 2006, the #MeToo movement catapulted into the mainstream in October of 2017. On Twitter, actor and activist Alyssa Milano called for anyone who had been sexually assaulted to reply to her Tweet with, 'MeToo' Burke's commonly used phrase.<sup>3</sup> Milano did this in response to a growing number of women in Hollywood accusing producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup> The movement became a viral trend after it was joined with a hashtag, and eventually sparked a cultural reckoning on the issue of sexual assault, with many other high-profile men in power coming under scrutiny.

An open letter titled, *We Are Not Surprised* further demystified the allure of powerful artists, and art professionals in the larger art world as well. The 2017 letter addresses *Artforum*

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<sup>1</sup> "Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964," Laws, Regulations, Guidance & MOUs, U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/titlevii.cfm>.

<sup>2</sup> Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Butterfly Politics* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Alyssa Milano (@Alyssa\_Milano), "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet," Twitter, October 15, 2017, 4:21 p.m., [https://twitter.com/Alyssa\\_Milano/status/919659438700670976](https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976).

<sup>4</sup> "Harvey Weinstein Timeline: How the Scandal Unfolded," BBC, February 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-41594672>.

co-publisher Knight Landesman's sexual misconduct allegations and was signed by nearly 1,800 women and nonbinary art professionals.<sup>5</sup> The title of the letter is a fitting reference to artist Jenny Holzer's *Truism*, "Abuse of power comes as no surprise," which captures the feeling expressed by the signatories. The *Not Surprised* letter describes the veiled sexual harassment of the art world, whose identifiers are the "condescending remarks, wayward hands on our bodies, threats and intimidations thinly veiled as flirtation."<sup>6</sup> The letter itself encapsulates the rampant abuse of power in the art world that has silenced, ostracized, or dismissed anyone who chose to speak out about it.

Acclaimed portrait artist Chuck Close was also the subject of #MeToo allegations, leaving curators and museum professionals with the duty of addressing his sexual misconduct allegations. The following actions museums took in response to the allegations exemplify the various ways in which #MeToo histories have impacted curatorial practices over the past couple of years. Two months after the first story detailing Weinstein's sexual harassment allegations, the *Huffington Post* and *New York Times* published articles recounting four women's allegations of Chuck Close's sexual misconduct.<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> The accounts of Close's sexual misconduct span a couple of decades, and share similarities. Close encouraged budding women artists, typically in their twenties and thirties to audition for his new project involving daguerreotypes in his studio.

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<sup>5</sup> "'We Are Not Surprised': Read the Blistering Open Letter That Art-World Women Wrote About Artforum," *Artnet News*, October 30, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/not-surprised-read-blistering-open-letter-art-world-women-wrote-artforum-1132463>.

<sup>6</sup> "'We Are Not Surprised': Read the Blistering Open Letter That Art-World Women Wrote About Artforum."

<sup>7</sup> Priscilla Frank, "Chuck Close Is A Giant of The Art World. He's Allegedly Also A 'F\*\*king Pervert.'" *Huffington Post*, December 19, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chuck-close-sexual-harassment\\_n\\_59f877dee4b09b5c2568fd88](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chuck-close-sexual-harassment_n_59f877dee4b09b5c2568fd88).

<sup>8</sup> Robin Pogrebin, "Chuck Close Apologizes After Accusations of Sexual Harassment," *New York Times*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/arts/design/chuck-close-sexual-harassment.html>.

He met them alone in the studio and requested they strip down nude, in front of him. He consistently made the women feel disturbed when making lewd, sexual comments about their bodies, and previous sexual relations. In 2009, Carla Rodriguez, an intern at a photo studio Close frequented, was interested in historical photography and had studied his earlier daguerreotype portraits.<sup>9</sup> She didn't question Close's invitation to audition for the opportunity to model, especially since creating daguerreotypes is an expensive and time-consuming process. Close and Rodriguez talked, agreeing to meet in his studio later on, along with another intern. Upon their arrival, the studio was dark and empty. Rodriguez had previous experience being a figure model, however, she was struck by his request to undress under a spotlight, which is typically inappropriate and unprofessional. His hands on her lower back were equally upsetting, and so was the crude language he used to reference her vagina. Attempting to laugh it off at first, she felt even more uncomfortable after Close showed her closely cropped images of penises, and inquired if she had experienced an uncircumcised one. He also mentioned how he's uncircumcised himself and how she really should experience it. Rodriguez had admired Close, but could finally no longer make excuses for the artist's behavior after he told her to play with herself as she sat on a chair in front of him. The experience left her feeling vulnerable, robbed, and fearful of speaking out against the widely celebrated artist. In the same *Hyperallergic* article that details Close's sexual misconduct, he commented:

