

**Amy Budd (AB):** Okay, I think we're gonna make a start. Thank you so much for coming. It's wonderful to see you all here tonight, hopefully some of you might have had a chance to see the exhibition upstairs, which we opened at half past four. And if not, you can see it after this discussion, which will be from six o'clock. My name is Amy Budd, Senior Curator exhibitions at Modern Art Oxford. And I'm joined by Jo who is the, you have so many job titles, I forget what they are.

**Jo Widoff (JW):** It's not that relevant right here. But I am curator of international art and head of collections for Moderna Museet at Stockholm.

**AB:** I'm delighted to have Jo here to talk about our co-curated exhibition, Monica Sjöo: *The Great Cosmic Mother*, which opens in Oxford tonight and was previously at Moderna Museet from May to October earlier this year, and will tour to Moderna Museet in Malmö, next spring. So we have a second venue on the tour. This is maybe a different format for the type of event we would have for an exhibition opening, where normally there'd be an artist in conversation. But in lieu of the artist, it's Jo and I thought, well, I thought we could just have a very informal chat about our experience of curating the exhibition, of how we both came to Monica's work and maybe to give some insight into that process, so you can understand a bit more about the exhibition upstairs, when you go upstairs to see the show. For those who might not be familiar with Monica's work, Monica was a Swedish artist, writer, activist, and eco-feminist, who lived and worked in Bristol for most of her adult life. She was a major advocate for freedom of oppression in all its forms. And that manifested through her feminist organising as part of the Women's Liberation Movement, but also, through her spirituality, and being a major exponent of the goddess movement in the UK internationally. I thought we might start this conversation just by talking about how we both came to Monica's work. Personally, Monica was unknown to me up to maybe five years ago, where I was working on an exhibition about the legacies of the domestic and feminist art practice in the UK. And I arrived at Monica's work through a text by the art historian Amy Tobin, who has written an essay in our catalogue. And her research really is about the history of the women's art movement in the UK. And that was a very small footnote in a text that she'd written about Monica and that was the instigator to find out more through various research, feminist archives, ourselves and discussion with many other people. But I wonder Jo, whether you could also say, how was your interest in Monica's work started?

**JW:** Oh, well, actually out of not knowing that much of Monica. As she started by saying, Monica Sjöo is a Swedish artist, although I don't think many people in Sweden actually think of her as a Swedish artist, because she moved so early to the UK and was so very present here. That actually, I think that she's much less well known in Sweden than she would be in the UK, and much less researched. However, as I've been at Moderna Museet for a long time, we actually did acquire works for from Monica in a very particular acquisitions campaign called *The Second Museum of our Wishes*, which was specifically aimed at acquiring women artists, historically, so that we would be able to actually amend (which is the wrong word, of course, because we will never be able to amend the balance in our collection), but that we would be able to display important women artists within our collection and galleries. And so Monica, where was surprisingly, actually one of them. And she was joined in this campaign by artists such as Siri Derkert and many, many others, including Russian avant garde artists, and so forth. So I always kind of had this curiosity about Monica's work, but never really had the chance to read up on it. There's not that much

written. And I think maybe we can come back to that, but the catalogue that we did is actually quite important than that way. But having kind of pushed through an exhibition of Siri Derkert Monica became more interesting to me and I did a collection display where I kind of positioned her work within a Swedish context and, and suddenly I realised that we have to do a show. And then strangely, you were thinking the same thing at the same time. And so this collaboration is not so much, you know, of course, that exhibitions tour and you know, you make a whole thing out of it and they travel to different countries and different places. But this exhibition is not a tour in that sense. It's actually a true collaboration. And it's been hugely beneficiary to be able to have us working together because I have absolutely, absolutely no is perhaps long, but I have very little knowledge of a British feminist scene whilst as you are very kind of embedded, of course, in this landscape. And so I think that this kind of almost binational kind of strange, perfect (we should even get money from some kind of EU fund for working together this way) has been really beneficiary.

