Critical Reflection Text

Introduction

She Was Called a Witch takes the witch as a starting point to examine how language defines witches and disciplines women through works by contemporary women artists. The exhibition is an in-person group show developed through a feminist curatorial methodology. I first discuss the concept and structure of the SICP, then the conceptual and practical shifts after the Curatorial Pitch, and finally curatorial ethics, collective collaboration and peer review at Summerhall.

Developing the Concept and Structure of the SICP

The Origin of the Concept

The exhibition's theme took shape through a series of revisions. Initially, my focus on witches stemmed from my interest in magic, the mysterious, and supernatural forces. As my reading and research deepened, I realized that "witches" should not be understood merely as cultural figures shrouded in mystery. Rather, they are a social symbol produced by power structures, systems of labor, and gender discipline. Marxist feminist theorist Silvia Federici (2022) interprets the witch hunts as part of capitalism's primitive accumulation. In this process, the symbol of the "witch" underwent a transformation in my mind, and my focus shifted from an interest in mystical culture to an examination of "how women are defined as

witches.”

Adjustments to the Exhibition Structure

Because “witches” was a broad theme, I initially used the Triple Goddess as the exhibition’s narrative framework. This mythological framework, developed by the British poet Robert Graves in the mid-20th century, links the phases of the moon with the three stages of a woman’s life: maiden, mother, and crone (Pérez, 1987, p. 139). It gave the exhibition a clear spatial structure and connected the witch to feminine divinity and resistance (Hutton, 2017).

However, the framework also reduced women’s lives to three fixed stages. My first plan divided the exhibition into “maiden,” “mother,” and “crone,” with one artwork for each. Yet one work could not represent an entire life stage. Religious and feminist scholar Cynthia Eller (2000, pp. 7–8) points out that while matriarchal myths can provide spiritual strength for some women, they may also reinforce gender stereotypes and undermine the diversity of women’s experiences. This helped me see that my structure risked assuming a universal female life path, such as motherhood. Consequently, I no longer treat the Triple Goddess as the exhibition’s central thesis, but as a supplementary analytical tool. The main theme has shifted to how language defines witches and disciplines women.

Defining the Scope of Language

When selecting artworks, I found that “language” is a broad concept. I needed clearer limits for selecting works.

The witch is not a natural identity, but rather a construct shaped through naming and discipline (Bovenschen, 1978, pp. 85–86). This process places women in a position of accusation

and discipline. Feminist gender studies philosopher Judith Butler (2021, p. 5) argues that humans are shaped by language; only when a person is named and acknowledged can they enter into social existence. Thus, the term “witch” carries a long history of power, influencing how these women are understood and treated by society.

However, Butler (2021, p. 14) also notes that the power of language is not static, as it depends on repetition and context; it can also be reappropriated, rewritten, and reclaimed. Therefore, my exhibition defines “language” as a process: how women were defined as witches, and what accusations and disciplinary measures they endured. It explores how this label has been reclaimed in the contemporary era, becoming a form of resistant expression.

Turning Points from the Curatorial Pitch

Women’s Persecution and Witch-Hunting

For the Week 6 Curatorial Pitch, I selected three artworks that depict various forms of pain experienced by women. However, after discussing this with the collective members, I realized that this approach focused more on “women’s pain” in a general sense and had little connection to the theme of “witches.”

In my initial curatorial concept, I interpreted “witch hunts” as another term for “persecution of women.” However, through my research, I discovered that this is not the case. “Persecution of women” constitutes a broader structural

framework, while “witch hunts” represent a specific manifestation within that framework. Witch hunts are not historical relics; they are a form of ongoing gender-based violence linked to feminist issues such as stigmatization and sexuality (Chaudhuri & Ward, 2026, p. 2). Furthermore, German feminist literary critic Silvia Bovenschen (1978, pp. 96–104) argues that historical witch hunts were linked to the conquest of nature, the reconstruction of social order, and the control of women. Therefore, research on “witch hunts” must be situated within the framework of patriarchal society’s discipline and exclusion of women. In other words, it must be analyzed within the broader framework of “persecution of women.”