I have been photographing and painting both portraits and nudes since 1967, and posing for me is completely voluntary. During the past 50 years I have created hundreds of nude photographs of men and women, and have met with many more who had decided not to pose for me. I have never received any complaints prior to reading about them in recent news reports. Having learned that I made these women upset and feel uncomfortable, I do apologize, without qualification.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jillian Steinhauer and Claire Voon, "Four More Women Allege Sexual Misconduct by Chuck Close," *Hyperallergic*, January 16, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/420538/four-more-women-allege-sexual-misconduct-by-chuck-close/>.

It's highly likely Close never received complaints of his behavior in years before the #MeToo movement, as his career has operated for 50 years in this art system that enables artists to get away with sexual harassment. The potential to be immortalized by a highly acclaimed artist can mean a lot for an emerging one, "A portrait by him is like being canonized" says Delia Brown, one of the women artists to come forward about Close's sexual misconduct to the *New York Times*.<sup>11</sup> Sadly, staying silent could promise one a career. The #MeToo movement brought previously silenced accounts of sexual assault and misconduct to the light. By bringing the personal lives of artists to the forefront, museums were faced with the responsibility of addressing contemporary artists who had been recently accused of sexual misconduct, or worse. Historic artists also came under the microscope for their past actions that had been previously silenced in favor of a more formal analysis of their work. This #MeToo movement confronted the art world with the realization that it's more difficult than ever to separate the art from the artist.

As the #MeToo movement encouraged individuals to take an activist stance, its early attempts to curtail the acceptance of sexual discrimination and harassment sometimes bordered on censorship. Whether it's individuals or institutions advocating for complete removal, or 'cancellation' of these artists for their unjust—even if unproven—actions, the silencing of these sensitive narratives will not do any justice to those subjected to these actions, nor does it attempt to reinterpret the art made by those accused of sexual misconduct in an informative way. For example, shortly after the movement went viral an online petition was created, calling for the removal of Balthus' 1938 painting titled *Thérèse Dreaming* from the Metropolitan Museum of

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<sup>10</sup> Steinhauer and Voon, "Four More Women Allege Sexual Misconduct by Chuck Close."

<sup>11</sup> Pogrebin, "Chuck Close Apologizes After Accusations of Sexual Harassment."

Art<sup>12</sup>. Although Balthus is not a contemporary artist with active #MeToo allegations, the petition claimed that in the current #MeToo climate, the sexually suggestive portrait of a prepubescent girl signifies the museum's (possibly unintentional) support of the objectification of girls as well as voyeurism. The petition opposing the painting acquired almost 10,000 signatures in the first week. In late January of 2018, a few weeks following the surfacing of Chuck Close's sexual misconduct allegations, Seattle University removed Close's *Self-Portrait* (2000).<sup>13</sup> The administration opted to remove the painting from the second floor of its library's lobby to prevent students or faculty from reacting to it. Weeks later, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. also chose to prevent negative reactions to Close's works, initially canceling his solo exhibition set to open May of 2018. Anabeth Guthrie, head of the National Gallery's communications, later clarified the museum did not "cancel" the exhibitions per se, but decided *with the artist* that it was not the appropriate time to present his work, given the current circumstances.<sup>14</sup> The museum also decided on a similar fate for photographer Thomas Roma's exhibition, which was scheduled after Close's. Roma was accused of sexual misconduct by five of his former students. Guthrie also mentioned this is the first time a show has been affected like this due to allegations of this kind.<sup>15</sup> While it may seem logical for institutions to remove

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<sup>12</sup> Mia Merrill, "Metropolitan Museum of Art: Remove Balthus' Suggestive Painting of a Pubescent Girl, *Thérèse Dreaming*," Care 2 Petitions, <https://www.thepetitionsite.com/157/407/182/metropolitan-museum-of-art-remove-balthus-suggestive-painting-of-a-pubescent-girl-thérèse-dreaming/>.