**AB:** Yeah, completely. And certainly, I mean, when we came to research, the the archives, I mean, there's a huge portion of, of Monica's writing, which is still held with the estate, which is in Swedish, and it would be in many ways, it would have been incredibly challenging to have staged an exhibition such as this without a Swedish partner, and without your language and also the insight into the context that she was working within in Sweden, which is quite distinct and quite different to the moment that Monica arrives in Bristol, to my mind. I have some slides prepared. This is very spontaneous and kind of responsive, but I thought we would start having introduced from your point of view, Jo, your interest just to kind of refer to the exhibition that you created in Stockholm. Yes, exactly.

**JW:** Yeah, it's a very different show from up here.

**AB:** It is, it is maybe, I mean, it's a very beautiful show in a very different space, and you approached installing the works, you know, very, with a very different approach. It's softer, I remember you saying you wanted the works to be softer, somehow.

**JW:** I wanted to, I mean, this is always a little bit intricate, of course, knowing your galleries, you also know the disadvantages of your galleries. And this gallery up here is, you know, light and beautiful, but the gallery that I had at my disposal at Moderna Museet, it was, it's our cellar galleries, our level two galleries, and they always, they were constructed for photography, and really small and, and I really felt that it was important somehow to be a little bit disarmed when entering the exhibition. And that's why I wanted a soft exhibition, I didn't want a soft exhibition in terms of it to be feminine or something like that, but rather, just the kind of experience of entering into something else, which I think was important and, and then we constructed these metal frames for it just because I wanted it, and this was something that I came to quite late in the process, and I think it has to do with our conversations and our research and the many conversations we've had with art historians, researchers, but also friends and Monica, the kind of acknowledgement that this is perhaps not only gallery art, this is not paintings that were supposed to be shown in the white box, or that didn't have any meaning. I mean, they're really much kind of torturous and intimate, somehow or torturous into an attempt to change something. And I think that was incredibly important. And so for me, it was urgent to have them present within kind of the gallery, but also *among* the audience. And that's why we constructed these metal frames for them.

**AB:** Yeah, they're incredibly sculptural at your show. And I loved how you could see between them through the paintings as well. And especially in this first room, which was full of the figurative, more figurative portrait paintings, it was really effective. And I think I riffed off that or tried to as much as we could with this exhibition where you could look through and past the works.

**JW:** I mean, I like it, but I shouldn't say and I don't have kind of the distance enough that people also hated it. I mean, some people absolutely hated it. I still kind of enjoy it. But I mean, it differs, it's about introducing something and we can talk all night about [inaudible] but we shouldn't do this. I'm very happy to see the show here. Of course, it looks very different.

**AB:** It's a different kind of impact. You know, I think that the carpet was really effective as well. Thinking more about the Swedish context I wanted to. Could you explain? Well, in our research, when I was I was also discovering more about the Swedish feminist art scene, I think through you and through your knowledge of Monica's involvement and through your research and contacts with Swedish art historians. And Siri Derkert, is an artist I had not know before starting this project, and I wondered if you could I'm not I mean, I'm not sure who else here might have heard of Siri Derkert which is a huge shame because she's an incredible artist, and I wondered if you could say more about series work and Monica's relationship with Siri.