This made me realize that if I only discuss women’s experiences of oppression, I remain confined to the concept of “persecution of women.” To truly address the theme of “witches,” I need to further examine the language that defines women as witches. Witch-hunting therefore became a paradigm for analysing why women are cast as pursued figures and why accusations continue to be fabricated through fear of their resistance (Chaudhuri & Ward, 2026, p. 3).

The Contemporary Reappropriation of the Witch Symbol

The contemporary reappropriation of the witch figure must be approached with caution. Religious studies scholar Laurel Zwissler (2018, pp. 13–18) notes that many feminists reclaim the “witch” as a symbol of resistance to patriarchy, associated with female anger, sexual awareness, and defiance. Yet Zwissler (2018, pp. 18, 23) also argues that this symbolic use cannot replace the historical meaning of the witch, since the figure remains tied to stigma and violence. As Zwissler (2018, p. 24) asks, if a woman turns to the identity of a “witch” only when no other option remains, can it still be

read simply as a feminist choice? It has also influenced my curatorial practice; I cannot limit myself to selecting works that present the "witch" solely as a symbol of female power. I therefore needed works that show both the violent and the resistant dimensions of this figure.

Adjustments to the Selection of Artworks

Therefore, I hope to create a dialogue among the different artworks. I selected Evelyn Taocheng Wang's *Witches are Flower Sis*. Wang's work has long focused on how language, customs, and culture shape identity (Lambo, 2025), which connects her treatment of "witches" to my exhibition's theme, "The Discipline of Language on Women." *Witches are Flower Sis* responds to the reimagining of "witches" within contemporary feminist and queer culture. Inspired by *Witches, Witch Hunting, and Women* (Federici, 2019), Wang transforms the feminine allure historically associated with fear and stigma into flowers. Through fragmented, abstract visual imagery, she presents the book's accounts of violence against women. Thus, the witches depicted in this work are not the historically persecuted female figures, but rather contemporary representations that have been reimagined and rewritten.

However, without historical and structural context, this reinterpretation risks romanticizing "witches" while overlooking the stigma and violence originally associated with them. Therefore, I have included two additional works. *Witches in Word, Not Deed* uses archival texts, costumes, and mannequins to visually present the accusations and confessions from historical witch trials. This work demonstrates that language is part of the mechanisms of persecution against women. *Magic Kills Industry*, meanwhile, further illustrates how these discourses are linked to capitalist development, the division of labor, and control over women's bodies. Through

this combination, I hope the exhibition not only explores the figure of the witch as reclaimed by feminism but also reveals how the witch was originally constructed.

The “witch” serves more as a node where different generations of feminism intersect, offering an intergenerational perspective (Brandl, 2023, p. 160). These three works help viewers see how the “witch” has been continuously rewritten across different times and spaces, thereby unfolding a feminist narrative.

Ethics, Collaboration, and Peer Review

Curatorial Ethics

The feedback on my curatorial pitch changed my judgment regarding artist selection. Initially, I chose Sarah Lucas’s *WINTER SONG* partly because the work aligned with the “Crone” phase of my three-phase lunar framework at the time; I also recognized Lucas’s high profile and hoped that her name would draw more attention to the exhibition.

But is it too simplistic to rely partly on an artist’s fame to determine an exhibition’s value? Art sociologists Laura Braden and Thomas Teekens (2019, p. 1) note that while an artist’s reputation can indeed attract audiences, it may also redirect viewers’ attention, marginalizing other works in a group exhibition.

Through feedback from my tutor, I realized that, as an emerging curator and given the project’s actual budget, it would be difficult for me to establish a collaboration with an established artist like Lucas. Curator and writer Karen Love

(2010, p. 23) argues that emerging curators should fully consider the practical scale and feasibility of a project before finalizing artist selections or developing a proposal.

Consequently, I adjusted my criteria for selecting artists. I no longer prioritized “high visibility” but shifted my focus to mid-career or emerging artists. This shift was not merely a response to practical constraints but also a repositioning of my curatorial ethics. As curator Mirjami Schuppert (2021, pp. 7–10) points out, a “dialogical relationship” is necessary between curators and artists, emphasizing equal collaboration. Therefore, I needed to consider the feasibility of collaboration and the equality of voice. This fosters a more equitable negotiation process and prevents a single star artist from dominating a group exhibition.