<sup>13</sup> Leah St. Lawrence, "Seattle University Removes Self-Portrait 2000 by Chuck Close, an Artist Accused of Sexual Misconduct," *The Stranger*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2018/01/26/25754954/seattle-university-removes-self-portrait-2000-by-chuck-close-an-artist-accused-of-sexual-misconduct>.

<sup>14</sup> James H. Miller, "National Gallery of Art Postpones Chuck Close and Thomas Roma Shows Following Sexual Misconduct Allegations," *Art Newspaper*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/national-gallery-of-art-postpones-chuck-close-and-thomas-roma-shows-following-sexual-misconduct-allegations>.

<sup>15</sup> Colin Moynihan and Robin Pogrebin, "The National Gallery of Art Cancels a Chuck Close Show After Misconduct Accusations," *New York Times*, January 26, 2018,



controversial art under these circumstances, it could also be argued that these decisions to sanitize art history are not only detrimental to the conversation surrounding sexual harassment in the art world, and beyond, but it's also seemingly impossible to censor all the many artists who may have committed salacious or now-illegal acts in the past that are unknown today.

Ultimately, the Metropolitan Museum of Art continued to exhibit Balthus' work. The Met decided that the sexually explicit, suggestive, or arguably, pedophilic imagery apparent in Balthus' *Thérèse Dreaming* is not grounds for the removal of the painting. In a conversation with *Artnet News*, a spokesman from the Met refers to their mission statement, noting:

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's mission is to '...collect, study, conserve, and present significant works of art across all times and cultures in order to connect people to creativity, knowledge, and ideas.' Moments such as this provide an opportunity for conversation, and visual art is one of the most significant means we have for reflecting on both the past and the present, and encouraging the continuing evolution of existing culture through informed discussion and respect for creative expression.<sup>16</sup>

While the Met's mission is to show works that connect the community to its past and present to transform its future, there were no apparent changes to the museum spaces themselves, or programming related to fostering a dialogue surrounding the implications of showing the artist's work. The author of the original petition to remove the Balthus painting, Mia Merrill, reconsidered her stance after the petition gained momentum. Merrill wrote to *Artnet News*, saying, "I would consider this petition a success if the Met included a message as brief as, 'Some viewers find this piece offensive or disturbing, given Balthus's artistic infatuation with young

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/arts/design/national-gallery-of-art-cancels-chuck-close-thomas-roma-sexual-misconduct.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer>.

<sup>16</sup> Kinsella, "The Met Says 'Suggestive' Balthus Painting Will Stay After Petition for Its Removal Is Signed by Thousands," *Artnet News*, December 5, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/met-museum-responds-to-petition-calling-for-removal-of-balthus-painting-1169105>.

girls.”<sup>17</sup> Merrill’s reasoning behind the petition aligns with one of the larger goals of the #MeToo movement, which is to “reframe and expand the global conversation around sexual violence to speak to the needs of a broader spectrum of survivors.”<sup>18</sup> Of course, portraying twelve-year-old girls is not illegal, however, Balthus’ portrayal of them in sexually suggestive poses acquires a new layer of meaning in the #MeToo era. The voyeuristic gaze Balthus paints the viewer into feels all the more disconcerting when the conversation surrounding sexual violence is in full swing. Perhaps an additional interpretive label would be sufficiently address the associations Balthus’ work brings forward while interpreting it in the #MeToo era.

The Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. and the Broad Museum in Los Angeles also claimed to create conversations surrounding the complexity now surrounding exhibiting Close’s works, which continued to hang in their galleries.<sup>19</sup> In response to whether or not the museum was “rethinking the artist’s presence on its walls,” Kim Sajet, the director of the National Portrait Gallery, told the *New York Times*, “We are engaged in active internal discussion, considering both the Broad Museum’s primary mission to present contemporary art and foster dialogue, and the complexity and seriousness of the issue.”<sup>20</sup> Neither has either museum revealed whether or not the works in any of these instances would acquire new wall plaques, or related programming, despite their thoughts on fostering dialogue about their artists’ #MeToo histories. Museums certainly don’t have to interpret all works with a

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<sup>17</sup> Kinsella, “The Met Says ‘Suggestive’ Balthus Painting Will Stay After Petition for Its Removal Is Signed by Thousands.”

<sup>18</sup> Me Too Movement, “History & Vision,” accessed April 12, 2020, <https://metoomvmt.org/about/#history>.

<sup>19</sup> Moynihan and Pogrebin, “The National Gallery of Art Cancels a Chuck Close Show After Misconduct Accusations.”