**JW:** Yeah, I mean, the sweet thing is that now I'm the Swedish art historian here. But actually, it's not my responsibility within the museum, I'm actually in charge of international modern art. But somehow I can always come back to certain aspects of Swedish art. And one of the aspects or one of the artists that I continuously come back to is actually Siri Derkert. And that was also interesting, not knowing Monica Sjöo that well, to understand how intimately they were actually connected. So Siri Derkert, and I'm not gonna give a lecture on her either. That will be strange here, although I try every time I'm abroad to kind of push her a little bit. Siri is a hugely important Swedish artist, one of the first you exhibited at Moderna Museet ever when we started. The first to hold the Nordic pavilion in the Venice Biennale, and really one of these women artists who's the first at everything, and she was exhibiting and painting and working in Paris already 1915. So she's very kind of, she holds this strong position in what we would call kind of first wave feminism, what you would call the suffragette movement, but we wouldn't we are a little bit later in terms of that. So she would be active in the 1920s, 1930s. In that time, she would have an incredible network of women writers, politicians, thinkers around her that would really push on for the women's movement in Sweden, basically. She was a really special person, I think she was working continuously up until her death in 1973. And interestingly enough, she met Monica quite soon, because Monica was I think... (I said to Amy, I can do this talk, but I can not do any date. Like, I will not remember a single date. But when did she go to Bristol in '56 or something like that?)...

**AB:** I thought it was slightly later than that.

**JW:** She would know better than I. She left early. But Monica came back to Stockholm in '67. I have an answer here.

[Inaudible audience response]

**JW:** Yeah, exactly. '67, '68, something like that, which of course, it's an important time at this point. And she started working for Siri. And I think that they were hugely influential for each other, which is interesting. It's not like Monica would be inspired and it would be a one way conversation. But actually, what is so interesting and there is a great essay in the catalogue about this as well is that you can see a change in Siri Derkert's work and they really kind of inspired each other. And one of Siri Derkert's best friends actually or kind of closest associates was a writer called Elin Wägner. Elin Wägner is a very famous Swedish feminist writer, and she was very early on writing a book called well, in Swedish it's *Väckarklocka*, but the translation would be, I guess, 'the alarm bell' or something similar? Yeah, exactly. It says here, then the alarm bell is actually one of these kind of proto ecofeminist books. And we know from Monica's diaries that this was hugely influential on her, which kind of made this discussion very early in a kind of stage where you wouldn't really talk about ecofeminism. But this kind of came through these conversations with these quite older women. And I think that's interesting, honestly.

**AB:** How much older was Siri Derkert from Monica, at the time when they met.

**JW:** I would imagine that Siri again, dates, but she would probably be born in 1880-1890, something like that. Um, we were talking about what was found in the archive, and there were many letters between Siri and between Monica, where they were cheering each other on. And actually, I went through the Siri Derkert papers as well, when we were doing research and and there is this kind of similar conversation.

**AB:** Yeah, no, it's fascinating. I mean, if I'd be doing it on my own, I would have just not even known what I was looking at. So yeah, it was the benefit of having the Swedish reader.

**JW:** But I have to say, I mean, I have this one chance. You have to google her. She's an amazing artist. Like, do a show.

**AB:** Yeah, but also I tried to find *The Alarm Clock* and it's impossible to find in English. It's not available to us at all. So there's a whole movement, you know, the feminist movement in Sweden, that's so much earlier in some ways, and Monica really, I had a sense of that was really incubated in her in Stockholm before she moved to Bristol, which she bought this energy and activism and organising and ecofeminism idea already fully formed in in Stockholm that allowed her to be so energetic in Bristol.

**JW:** Yeah, I think it's perhaps important, and this was a surprise to me as well, to understand how present Monica Sjöo was in the Swedish art scene and especially in the Stockholm art scene. She was exhibiting, she was constantly in contact with many artists and she was actually in contact with them throughout her life. She was acting more or less like a correspondent of sorts, kind of channelling or funnelling information about what was happening in Sweden and what was happening in the UK. And interestingly enough, and I think we don't talk enough about this, she was also in, you know, constant contact with both West Coast artists, New York artists, and she was really kind of acting as an intermediary, you say, in English, between different scenes. And I think that was also a huge part of her contribution to, to these different scenes.

**AB:** Exactly. We're very lucky to have the Monica Sjoo estate with us - Annie, who represents the state and also Maggie Parks, who was a longtime friend of Monica, and they've described Monica as being this amazing networker. And I think that might have a different connotation now, but she definitely connected people that was part of her organising. And I do think that maybe isn't so obvious in the exhibition. But when we were looking through the archive, and the volumes of photo albums that we have taken some of those images for the catalogue, but it's just a phenomenal community around her that she really forged, I think.

