

Masculinities

Liberation through Photography
Creative Learning: Teachers' Resource



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Catherine Opie, *Rusty*, 2008. From the series *High School Football*, 2007–2009. Photograph: Catherine Opie/Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

Using this Resource

This resource is designed to highlight key focus areas from the exhibition. It includes questions and points for consideration that encourage engagement and further research. It can be used as a starting point for the exploration of thoughts, ideas, observations and interpretations about the works; and as a prompt for discussion and response. It may be useful to secondary school teachers, further education tutors and leaders of arts, or youth groups visiting the exhibition.

Resource created by Alison Dunne for Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning.

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Plan your Visit

This resource is most appropriate for pupils studying at Key Stage 4/5 or higher. A pre-visit is recommended for teachers intending to bring students to the exhibition.

Your Visit

Barbican Art Gallery (Level 3), Barbican Centre
 Thu 20 Feb—Sun 17 May
 Sun–Wed, 10am–6pm
 Thu–Sat, 10am–9pm

A discounted group booking rate of £3 per student applies to all secondary and sixth form school groups of ten or more (up to age 19).

For bookings and enquiries please contact the school groups booking line.

Tel: 020 7382 7211 (Mon–Fri 10am–5pm)

Email: groups@barbican.org.uk

Please book at least two weeks in advance if you would like a free exhibition tour as part of your visit.



Adi Nes, *Untitled*, from the series *Soldiers*, 1999. Courtesy Adi Nes & Praz-Delavallade Paris, Los Angeles

Introduction

Masculinities: Liberation through Photography explores the ways in which masculinity is variously experienced, performed, coded and socially constructed, as expressed and documented through photography and film from the 1960s to the present day.

Jane Alison, Head of Visual Arts, Barbican and Alona Pardo, Curator, Barbican Art Gallery.

The fact that the photographs in this exhibition are from the 1960s onwards, means we can view them in the context of the sexual revolution, civil rights, women's and gay rights movements. These images are a product of, and a response to, a time of huge societal changes and the loosening of tight definitions of masculinity.

What does it mean to be male? This is a central question running through the exhibition as a whole – and it is a question with a plethora of answers, particularly in our ever-changing times. Consider the title, *Masculinities* and the choice of the plural over the singular. As a plurality, what definitions or ideas do you associate with the word masculinities? Compare expectations and perceptions of masculinity through time, society and place – where are we now and where have we come from? Look at the variety of masculine identities encompassed, often complex or even contradictory, shaped by culture and society. In addition, you could consider the word femininities in just the same way and compare commonalities or differences.

Consider too, the word liberation in the context of the title – how and if photography is a *liberating* force for the subjects of the camera's gaze.

Interdisciplinaries...

Masculinities can be explored from a range of disciplines and viewpoints with thought provoking intersections between Art and Design, Photography and Film, PSHE and RSE, English, History, Sociology and Gender Studies.

Key Focus Areas and questions:

When visiting the exhibition, it may be useful to use the following focus areas and questions either individually or in groups as springboards into enquiry, discussion and further work:

In what ways is 'masculinity variously experienced, performed, coded and socially constructed' both in reference to the works in the exhibition and in life around us?

Are we getting closer to dissolving boundaries between masculine and feminine – closer to a non-binary, gender non-conforming age? Would you agree that masculinity and femininity are fluid concepts that are not purely reducible to gender? What defines one's identity and how can this multifaceted identity shift or even contradict itself? How do sexual, gender and cultural identities overlap?

Do you think photography such as that seen in the exhibition can help to pave the way for new attitudes and choices? Discuss any examples you find in the exhibition.

What overarching themes do you associate with the words masculine, masculinities or male? What would you classify as hegemonic (ruling) masculine values or traits, particularly historically – e.g. power, leadership, strength, dominance?

What would you say are the assumed norms of masculinity today? Think of examples of what breaks or subverts these norms and find examples in the exhibition.

How much are we conditioned by the society or culture in which we live, in terms of our gender identities? Consider gender expectations from birth onwards – what messages do we receive about who we are or are supposed to be and accompanying notions of equality? Do you feel there is still pressure put on young boys to be a certain way or to conform to some perceived gender norm?

Disrupting the Archetype

What do you think of as conventional, archetypal or traditional masculinity – what images come to mind, and can you describe any particular stereotypes/archetypes? Do you feel masculinity is sometimes performed / a performance adhering to various coded expectations?