<sup>20</sup> Moynihan and Pogrebin, “The National Gallery of Art Cancels a Chuck Close Show After Misconduct Accusations.”

#MeToo lens, and may indeed continue to place value on the formal quality of the works in question, disregarding the allegations against the artists. By sticking to strictly formalistic interpretation, the protective shield of formalism itself is exposed, which enables the art to become separate from the artist indefinitely.

It's no surprise that the Met and the National Portrait Gallery choose not to re-interpret the works of Balthus or Close directly through its interpretive texts, for formalism itself works in favor of museums by allowing them to present artists in a purer light, free of their personal lives or biography. Formalism has dominated art criticism in the United States through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Clement Greenberg led the formalist tradition in art criticism and was the most influential art critic of his time. In his essay *Modernist Painting* (1960), Greenberg places a strong emphasis on the importance of the artwork's *autonomy* in its interpretation<sup>21</sup>. Greenberg sought to evaluate art on its formal qualities, assuming that politics or social concerns are external to a work of art's aesthetic quality, or are indeed irrelevant to its assessment. He argued that for a painting to achieve its purest form, it must divest itself of all characteristics shared with other media. In Greenberg's view, a painting should not try to imitate sculpture through techniques of shading, nor should it engage in narrative borrowed from the field of literature. Contextual information about the work itself, including artist biographies, should be eliminated from the critique or interpretation of a work. Ultimately, the line, colors, and shapes in a painting—and the medium of paint itself—are what make it uniquely *modern*, and are the only elements needed to interpret it. This embedded ideology of formalism is on the decline today as art historians opt for a more contextualized approach, and as knowledge becomes more

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<sup>21</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* 5, no. 6 (1982).

accessible to museumgoers with the advent of the internet and smartphone.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the Met and National Portrait Gallery were hesitant to address the illicit, or explicit, behaviors of artists directly in fear of heightening controversy, or possibly they were unsure of what language to use to convey the new complexities of the work they exhibit. Leaning into a more formalist interpretation of works is a seemingly safe move, but it's time to move forward and address the nuances surrounding Balthus' and Close's work now.

Art historian and critic Claire Bishop explains how formalism - the very thing that works to conceal artist's #MeToo histories – can also operate to drive social change since aesthetics are inherently political. Rather than enabling the artist's work to excuse their actions, the formalistic qualities can be reinterpreted to address the problems the work raises. Claire Bishop's essay, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents" indicates a shift in visual art practices towards "constructive social change," which challenges art's ability to be more than just art.<sup>23</sup> The art historian and critic realizes these works are difficult to discuss within the limitations of conventional art criticism, such as formalism, and draws new parameters for discussing social practice art. Eleven years or so after this theory was written, the #MeToo movement would emerge, informing creative practices and the subverted sexual harassment in the art world. As this movement concerns human rights, Bishop's theory can be applied to the art and curatorial practices impacted by the #MeToo movement. Furthermore, Bishop reconciles the "tension and confusion between autonomy (the desire for art to be at one remove from the means-ends relationships) and heteronomy (the blurring of art and life)" by considering French philosopher

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<sup>22</sup> Deniz Tekiner, "Formalist Art Criticism and the Politics of Meaning," *Social Justice* 33, no.2 (104) (2006): 31-44, [www.jstor.org/stable/29768369](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29768369).

<sup>23</sup> Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (2005).

Rancière, who writes on the politics of aesthetics.<sup>24</sup> As Greenberg had claimed decades prior, the autonomy of art is predicated on its ability to stand alone as an object for the sake of itself, stating that in its “purity,” or self-definition, one could “find the guarantee of its standard of quality as well as of its independence.”<sup>25</sup> But rather than operating as a purely aesthetic object, art can be heteronomous; meaning it can be subject to meaning outside of itself. Bishop negotiates this paradoxical relationship through Rancière’s reworking of the term “aesthetic,” where he describes how art is thought. He argues that it’s not possible to separate an aesthetic judgment (autonomy) from a political one (heteronomy) since they both contain the possibility for their meanings to change based on their ability to make the viewer ponder the question of how things are. Bishop summarizes Rancière’s point by writing, “In short: the aesthetic need not be sacrificed at the altar of social change, because it already contains this ameliorative promise.”<sup>26</sup> Although formalism may have worked to bury latent political and social meaning in the past, it can also be utilized towards constructing social change depending on how the aesthetics are politicized, or interpreted for that matter. In Bishop’s argument, one thing is for certain – attention still must be paid to formal qualities of a work, or else it just isn’t *art*.