**JW:** No, it was phenomenal task. I mean, she had three children, and she was writing, I don't know, 15 letters a day. I'm in shock. Yeah. Really? Who has time for that? I mean...

**AB:** Exactly...

**JW:** Maybe if you miss out on a few episodes of *The Crown* you can do a few, but not 15! So I'm impressed on. But I think it actually is present in the show. I'm sorry, when I start talking, I keep talking. But I think it is present in the wall or posters. I was thinking about it yesterday, actually, when you were giving an introduction. You know, because one thing that is so very apparent when you look into Monica's art, and quite rare, actually is that she's so focused on, you know, reaching out on connecting on kind of forming alliances, or on inviting people to take part of something. And this is really present in the posters in the many, many, many campaigns and, you know, grassroot organisations and meetings that she was involved in, but of course, it's very important in the ways that she write her letters and the way to contact people, but also in her practice of writing. I mean, she was hugely prolific writer, and she would kind of contribute to all the magazines that she could and yeah, you know, really trying to reach out and especially... And interestingly enough, I briefly mentioned that I kind of came to Monica after coming out of this Hilma Af Klimt period, who is a very, very introverted person, especially thinking about her spiritualist kind of practice, whilst Monica spiritualism with this and kind of her beliefs are not something that is shut off, or something that she keeps private, but she's, you know, continuously in a conversation with people and with the world. And I think that's fascinating. And one of the things that makes her so very contemporary, or prescient, or, you know...

**AB:** I think we described her as being, um, energetic is the word. But that doesn't necessarily mean she was a very prolific painter, but it was definitely this holistic approach to organising to speaking, discussing, to meeting. And I think what we wanted to really capture in this exhibition was to include paintings and also works on paper, but the archive, the slides, the posters, footage, to really encapsulate this incredibly, the very many aspects of her life. With that in mind - one thing I've put down to discuss is maybe the challenges of making an exhibition such as this, with an artist who is... We've been very reluctant to refer to her as being unknown, which is very tempting for someone who maybe isn't as widely known as they should be, because she was certainly incredibly well known. I mean, I'm sure many of you here tonight are aware of her, which is wonderful, and I hope many more people come to see the show, and it's very much the incentive of doing the show was to really celebrate that. But the challenge of it is that she hasn't been historicized in the way that she should do. That was the motivation space in the catalogue for commissioning those texts. But this kind of very long process of research and spending time with Annie in the estate. Annie who is here, who was incredibly generous in giving us a lot.

**JW:** Is Annie here?

**AB:** She is, she's just there at the back, she just walked in! I mean, I can't even give enough thanks to Annie for allowing us the access that we had as curators to incubate and develop this exhibition and giving us so much trust, I think we came with a proposal and without, you know, a timeframe. It spanned the pandemic and also spanned two pregnancies for you, and you know, a huge amount of time and a lot of pausing and a lot of planning. But to arrive at this point has been a huge achievement. And I think maybe, maybe - can we perhaps talk about our expectations before we made this exhibition, and what we uncovered through the process of it? I guess, for me at least, it was an enormous learning experience to understand. I think before I, I was aware through Monica's archives and feminist archives that she was incredibly well connected. But I perhaps didn't understand how incredibly industrious and committed and prolific and relentless she was in her making and organising and communicating throughout her life. And the archive really testifies to that. But there's also the challenge of bringing an interpretation to the work, from an historical point of view, for the first time in a very substantial and serious way. I think we're also very indebted to Rupert White's work around Monica. And the books that he's published on her. Those are enormous reference points, I think in pulling together a biography and to create a narrative around the artist. I think.

