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Photography in Context Task 1

Due: 9<sup>th</sup> December 2022

Beware of The Women with Blades

Justine Kurland's *SCUMB Manifesto* is a built-up collection of collages, torn from the pages of iconic photobooks created by white male photographers, that dominate the shelves of every prestigious art collection. Kurland's book rips out the preconceptions of the female body made through the eyes of men and reconfigures them with her own hands to create beautiful art monsters. Her rebellious act formed out of frustration creates an emotional catharsis laid out on each page.

"SCUMB" (Society of Cutting up Men's Books); a reference to Valerie Solanas's own famous radical 'SCUM (Society for cutting up men) manifesto' published in 1967. A book widely criticized for its violent misandrist views, while others saw the book for its dark comedy and satirical look on the absurdity of power held by men. A topic Solanas knew greatly of, after facing a history abuse under a misogynist system. She is most famously known for shooting Andy Warhol in 1968, after accusing Warhol of exploiting her work and stealing the only cop of her screenplay, titled *Up Your Ass*. Solanas was a model and actress for Warhol appearing in his film 'I, a man' that she claims to not of been paid for and if all very little<sup>1</sup>. Solanas's story is one of many, told again and again by women trying to break into the art world and claw at that recognition so easily handed to men. So many women are hidden in history by the men that took claim to their work. Solanas wrote "If SCUM ever strikes it will be in the dark with a six-inch blade"<sup>2</sup>. Kurland listened to these women like Solanas, channeling the frustration into art, "coming at you with a blade" as she states on the cover. Although it may be the more legal Exacto knife, the threat remains to damage the age-old reputation of how we see art. To this day in the U.S, art museums are made of 87% male art<sup>3</sup>. Being a woman decreases an art works' financial value. As Linda Nochlin points out "In the field of art history, the white Western male viewpoint unconsciously accepted as the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Valerie Solanas, SCUM Manifesto and Tragic life story DOCUMENTARY' by Hannah Tay

<sup>2</sup> The SCUM Manifesto by Valerie Solanas

<sup>3</sup> Forbes's article 'The \$192 billion gender gap in art' by Kim Elsasser

viewpoint”<sup>4</sup>. Leaving anything that doesn’t fit the description to be ‘othered’. “There is a different kind of ‘greatness’ for women’s art than for men’s”<sup>5</sup>, anything a woman makes displays female experience. Our Western society sees this femininity as weak because it simply does not compare to the greatness of masculinity.

Kurland drew these images from her own personal archive, built up of “90% white male”<sup>6</sup> photographers’ books. It was “difficult” for her to destroy books that taught her how to take photographs. On the cover of the book, the text reads “I wanted her body back. She was flattened and I wanted her in a growing fold (...) I was something cut cutting something bruised and making new space form it”. By the addition of text, we sympathise with these women. This is a therapeutic and emotional act for Kurland, she is destroying and reevaluating her own internalized male gaze, watching these women in a new light as they mutate into something greater. This came through in the actual images. One that stood out to me was her use of Garry Winogrand’s ‘Women are beautiful’ book. There’s no brutal ripping but a carefully cut out woman that leaves a haunting silhouette space, no human is whole in this book but rather a discarded limb. The title of Winogrand’s book is scratched and covered by the empty space of this woman. I feel as though she’s protecting these bodies from being perceived in 2D. This contrasts to her whirlwind of female body parts she constructed out of Friedlander’s ‘Nudes’ that stare back at you in the shape of an eye, averting the gaze back on the viewer. Still, she’s afraid to damage the people in the picture but not the photos themselves. It’s complicated just like her relationship to the books. Even though they are regarded as sexist, part of her still responded to these memories she has with them. Despite my love for this book, I question the ethics of reobjectifying these women in the books to her own gaze. No one can completely rid themselves of their inner conditioning and normalization of female objectification when we still live in a patriarchal society. I think that frustration of having that inner mirror is what motivated SCUMB.

Kurland’s book doesn’t hurt anyone, she chose not to include the names of the male artists, just the titles of their books. This is a purely performative act that threatens her own standing as a photographer; she knows this will have no effect on the reputation of these men. Why

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<sup>4</sup> Why have there been no great women artists? By Linda Nochlin

<sup>5</sup> Why have there been no great women artists? By Linda Nochlin

<sup>6</sup> Janice Guy and Justine Kurland in conversation with Marina Chao for Hunters Point Press 2021

risk the network and relationships she has built with these photographers? Some of which being past teachers and mentors. Kurland even bravely offered to sell her collages back to the artists that made the materials. None accepted the offer, some got offended and one even encouraged her to keep going, sending her more of his material<sup>7</sup>. It is this dismissal of hierarchy and fear that I admire the most. She is burning it to the ground, angry like Solanas, that subservience to hierarchy is no longer an option. SCUMB does not shy away from its violence, the images are full bleed, and the book has a river of red running through it. Her cover is what's strikes me the most, it's full in text. Her words are brutally confrontational. It's refreshing to see such honesty from a female photographer. So often women hide their rage to avoid the female type casting, so often their pain is hidden in art waiting to be spotted, begging an audience to be intrigued. Kurland lays it all out in the cover in big orange writing "I call for the end of the graphic representation of the male canon". She is screaming so loud; you have no other option but to hear her voice.

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<sup>7</sup> Janice Guy and Justine Kurland in conversation with Marina Chao for Hunters Point Press 2021