The #MeToo movement has led a shift in the interest towards biography, and museums can reflect this change in their exhibitions by incorporating more about the context of the artist’s life into their interpretations of art in this #MeToo era. Biography is nothing new to art history, in fact it was founded on it. In 1550, Giorgio Vasari published *The Lives of the Artists*, in which he writes a critical history of Western art by providing in-depth biographies of painters,

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<sup>24</sup> Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents.”

<sup>25</sup> Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 2.

<sup>26</sup> Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents.”

sculptors, and architects.<sup>27</sup> Biography, the foundation of art history itself, would fall out of the favor of art critics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Feminist art historian Linda Nochlin was critical of Vasari's use of biography in her 1971 essay, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*<sup>28</sup> Nochlin claims biography perpetuates the myth of the genius artist, writing,

The fairy tale of the Boy Wonder, discovered by an older artist or discerning patron, often in the guise of a lowly shepherd boy, has been a stock-in-trade of artistic mythology ever since Vasari immortalized the young Giotto, discovered by the great Cimabue while the lad was drawing sheep on a stone while guarding his flocks.<sup>29</sup>

It's as if by divine intervention, these male artists achieve a god-like status that enables them to become the greatest artists of their time, whether they are discovered by another great artist or instilled with artistic talent at birth. The focus is not on the artists themselves, but rather on the mystique behind them which enables them to make great work. Formalist interpretation of art also buries the focus of the artists themselves, creating a divide between art and artist. The dissonance between the two is what enables artists to partake in the "aesthetic alibi," where their art excuses their crimes.<sup>30</sup> Intellectual historian Martin Jay describes this as when the artist uses their work to excuse their illegal, immoral, or reprehensible behavior otherwise. It's not uncommon for artists to be pardoned for legal activities on the account of artistic freedom, of their status as an artistic, cultural icon. Although biography can perpetuate the myth of artistic genius, and formalism can create an aesthetic alibi, together, and with the help of the backdrop of the #MeToo movement, art can be interpreted with a lens that reveals more layers of art history

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<sup>27</sup> Vasari, Giorgio, Peter E. Bonsanella, and Julia Conaway Bondanella, *The Lives of the Artists*, Oxford World's Classics, 1998, EBSCOhost.

<sup>28</sup> Linda Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* 1971.

<sup>29</sup> Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Jay, "The Aesthetic Alibi," *Salmagundi* no. 93 (Winter 1992): 13-25, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/40548650?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40548650?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

that are typically not prominently exhibited – like the history of sexual violence or harassment in the arts.

With a #MeToo lens, Close's work is interpreted differently. Although he offered the prospect of portraying the women who alleged sexual misconduct, his intentions were never seen through and no work was made including any of the women.<sup>31</sup> While we may not have those specific works, Close's series of daguerreotypes with other subjects can be interpreted with a #MeToo lens as well. His most well-known daguerreotypes of supermodel Kate Moss include three diptychs of her torso from various sides and three closely-cropped portraits. The colorless images of torsos and busts resonate with a longstanding tradition of nude female portraiture and sculpture in Western art history. Moss's portraits also have an unfiltered vulnerability and portray her imperfections more realistically than ever before. Not only was Close exploring the technology of photography itself, but he was also referencing generations of artists that came before him. The photos of Moss, along with others, were exhibited at Pace Gallery in New York in 2014. Upon the opening, Hailey Gates from the *Paris Review* visited Close in his studio. After Gates mentioned the lack of sexual provocativeness in these images, Close went on to talk about the relationship between artist and model as being inherently erotic, saying, "No one makes a nude if they're not going to get turned on, and if they claim that they are making it for other reasons it's an absolute lie."<sup>32</sup> While there's no doubt most artists have a libidinous drive fueling their work, these comments, alongside his #MeToo allegations transform his work into something else. Rather than operating as a re-interpretation of classical nude portraiture, the image serves a document of his sexual misconduct. They conjure thoughts of his studio practice

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<sup>31</sup> Priscilla Frank, "Chuck Close Is A Giant of The Art World. He's Allegedly Also A 'F\*\*king Pervert.'"