**JW:** Yeah, I mean, I think it's hugely important for these type of projects to acknowledge that this is work that has been done by many people in small instances. And, and of course, I mean, you thanked Annie, but Annie, you're almost like the third curator of this exhibition, even though I don't see you. And I think sometimes, we forget about the importance of archives and archiving. And there are these discussions now and symposiums, which really strongly support, that are talking about activism and archives and archive-ism as activism, which is incredibly important. And I'm always struck when I'm in the UK about how good you are actually, at this, especially in terms of oral history and keeping so much we are terrible at this in Sweden. But of course, I mean, you and I are art historians, coming into the archive was a shock to me. It was something I could continue doing for years. I think there is a book or three books to be written about Monica Sjöo. I think this is the first major museum exhibition. But I'm pretty convinced there will be an even larger one in a few years. And there's lots of materials, I'm trying to push it on every art student I ever meet, saying that there is at least 10 dissertations in this archive. I'm sorry Annie, I haven't told you about this, but you're going to be busy. And of course, I mean, this type of exhibition, and it's always difficult sometimes to explain the amount of work which is behind it. And this is not to, you know, kind of credit ourselves. But honestly, the amount of work that also comes with, you know, documenting everything in terms of Annie's work with actually archiving, documenting, organising, thinking about everything, and I think that comes down to 15, 20 years or something like that. You will have to speak for yourself. But I mean, it's an intense work. And now for this specific exhibition, just doing the catalogue, I mean, having to kind of dig through everything and, you know, take new photographs of everything. And we actually had the possibility thanks to the estate to have the works in the museum for almost six months, I think. So I got quite intimately connected to them because we needed to photograph them because some of them needed to be restored. I mean, it's an amazing job. And it's the best part of my job, honestly, when you get to do these things. And then you see the show and it's

up for six months or three months and you go like “okay”, but it really it feels like something, something that is quite important.

**AB:** Yeah, it was hugely important. And I should also credit Moderna Museet’s investment in this exhibition through the conservation, through the photography, and you know, the framing of works as well in order to make these works exhibition ready because they really were in storage for a very long time... I'm just consulting my notes of another point that I wanted to reference. A part of the, I guess, our time in the archive was also I think, discovering a part of Monica's involvement in Greenham Common, and with Women for Life on Earth. These movements in the '80s when she was living in Wales that I had not anticipated finding really. This was something that I, I mean, I was aware of [the fact that] the works had changed and that after you know, *The Goddess at Avebury and Silbury*, there was a shift in her work with which the eco feminism becomes much more pronounced, she is living in Wales, her work practice is moving away from the Marxist materialist demands of the Women's Liberation Movement, something that's more about our relationship to nature and each other, and the goddess, of course. But this moment, particularly in the '80s, around Greenham Common, was entirely new to me. And I think I just wanted to have a moment to explain, as part of our research was stumbling upon this slide selection, which I think I feel very attached to in the exhibition. It's a very small moment, I suppose, in our middle galleries, but for me, really speaks to her practice in a very broad sense as, as an activist, as an artist, as someone who seemed to always have a camera on them all the time throughout their lives. And this, the Reclaim Salisbury Plane March was something that we were in, in the archive and just researching and looking very speculatively to see what we could find. And this was a real moment of joy for me to find these colour images that we had. I borrowed a projector from the workshop, and we had a look together, and we were like, “Wow, these are amazing photos”. Yes, I just wanted to point to that. But also, what I was interested in is, Jo, from your point of view, the history of Greenham Common was completely new to a Swedish audience. This is not something that was known so much, or at least, when we were talking about this moment in Monica's life, this was a new kind of new territory for you to work with in the museum.