Reflections Inspired by Intersectional Feminism

Intersectional feminism prompted me to reexamine my selection of works. At first, my choices mainly responded to Scotland’s witch-hunting history because the project began from this local context. However, if the exhibition remained within a single regional narrative, it might present witch persecution as a local event and overlook similar structures of discipline, stigma and oppression across different places. Critical race theory scholar Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (2021) argues that intersectional feminism emphasizes that gender oppression is not a singular, homogeneous experience, but is always interwoven with geographical, cultural, class, ethnic, and historical conditions. This changed my approach to artwork selection. I no longer sought only direct responses to Scottish history, but began to consider how similar problems appear in different cultural contexts. This is why I chose Evelyn Taocheng Wang, an artist born in China and currently based in the Netherlands. Her inclusion broadens the

exhibition beyond Scotland and places the figure of the witch within a wider cross-cultural context. The works therefore no longer revolve around one location, but build an intersectional argument through difference and resonance.

Feminist curating also led me to rethink the role of the curator. Curators are not entirely neutral; rather, they assume a stance and responsibility when selecting and organizing works (Mohamadi, 2023, pp. 1–4). Therefore, I needed to examine my curatorial practice through a critical lens, constantly asking: which women's experiences does my exhibition make visible, and which does it overlook?

Collective Collaboration

We held several group meetings online and in person. At first, communication was difficult, especially when discussing our collective ethical manifesto. Later, we used voting to move decisions forward, which improved efficiency. I also applied this method to my personal project and realised that collaboration needs both open discussion and clear decision-making rules. Feminist scholar Jo Freeman (2013, pp. 232–233) argues that the absence of rules does not necessarily mean a collective is flat and equitable. Power may be hidden within informal relationships and concentrated in the hands of a few. Therefore, establishing clear and transparent rules can support more equitable participation.

However, collective work did not always generate strong criticism. In Week 10, we completed a research project on the suitability of the Summerhall venue for the artworks. By this point, more stable relationships had been established among the members. Yet written comments were often mild and supportive rather than critical, and I was no exception. In-person feedback was usually more direct. This showed me that written formats can protect feelings but weaken critique. In future collaborations, I would clarify that identifying

problems is not personal rejection, but a way to develop collective thinking.

Reflections on Peer Review

While reviewing Yuwei's blog according to the course requirements, I noticed similar problems in my own blog. Because authors know their own ideas too well, they can overestimate the clarity of their writing. What seemed clear to me was not always clear to readers, especially when images, examples or context were missing. I therefore shared my blog with group members and asked for feedback from a reader's perspective. They pointed out that some sections lacked logical clarity and that several ideas needed further development. After revision, the structure and expression of my blog became clearer.

Yuwei's blog also gave me a new curatorial direction. She mentioned a curatorial approach that "leans toward the educational and process-oriented." Although she did not explain this fully, it led me to research related examples. Through ICI's *do it (in school) (2019)*, I realised that education and process can operate as curatorial forms. This helped me rethink my own public programme: how can interactive activities help participants develop understanding through the process itself?

Conclusion

This project has three main strengths. First, it develops a clear research question by moving beyond "witch" or women's themes to examine language, power and mechanisms of oppression. Second, it connects research and curatorial practice through reading, case studies and artwork selection.

Third, it builds a coherent curatorial structure, with clear relationships between the works. However, it also has limitations. The project covers many issues, including history, language and geography, which may blur my central focus on linguistic oppression. I also learned that I often leave too many assumptions unstated, so readers and audiences may not always follow the logic that seems clear to me.

In the future, I hope to continue developing feminist curatorial practice through research-led exhibitions, public programmes and collaborative work. This project has helped me learn how to narrow a broad theme into a clearer question, connect artworks through a shared argument, and situate them within historical, social and cultural contexts. These skills will continue to shape my future exhibition-making, research writing and collaborative practice.

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