<sup>32</sup> Hailey Gates, "Nudes." *Paris Review*, no. 207 (Winter 2013): 94, ESBCOhost.

as a portraiture artist now portraying the entire human form, and how he interacts with models, or those who audition beforehand. It also brings forth the thought of all other numerous undocumented accounts of sexual harassment brushed off *before* the #MeToo movement. Close's work should no longer serve as an alibi for his sexual misconduct; it serves now to document it, in this #MeToo era.

With the #MeToo movement offering increased visibility of the personal lives of artists, curators are urged to consider the ethical implications of exhibiting works by contemporary and historical artists. Maura Reilly's book, *Curatorial Activism* provides tools and framework curators can utilize to put Claire Bishop's theory of the social turn in art practice, by critically interpreting work by said artists while advocating for a more equitable art world.<sup>33</sup> Reilly writes of curatorial activism as a counter-hegemonic strategy to combat misogyny, racism, and homophobia in the art world and the global society as a whole. Curatorial activism aims to restructure the power in the art world by re-contextualizing the histories of well-known artists, in this case addressing artist's #MeToo histories. As Clair Bishop argues, this form of revisionism inherently politicizes the work when as it's seen through the #MeToo lens. This ethical curation aims to produce new canons, write new art historical discourse, as well as employ a relational approach that will enable new voices to speak and new perspectives to be seen.

The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) responded to Chuck Close's sexual misconduct allegations early on and serves as an example how the #MeToo movement has led curators to incorporate the complexity of the #MeToo movement into the interpretation of art by artists with #MeToo allegations, while also addressing the imbalance between gender and power

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<sup>33</sup> Maura Reilly and Lucy Lippard, *Curatorial Activism* (Thames & Hudson, 2018).



in the art world.<sup>34</sup> PAFA already had exhibition *Chuck Close Photographs* up for two months before the artist's #MeToo allegations surfaced in December of 2017. At the time they surfaced, faculty, students, and the board members of PAFA were on winter break. Monica Zimmerman, the Director of Museum Education noted their initial decision to hold a forum with students and senior leadership when they arrived back, to begin a dialogue regarding thoughts, feelings, and experiences with the hierarchy of power in the art world that enables sexual harassment and abuse.<sup>35</sup> Some students advocated for complete censorship and removal of the Close exhibition, much like how the National Gallery in D.C. decided to indefinitely postpone Close's upcoming show. The initial open discussion served as a polylogue, an important element Maura Reilly mentions in her book, *Curatorial Activism*.<sup>36</sup> As an art school as well as a museum, the obligation to address this moment of cultural reckoning was felt, and staff ultimately decided to mount a concurrent exhibition to respond to and interpret the complex issue of exhibiting art at this time. *The Art World We Want* was installed before the entrance to *Chuck Close Photographs*, and framed a conversation that would enable visitors to ponder Close's work with a #MeToo lens. Zimmerman describes the introductory wall text as honest and transparent, it reads in part,

Taking [*Chuck Close Photographs*] down might have been easier – it would have allowed us to move on to the next project [...] It would have preserved our artistic mentors, heroes and even the canon of art history. But we believe there is a new canon to write, more stories to be told and more questions still to be asked. [...] Art museums and art schools must own their role in perpetuating the status quo.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Claire Voon, "Museum Keeps Chuck Close Exhibition, Supplements It with Show About Power and Gender Dynamics," *Hyperallergic*, January 30, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/423956/chuck-close-exhibition-pennsylvania-academy-fine-arts/>.

<sup>35</sup> Nisa Mackie, "The Conversations That Follow Abuse of Power," Walker Art Center, April 19, 2018, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/monica-zimmerman-chuck-close-pafa-education>.

<sup>36</sup> Reilly and Lippard, *Curatorial Activism*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Mackie, "The Conversations That Follow Abuse of Power."

In attempts to own that responsibility, PAFA incorporated a salon-style wall hung with the art of artists Kara Walker, Mequitta Ahuja, Barbara Kruger, and more. Above the artworks were open-ended questions asking the visitors, “Who has had the power to speak about women’s bodies?” and “Who do we need to hear more from?”<sup>38</sup> This inclusive gallery space focused more attention to artists that have received less attention than their white, male counterparts have.<sup>39</sup> There was also an open timeline of the future so guests could share their aspirations for the art world. It was important to PAFA to have the students define the future art world that they will be working in. Their responses ranged from increasing the representation of women and artists of color to paying artists better. The museum archived all of the responses and will use them in future programming.<sup>40</sup> The exhibition concluded with a collaborative programming event, where PAFA printmaking students held a workshop on how to make Guerrilla Girls-inspired protest posters.<sup>41</sup>