**JW:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, this was, in a Swedish perspective, this is something that needed to be much explained. I mean, we were talking earlier today, I went to this show at Tate *Women in Revolt*. And I was explaining, of course, that this for me is a history that I don't know that well. And I mean, this is the same thing for a Swedish audience, we wouldn't be you know, intimately connected to the ins and outs of the kind of political landscape of the UK at the time. But on the other hand, again, it speaks to a very Swedish moment, at the same time, I mean, these are parallel processes, even though this specific event was a very UK based one. But I think, importantly, with this material, I was also very surprised. And, of course, I learned a lot. I would never have known the Reclaim Salisbury March, it was not part of my historical kind of concept. But I think interestingly enough, it made sense. It makes sense that of whatever Monica does, she's so consistent from the early works in the '60s up until you know, very late works in the 2000s. She's continually pushing the same thing which is absolute absolutely astonishing to me and her kind of resistance to... I'm sorry, my English is failing me slightly... compartmentalise you say?... to compartmentalise, you know her spiritual beliefs, your personal life or her political standpoints. Instead, they're always continuously merged in a very, very strong way. And I think, I mean, this eco feminist part was surprising to me. Yeah, but not that, you know, when you saw it yourself, of course, of

course, it makes sense. And I also particularly like the way that she would, you know, make it very personal in the sense that she would tie it together with these specific places and sites that were so sacred and so important to her, and how those sites were kind of being cut off of landscapes and you know, they were being taken over by military. And of course, it made sense. And there's always this kind of interconnectivity between her different, how she looks at and how she perceives the world around her and I think that's amazing.

**AB:** Something I was also drawn to her as an artist was also the very indiscriminate way that she uses her work. She uses it to illustrate the publications that she committed to, her poetry. But this is a wonderful example of her creating a banner for a protest for the march from Cardiff to Braudy, and then this is later kind of stretched or put onto borders to transform into a painting and in the catalogue we don't, I don't have a photo of it, but she takes Mother Earth in pain to a GM crops processing science lab and you know stands in the carpark carrying out rituals with her paintings to one side, and I just absolutely love that about her. The lack of preciousness I think she has to her work. Not that they're not important, but she understands their different uses in different contexts.

**JW:** And perhaps the kind of iconic nature of the works, in the true sense of the meaning not in the kind of art market sense of iconic, but really the fact that they were again, you know, meant to do something in the world. They were not meant to be just observed or seen, but actually, again, act for change. And I think that's very, very relevant when you see her kind of walking around with them, or, as you say, posting them in demonstrations, or in any way using it. I'm a little bit, I mean, I was a little bit disappointed that she actually mounted this one, I love the, the banners

**AB:** Oh yeah, the banners, she has cut it slightly, it's a bit smaller than that.

**JW:** But I will live with that.

**AB:** But in terms of how her work functions as a different tool. This was also a key conversation that we had with Kathy Jones at the Glastonbury Goddess Temple. So we're very lucky to have this painting in our exhibition. And it wasn't quite, it sadly, isn't travelling to Sweden. But Kathy pointed out, she reminded us, I think, in conversations about the loan of this work that this is also a tool for devotion. In some sense, the works are within the context of an exhibition within the gallery, we're approaching them within the context of an artistic practice, but, you know, the goddess context is also incredibly important. And this work usually sits within goddess Hall in Glastonbury where it has a very different purpose and a very different audience. So I think that's something that we've kept in mind at least. And we alluded to that in the catalogue that we would [be] treading a careful line, I think, on occasions about how we are approaching these works, you know, to kind of fully represent the very many aspects of her life and work.

**JW:** I mean, I think, honestly, I'm so really disappointed that this work was not in Stockholm. There are some amazing works here, that was not part of the Stockholm exhibition. So you should really enjoy them. I was almost pissed off when I saw them. Especially this one which is incredible. But I'm trying to get through that, and I can't even remember what you were asking... In terms of spirituality...



**AB:** Just that these are not just artworks, I suppose. And we look we're looking at them in an art historical context...