You will see photographs (by a variety of photographers) of soldiers, cowboys, body builders and more in the exhibition. For example, look at works by Adi Nes and Collier Schorr. Do these images of soldiers or cowboys disrupt the archetype in any way – can you detect vulnerability, sensitivity, fear or other qualities not usually connected to arguably more archetypal qualities of strength, machismo, courage etc.? Watch Bas Jan Ader's film, *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* as a springboard to discuss emotions and mental health – debunking the myth of 'boys don't cry.'

Can you find any examples of photographs which reinforce the archetype or celebrate it? For example, reflect on the work of Robert Mapplethorpe or Herb Ritts. Look at photographers going against the grain of the archetype such as the very honest self-portraits by John Coplans, exploring and confronting the realities of his own aging body.



Karen Knorr, *Newspapers are no longer ironed, Coins no longer boiled So far have Standards fallen*. From the series *Gentlemen*, 1981 – 83.
© Karen Knorr. Tate: Gift Eric and Louise Franck London Collection 2013.

Male Order: Power, Patriarchy and Space

The dominance of men in positions of power has numerous examples through history and into the present day. The middle aged or older white, educated man has so often featured highly in social constructs. Think of where females have broken through this 'old order' or patriarchy - whether that be Margaret Thatcher or Hilary Clinton or other examples you can think of. Do females inhabiting positions of power get treated the same as men and how does the public respond to them?

Look at Richard Avedon's images entitled *The Family* which show the key players in America's corporate and political elite in 1976. What do you notice and would you say this demographic still holds true today in our society? What comparisons can be drawn?

Look at ways in which feminism has impacted on patriarchal structures. Think of the term 'toxic masculinity' and what connotations it has (e.g. the backdrop to the huge #MeToo movement).

Too Close to Home: Family and Fatherhood

This section explores masculine identities in terms of family relationships. Archetypal images of the family have historically situated the female being at the centre of domestic life and childcare. How do some of the photographs here disrupt this?

Do family dynamics allow for a range of masculine identities and experiences to flourish? For example, look at works by Duane Michals who explores the tenderness, affection and vulnerability shared between male family members; or Larry Sultan who examines his own shifting relationship with his aging father by photographing him in quiet observation.

Consider current awareness-raising drives to support male mental and emotional health e.g. encouraging talking about and sharing feelings and emotions openly. How is this challenging old expectations and strictures? Does this signify a culture shift in male experience, offering a healthier template in which to live?



Larry Sultan, *Dad on Bed*, 1984. From the series *Pictures from Home*, 1992. Casemore Kirkeby, San Francisco; Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne; and Estate of Larry Sultan. Image courtesy of MACK.



Sunil Gupta, *Untitled 22* from the series *Christopher Street*, 1976. Courtesy the artist and Hales Gallery.

Queering Masculinity

From the 1960s onwards, the demand for increased visibility and legitimacy by the gay community has steadily grown in many countries and communities – providing hope and new possibilities after being criminalised and marginalised for so long. It should be noted however, that homosexuality is still treated as a criminal offence in various countries across the globe...

Within the exhibition, photographers breaking away from norms of gender and sexuality have presented alternative visions celebrating the experience of queer masculinity. Where can you see this reflected in the works shown? For example, look at the simultaneous exploration of romance and threat posed by being both queer and black in Isaac Julien’s film *Looking for Langston*; or photographs by Sunil Gupta celebrating the early days of the gay liberation movement in America and his images exploring the vulnerability and secrecy of being gay in India many years later.



Hans Eijkelboom, *The Ideal Man*, 1978 © Hans Eijkelboom

Reclaiming the Black Body

This section examines expectations and presentations of masculinity in terms of race, gender and history with the struggle for black civil rights as the beginning of a sea change in terms of African American experience. How do photographers in this section ‘reclaim’ black identity? For example, the work of Hank Willis Thomas redeploys magazine adverts from the late 60s onwards. Taking away all text, he uses them as a lens through which to evaluate the way African American males have been presented, objectified and often stereotyped in advertising through time.