The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts bravely took the responsibility of discussing the implications of the #MeToo era, and was willing to foster a dialogue about the wider inequalities surrounding gender and power in the art world with considerable time constraints; however, the separateness of the two exhibitions prevented PAFA from actually re-interpreting Close’s works, or revising the art historical canon, which Maura Reilly argues is an integral element of curatorial activism. Claire Bishop would also argue that when advocating for social change through art practice, the failure to address the aesthetic qualities of Close’s work alongside his

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<sup>38</sup> Nadja Sayej, “Chuck Close: How to Deal with an Artist Accused of Sexual Harassment,” *Guardian*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/feb/15/chuck-close-art-sexual-harassment-pafa>.

<sup>39</sup> Sayej, “Chuck Close: How to Deal with an Artist Accused of Sexual Harassment.”

<sup>40</sup> Mackie, “The Conversations That Follow Abuse of Power.”

<sup>41</sup> Johnathan Wilson, “PAFA’s Chuck Close Exhibit Ends with Workshop on the Art of Protest,” WHYY, April 9, 2018, <https://whyy.org/articles/pafas-chuck-close-exhibit-ends-with-workshop-on-the-art-of-protest/>.

allegations leads the discussion *away* from the art object itself. Attention always needs to be brought back to the art! *The Art World We Want* is an early example of how curators have worked to interpret the art of Chuck Close more transparently in the #MeToo era, while also addressing the impact of the #MeToo movement on the larger art world.

The National Gallery in London's 2019 exhibit of Paul Gauguin's portraits exemplify ways in which institutions can engage with the ongoing #MeToo conversations they face even as they continue to exhibit problematic work by historically important artists.<sup>42</sup> It's widely known that Gauguin portrayed Tahitians in an exotic lens, from a French colonial perspective. However, this information is rarely mentioned alongside displays of his work. The audio guide of the exhibition begins with a surprising question that acknowledges the changing attitudes towards artists with questionable behavior, "Is it time to stop looking at Gauguin altogether?"<sup>43</sup> As demonstrated by the cancellation of Close's exhibition or removal of his works from Seattle University; censorship would fail to address important issues Gauguin's work often raises. Like PAFA, the National Gallery posits these questions for the audience to ponder throughout the exhibition. Other questions include, "Do Gauguin's artistic achievements justify what he did to underage women?" and "Can we still love the work of artists whose behavior we loathe?"<sup>44</sup> The last question is tested throughout the show, with wall and interpretive texts incorporating the harsher realities surrounding Gauguin. Alongside Gauguin's *Tehamana Has Many Parents* (1893) the wall text states, "[Gauguin] repeatedly entered into sexual relations with young girls, 'marrying' two of them and fathering children, [...] Gauguin undoubtedly exploited his position

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<sup>42</sup> Farah Nayeri, "No More Excuses for Gauguin," *New York Times*, November 19, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2D0mXNj>.

<sup>43</sup> Nayeri, "No More Excuses for Gauguin."

<sup>44</sup> Javier Pes, "'Formal Analysis Cannot Occlude the Real Issues': How Curators Are Addressing Gauguin's Dark Side in a New Show at the National Gallery in London," *Artnet News*, October 10, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/gauguin-metoo-national-gallery1672810>.

as a privileged Westerner to make the most of the sexual freedoms available to him.”<sup>45</sup> *The Ancestors of Tehamana* exemplifies Gauguin’s innovative post-impressionistic style, which uses vibrant hues and symbolism in its depiction of a non-Western subject, Tehamana, a 13-year-old Tahitian girl. The painting blends elements of both Tahitian culture, such as the flowers in Tehamana’s hair and images of her ancestors behind her, with European elements, such as the striped dress she wears. Running concurrent with the second anniversary of the #MeToo movement, the Gauguin exhibition marks one of the first times a high-profile museum has “broken a cultural taboo to also discuss [Gauguin’s] flaws as a man,” alongside the greatness of his work.<sup>46</sup> This sentiment is also expressed by co-curator, Christopher Riopelle, who describes how the show “would have been a great deal more about formal innovation” if an exhibition of the same thing would’ve been curated a couple of decades ago.<sup>47</sup> London’s National Gallery is more successful in interpreting art with a #MeToo lens, compared to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, because of their revisionist interpretations of Gauguin’s work. Maura Reilly would commend the revision of the traditional art historical canon to include these histories. The National Gallery in London exemplifies ways in which institutions can engage with the ongoing #MeToo conversations as they continue to exhibit problematic work by historically important artists.