**JW:** This is of course a very long discussion in terms of art history, and the purpose of art and religious art in particular, and, and how we kind of perceive that. I think it's a balancing act, I really do. It was partly we started off talking about this incredibly weird purple, you know, carpet I had and thinking about how do we kind of locate these works. And I think it's really interesting to see them up here. Because you have as we were talking about, even though this is a brewery, it has this kind of almost church like status and churches, of course also very problematic in terms of Monica's work. And then how do you think about that and and altarpieces and so forth? It is a balance. I think it's a balance that also you were talking about, why has perhaps Monica fallen the debate in between chairs? One aspect is, of course, the way that she deals with spirituality, which has been taboo in the art world for a very, very long time. And I think we're finally at this moment when we can start to talk about this. And just recently, there was this major Judy Chicago exhibition that opened in New York. I think it opened in October. So actually, for the first time showing some of Judy's works that you know, has been a major part of her art but still we kind of see these car hood and they kind of dinner table that's the only thing we see because no one has really kind of wanted to touch these other works. And it's interesting to see how they're kind of careers align.

**AB:** Yeah, definitely, yeah. I mean, they were also in touch and they were kind of what appears to a point and I think like you said, it's a shame that Monica pass away so, so soon, relatively because given that length Judy Chicago's career she's having this is a right to her now in her 80s. I think at this point.

**JW:** Yeah, I mean, there are a series, of course of especially West Coast women, but also East Coast artists that are really famous in terms of, you know, conceptual works within a feminist practice. But they were also very much connected to a goddess movement, of course. But that has been, you know, disregarded in that sense for a long time.

**AB:** One thing I have been thinking about, I guess, since installing the show and walking around is that the earlier works in the upper gallery, from the 1970s are so explicitly, so direct in their feminist messaging, I think. But it's also important to remember this, these paintings also, the later works come from the same position. And somehow that is often lost, perhaps it might be tempting to read Monica's work within a more romantic idea of the landscape and the goddess, but it still comes from this position of wanting to end patriarchy thinking about ancient matriarchal cultures to bring about a total revolution. And I think that's something that I find I personally, I've always been - have kept in mind when researching and working on this exhibition is, it challenges my expectations of what a feminist practice might look like? Or what how political art is manifested?

**JW:** And yeah, and I think also, it takes a little bit of time, I mean, to understand these works... to really understand them, I think, is a lifetime practice. We have to remember that Monica Sjoog was also, you know, researching, she was a complete, you know, researcher in the sense that she spent almost a lifetime trying to understand symbols, communities, historical contexts, and she was writing and writing and writing, and she was adding on layers in her paintings. And the paintings can be read from a very, very specific... And I think

there's this beautiful slideshow that we haven't really talked about in the gallery upstairs. Because it also shows some of our...

**AB:** Yeah, this is the slideshow...

**JW:** Show some of the references, and we did manage to see some recordings of Monica, actually doing almost performance lectures talking about her work. And when you see those you actually understand how complex they are, and how kind of put together they are. And I think she very early on started on this almost impossible project that I really want to understand more about, because it's almost like she's trying to construct a belief system or kind of construct a theory that doesn't relate to opponents. Again, not finding the correct English word, but you know, black and white, dark and light and both male and female. And I think it's incredibly difficult to do that. And, you know, you can see it over and over again, in her works, that she's really kind of struggling to bring forth knowledge, experiences, that have been pushed to the side, for reasons of, you know, rationality or patriarchy, you know, systems in general. And she's trying to put them side by side. And that's a difficult thing to do. Because most of our thinking, for a very long time is actually based on this kind of dual ideas. And I think that's the true kind of craziness of Monica's work, but I'm not really there to talk about it yet. But that's what really kind of excites me and and I think there's, again, I think there's another book there, there's not my book, but you know, someone has a chance.

**AB:** But there are also I mean, we have maybe 80, 80 slides in this carousel, and I don't even... there are hundreds - hundreds and hundreds of them. I mean, there could be like a whole hours long with these five lectures that she would give and she became very well known for.