American artist Deana Lawson also looks at black cultural stereotyping in order to then carefully challenge it – such as in *Sons of Cush*, where a heavily tattooed, muscular man holds a new-born baby in his protective embrace.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Smokin’ Joe Ain’t J’Mama*, 1978/2006. from the series *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America?*

Women on Men: Reversing the Male Gaze

Throughout history there has been a dominance of the female being objectified over the male in arts, media, culture and society. Do you think this still holds true today? In this section we see the male becoming objectified and scrutinised.

In Laurie Anderson’s series *Fully Automated Nikon (Object/Objection/Objectivity)* her camera becomes a weapon on the streets of 1970’s New York. Angered by the open sexual harassment she was subjected to, she photographed the perpetrators, symbolically stripping away their gaze and thus deflecting her own objectification.

Hans Eijkelboom playfully constructs a series of ideal men in terms of feedback given by a number of women. Although amusing, does this also provide a more serious commentary on how it is usually women re-making their image to fit in with the male gaze and set of expectations?

Marianne Wex looks at male and female posture and conscious/unconscious body language. Consider the origins of this and how we have absorbed coded behaviours due to sex.



Samuel Fosso, Self-portrait from the series 70s Lifestyle, 1975–78. © Samuel Fosso. Courtesy Jean Marc Patras, Paris.

Reading Photographs

Some ideas for consideration and questions to ask or use to generate discussion and debate:

Consider your own preferences and reactions to the works you see and what effect they have on you, what they communicate to you, how they make you think and feel – and why?

In what ways has the digital age changed how we communicate and understand the lives of other people?

How have photos been used to communicate information or beliefs or make a statement?

Why do you think the photographer has chosen to photograph this – what do you think was the photographer's motivation/intention?

What do you think was the photographer's attitude or relationship to their subject?

Where does the intention of the photographer end and the interpretation of the viewer start?

What do you see and notice in the photograph – what is happening?

Where and when do you think it was taken, what is the wider context– what clues are there?

What do we learn about the people in the photograph? What story does it tell?

What is the mood or feeling of the image and how is that communicated?

Is the subject turned towards the photographer or away? Natural or posed? What effect does this have?

What does the image reveal and what does it not reveal? Do you think there is anything the photographer has chosen not to include?

How does the context we see a photograph in impact its interpretation?

Explore Further

1. Create a series of photographs of people from a certain group or community and spend time getting to know them – see what stories, identities and questions start to emerge in the resulting photographs.
2. Create a series of works using photography/text/film or other mediums inspired by some aspect(s) of gender, identity, and sexuality – e.g. examining the artificial or limiting nature of gender itself.
3. Look at the advert 'hacks' examining identities and commodification by Hank Willis Thomas (and also those by Ellen Gallagher who is not featured in the exhibition). Create a series of works (e.g. collage or digital) using current adverts and re-make these to create new implications, messages and dialogues.
4. In groups think up some questions you would like to ask the photographer or a person portrayed in the photograph. Groups can then swap questions and provide answers.
5. Look at the 'performance' of masculinity through the lens of expected dress codes, uniforms and other accoutrements. Create art works in any medium which references and/or challenges expectations around this area. e.g. look at photographic work by:

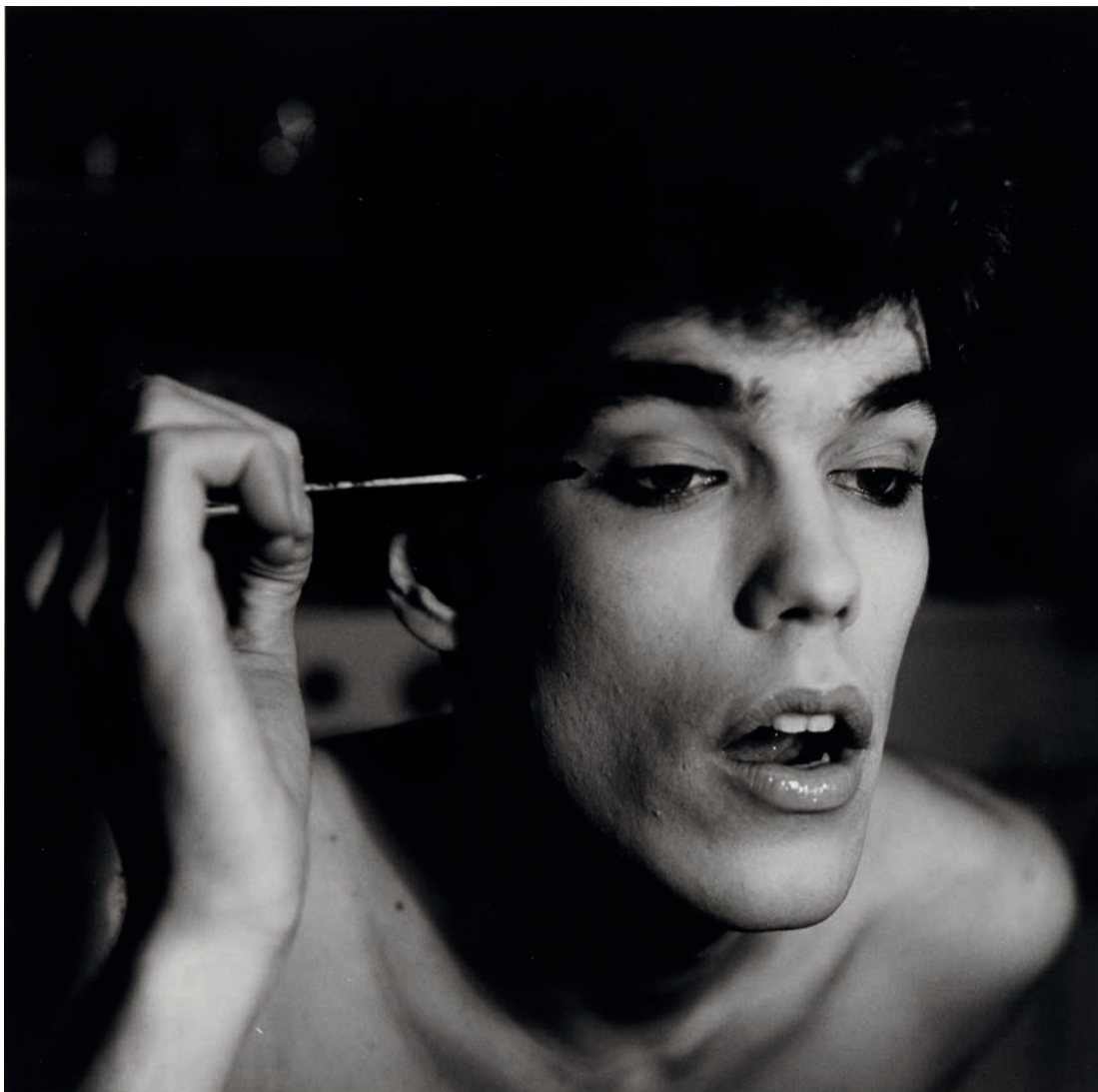
Peter Hujar, who examines the idea and theme of life as a performance with a focus on drag performers and Hal Fischer, who catalogues the signifiers and semiotics of dress codes.

Ana Mendieta, who works through empathic experiences across gender and identity often through performance art; Catherine Opie, who asks us what is normal and Karlheinz Weinberger who explores his subjects' highly stylised or expressive style and identity inspired by American culture.

6. Create layered art works to interrogate the layered realities of male experience/masculinities. E.g. look at the work of Kalen Na'il Roach who scratches away at and adds to a photograph's surface as if to excavate and explore additional meanings and aspects of identity; or the work of Annette Messager whose installations combine photography, texts, drawing, textiles and other objects to reflect and critique society and one's identity within it.
7. Choose a photograph and develop a creative narrative to accompany it. It could be based on the possible thoughts or life experiences of the people within the image and it might include what happened before or after the image was taken and what is happening beyond the frame of the photograph.
8. Pick one of the photographs as an inspiration for some free writing, exploring thoughts, emotions, ideas and questions that the image suggests. Responses to the exhibition can be developed using collaged text, poetry, spoken word, performance etc.
9. Look at and discuss examples of unconscious bias in the way males and females are treated, including how language is used around males and females e.g. *man up*, *tomboy*, *be a man*, *boys will be boys*.

This Teachers' Resource was prepared by Alison Dunne for Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning, which supports people of all ages and backgrounds to access and participate in world-class visual arts, music, theatre, dance, film and spoken word.

We regularly work with schools and colleges to create unforgettable learning experiences that help to embed arts and creativity across the national curriculum. For more information please contact: creative.learning@barbican.org.uk



Peter Hujar, *David Brintzenhofe Applying Makeup (II)*, 1982. © 1987 The Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco



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