

POL361 About the exhibition 'The Cult of Beauty' and your visit

There are 200 different objects and artworks in the exhibition. These include: books, videos, paintings and posters, objects, sculptures and photographs.

'The Cult of Beauty' exhibition is about:

- Why we all think about beauty.
- How ideas about beauty are different for different people.
- How the beauty industry is connected to health and wellbeing.
- There are many ways to be beautiful.

The exhibition considers the influence of morality, status, health, age, race and gender on the evolution of ideas about beauty. The curators invite you to question established norms and reflect on more inclusive definitions of beauty.

This exhibition is divided into three sections.

- The **Ideals of Beauty** is about the shapes that people find beautiful.
- The **Industry of Beauty** is about the business behind beauty products.
- **Subverting Beauty** is about celebrating different ways to be beautiful.

The exhibition is free, but please note no food or drink is allowed inside the area. I should also make you aware that the exhibition includes depictions of nudity, images of surgery and human tissue. It also contains racist and misogynist materials.

You do not have to look at every single work, and you should not rely too much on wall texts. You are in control of how you engage with the space and interact with the material on show.

However, you should remember a few things before your visit.

- **Keep in mind the lens through which we are viewing the exhibits**, i.e. what can beauty (its ideals, industry, and subversion) tell us about gender and sex, about power relations, about feminism and intersectionality. You will not be able to cover all of these aspects in your assignment, but you will have to show you are using the exhibition material to inform your reflections on at least one of these topics (see following page for a more detailed list of issues and learning objectives).
- The first assignment is a 500-word review of the exhibition. However, instead of speaking of the exhibition as a whole, **you are being asked to focus on one of the exhibits**. For this reason, make sure you take photos and notes of any object and artwork you find particularly compelling. This will provide you with the material

you need to make a final selection, and allow you to access important information to research the object/artist/artwork.

- **You are encouraged to include a photo in your submission.** If you don't have a mobile phone/camera with you, speak to the module convenor/tutor at the beginning of the visit to find an alternative way to gather the material you need to address the assignment.
- **Take notes (during the visit and/or after).** You may want to reflect on why you were drawn to a particular object/artwork, or maybe what object/artwork surprised you the most. These are good places to start. If you are going round with friends or classmates, then you may also want to include reflections on how they interacted with the exhibits. All these things will give you interesting entry points when writing your review.

This is where being clear about the learning outcomes of specific topics and debates can help you make the most of your visit. This list is by no means exhaustive but, in the first three weeks, we have considered:

- The development of feminism – the political movement for women's liberation, rights and equality – and how this impacted the definition of “woman” and the category of “gender”.
- The way the category of “gender” has come to be defined in terms of dichotomy and difference, and why it may be more useful to think of gender in terms of relations (see R.W. Connell).
- The danger of producing knowledge about “gender” when this is exclusively based on a Western and Euro-centric perspective (see Oyěwùmí and Najmabadi).
- The distinction between sex (biological nature) and gender (social construct), and how this can be “troubled” (see Shahvisi).
- Butler's critique of the sex-gender distinction, through her theory of performativity and concepts of citationality (see Butler).
- A brief overview of trans* politics (see Heyam).
- The way gender intersects with other identities such as race, age, ethnicity, class, sexuality and (dis)ability (see Crenshaw).
- The history intersectionality, and its theoretical and methodological implications for gender and politics (see Lorde).
- The importance of affects.

N.B. Pay careful attention to the way politics is being understood as power (subjection) and how this allows us to explore concepts such as liberation and resistance