The paintings of Chuck Close and Paul Gauguin undoubtedly created a lasting impact on portraiture itself, as well as the larger canon of art history. Their work has been held in high regard due to their formal innovations and technical virtuosity, but only recently have institutions

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<sup>45</sup> Nayeri, “No More Excuses for Gauguin.”

<sup>46</sup> Pes, “‘Formal Analysis Cannot Occlude the Real Issues’: How Curators Are Addressing Gauguin’s Dark Side in a New Show at the National Gallery in London.”

<sup>47</sup> Nayeri, “No More Excuses for Gauguin.”

taken responsibility for highlighting these artists' abuse of power in their interpretations of their work. In addition to the interpretations of these artist's works in the #MeToo era, there has been a flowering of art that confronts these issues, growing directly out of the arguments these museums have been wrestling with since the cultural reckoning of the #MeToo movement began.

Anonymous artist-activist group, the Guerrilla Girls tackled the re-interpretation of art by artists who have used their power to sexually exploit women. Their 2018 poster titled, "3 Ways to Write a Museum Wall Label" provides alternative ways for museums to approach Chuck Close's #MeToo sexual misconduct allegations when interpreting Close's *Portrait of Bill Clinton* (2006). Written with their typical dose of satire, labels increase in the degree of biographical, #MeToo context they provide about the artist. The first label reads "For museums afraid of alienating billionaire trustees and collectors who donated the artist's work" and "Chuck Close is one of the most important artists of his generation, and the creator of a new kind of portraiture consisting of patterns of color."<sup>48</sup> It's interesting to note that this strictly formal analysis of his work upholds the ideals of pure, artistic genius. The middle wall label for "museums conflicted about disclosing an artist's abuse next to his art" is identical to the former, and adds, "Like many artists, he has had a few disgruntled employees." The third and final blow is for "museums who need help from the guerrilla girls" and says,

Chuck Close has had a huge career with prices to match. He has been accused of sexually abusing models and students he picked up at fancy art schools. How fitting and ironic that he painted the official portrait of Bill Clinton. The art world tolerates abuse because it believes art is above all, and rules don't apply to "genius" white male artists. WRONG!<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The Guerrilla Girls, "3 Ways to Write a Museum Wall Label," Copyright © Guerrilla Girls, courtesy guerrillagirls.com.

<sup>49</sup> The Guerrilla Girls, "3 Ways to Write a Museum Wall Label."

Artworks responding to allegations against high-profile artists initiate a shift towards activism in curatorial practices and perhaps was a driving force that led curators to think differently about interpreting art in the #MeToo era, and finally, remove the shield protecting and enabling famous—and mostly male—artists to abuse their power. Art has worked to drive change in the past, and as Bishop suggests, there has been a resurgence of artists advocating for constructive social change today. And, as Rancière demonstrates, the aesthetic nature of art is inherently political itself. While some curators may have not known how to react to #MeToo histories in their interpretations of art, they can certainly take note of how *artists* are reacting to this movement. Swiss curator, Hans Ulrich Obrist explains the direct impact artists have on curators, writing,

A curator cannot predict the future of art. Artists, however, have antennae that are extremely sensitive to impending change, and can often detect it before anyone else. And so, by sticking close to artists, curators might be granted a glimpse of what is to come. Curating follows art.<sup>50</sup>

By following the lead of artists like Emma Sulkowicz or the Guerrilla Girls, curators can work to address pertinent issues such as sexual discrimination in the arts, as exemplified by the curatorial efforts of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art and National Gallery in London.

The #MeToo movement has brought the personal histories of artists to the forefront of our minds, and has impacted the way art historians, curators, critics and even the public interpret the work by these artists. No longer will an aesthetic alibi excuse sexual harassment, or other crimes for that matter. Interpreting art in the #MeToo era not only raises awareness of sexual violence but also strives for a transparent, inclusive future for art history itself.

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<sup>50</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, “What is the Future of Art?” Artsy, <https://www.artsy.net/article/hans-ulrich-obrist-the-future-of-art-according-to-hans-ulrich-obrist>.

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