

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, "Weddings, ovens and Jesus in heels: the savage wit of the avant-garde feminists," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2016

**The  
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## **Weddings, ovens and Jesus in heels: the savage wit of the avant-garde feminists**

From the wearable oven to the all-female Last Supper, this hard-hitting and hilarious collection of feminist avant-garde photography still packs a punch



▲ Nest, 1979 by Birgit Jürgenssen. Photograph: Estate Birgit Jürgenssen / DACS, London, 2016 / Sammlung Verbund, Vienna

There are, inevitably, vaginas. Of course there are; it wouldn't be a show about the 1970s feminist avant-garde without them. But the vaginas are not the central focus of the new exhibition at the Photographer's Gallery showcasing 48 international female artists over 200 major works from the Verbund collection. There is, after all, more to feminist art than the vagina; though curator Anna Dannemann does confess that she enjoys watching men's reactions as they round the corner and are confronted with Judy Chicago's 1971 work *Red Flag* – a close-up study of a crimson tampon being removed.

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▲ Hausfrauen-  
Kuchenschurze, 1975 by  
Birgit Jürgenssen.  
Photograph: Estate Birgit  
Jürgenssens / DACS,  
London, 2016 /  
Sammlung Verbund,  
Vienna

There's a certain kind of man who will read the previous sentence and bristle. What is it about women questioning and exploring their own bodies that some find so offensive?

The answer, I believe, is agency – the demand for which is feminist artistic practice's perennial *cri de coeur*. Chicago's photograph is aptly named; it is a confrontation that highlights just how radical some of these works were and continue to be, even today, in this TMI era of social media.

The exhibition is well timed; this summer the world watched as a woman on a beach in the south of France was made to remove her clothing as men with guns stood over her, and the policing of women's bodies by men continues to be protested internationally. Earlier this week a photograph of an older Polish woman went viral. She was protesting the country's proposed anti-abortion legislation, and her sign read: "I can't believe I still have to protest this fucking shit." Looking at the work of the 1970s feminist avant-garde provokes the same emotions.

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▲ Ulrike Rosenbach's *Art is a criminal action* No. 4, 1969. Photograph: Ulrike Rosenbach / DACS, London, 2016 / Sammlung Verbund, Vienna

Women are still grappling with the same issues that prevail in this thematically organised exhibition: the confines of the domestic sphere, the objectification and sexualisation of our bodies, cultural notions of beauty, and stereotypical gender roles. Running throughout is also the demand to be taken seriously as artists in an industry that venerates the male and excludes the female from the canon. Mary Beth Edelson's *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper, 1972* makes the point neatly and playfully at the start of the exhibition. Indeed, many of the artists have their tongues placed firmly in their cheeks. Penny Slinger's *Wedding Invitation 2*, which shows a bride posing, legs apart, while wearing a wedding cake, is absurdly hilarious, though not a look I'd recommend you replicate for your own special day.



▲ *Wedding Invitation 2*, 1973 by Penny Slinger. Photograph: Penny Slinger / Sammlung Verbund, Vienna

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Much of the art examines women's relationships to their own bodies, so naturally there is female nudity throughout. I loved Hannah Wilke's series, where she starts off as Mary Magdalene standing on a plinth swathed in yards of fabric, and gradually strips until she becomes a half-naked Jesus in high heels. Of male nudity, there is just one example. Lili Dujourie's 1977 untitled series shows a naked man on the wooden floor of an apartment. At first glance you might think you were looking at one of the traditional female nudes that have long been the subjects of male artists. The so-called femininity of the poses and the length of the model's hair (it was the late 1970s after all) denote a woman, leading to questions about how artists have chosen to depict the body throughout art history. It is rare to see a male figure look so fragile and so beautiful.

Dannemann's curation strikes a good balance between the light and the dark. The humour of artists such as Edelson and Slinger complement the anger and despair of some of the other works. It's quite an achievement considering the mockery of "angry feminists" of the time.



▲ Lili Dujourie's Zonder Titel, 1977. Photograph: Lili Dujourie / Sammlung Verbund, Vienna



Flicking through an old Spare Rib of my mother's, I once came across an editorial headlined: "Why is this magazine so depressing?" You could not ask the same question of this show, though it quite rightly includes some works that punch you in the gut. Most affecting was Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy's 1977-78 performance *In Mourning and In Rage*, a response

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to coverage of LA's "Hillside Strangler", a man who raped and murdered 10 young women. The public ritual they created in order to pay them tribute and demand action is profoundly affecting. "I am here for the rage of all women!" one says, and you feel it. The female victims of murder and sexual violence continue to be presented to the media in a grotesquely titillating manner. A photograph of a woman is still highly likely to make the front pages provided she is sexy, or dead. Preferably both.