**JW:** There's like one removing box of, you know, images marked trees, right. It's an incredible life achievement.

**AB:** It is. Yeah. And I think I think when you when you get to the final gallery upstairs, you can also notice the references, she kind of uses. These references for her own kind of anthropology into these histories. But also you recognise the motifs that she uses in the paintings. In the lectures, she would intersperse her own artworks in this herstory, I suppose. So yeah, I find these really, really fascinating. And also, when we were in the archives, just the quantity of invitations that she received to give these lectures is phenomenal as well, clearly it's artistic, but it was never considered so, or at least acknowledged or at least framed in that way. I think she thought it within her practice. But perhaps from our contemporary art point of view, for me, it's this is a performative iteration of her ideas.

**JW:** Right? I think, I mean, we started this with a question also about, you know, the archives and what does it mean and so on. And, you know, how did we kind of come to that? I think there was this one point in our research that was hugely important. I mean, there were many points. But like one point that was important to me when we visited the feminist archives in Bristol. And we had this wonderful time. And you know, suddenly I understood because we were asking, "so how many people do access this material? How many people research them want to go where papers?" And, you know, they told us that really, there's a lot, there's many students, many researchers that enter this material, but perhaps not from, you know, the point of our historical research or, you know, doing research on Monica Sjo

specifically, but because she spent a lifetime researching, and gathering materials, these, you know, papers are so important for anyone, you know, in historical department or thinking about, you know, social justice in South America or thinking about GMO crops and the kind of history of how that has evolved. And there is this kind of bank of knowledge that is just immense.

**AB:** Yeah, it's huge, I think, yeah, many users of theology or other spirituality, or histories of goddess feminism, which is, you know, kind of the rich quality of a practice such as this.

**JW:** Again, it makes you want to cancel your Netflix account. It's just incredible.

**AB:** Just looking through my notes of other slides that we have to just refer to.

**JW:** I have no idea what slides we have.

**AB:** No, we're indebted to our curator - Jess put these together for us.

I mean, these are the two works that are you know, in your collection, and maybe it's something I touched on in the tour that we had last night was the renewed significance. This, this painting particularly gained during the time of creating the show. I think it was last summer, the US Supreme Court overturned Roe versus Wade, which is the constitutional right to abortion. Suddenly, this painting is 55 years old, and it feels, you know, horrifically relevant today. And maybe there's a question about the timeliness of this work. And the timing of this exhibition. I think a few people have noticed, obviously, there's *Women in Revolt* on show in London at the moment, there's *Resistance* exhibition, at the Barbican, and there is a feminist moment, perhaps happening in the UK, a belated review, I think of this history. But maybe maybe we think about the timeliness of Monica's work. And also that relates another thing I wanted to say was we were very keen, this wasn't a '70s feminist art show. I remember that was one of the first conversations that we had, that we had to insist on the prescient and relevance of this practice, and to keep it contemporary and to not, not only focus on works made during the '70s.

**JW:** Yeah, I think in a way, I mean, we talked about this the other day, I think we started from an art historical perspective, thinking about overlooked artists, which is already a trap. And you mentioned that before that. I mean, this is now institutional strategy, thinking about overlooked women artists that we can find the kind of route plan. It's a ridiculous practice, specifically, because it kind of undermines what we're trying to do, because always insisting on some of these women artists having been, you know, put to the side not visible and so on. It's also undermining what they actually did, and again, you mentioned that Monica was very much present, she was, you know, on the cover of newspapers, she was, you know, very much in the debate. But that's another, you know, I can get really upset about this. In terms of starting as an art historical exhibition, of course, this depressingly enough, turned out not to be, not only did we have Roe versus Wade, we were discussing things I would never think we were to discuss both here in the UK in the US, obviously, but also in Sweden, and kind of going back all over Europe, in terms of abortion rights, and so forth. We also have a war in Europe, which happened during the research process. And everything kind of came together as becoming more and more urgent. And this is, you know, of course, if I would be cynical, I would say "Oh, timely", you know, but not really. And it's incredibly difficult

to have to think of these works or Monica's works as something that is not finished, you know, that we're not there yet, that we have to continue this fight. On the other hand, I really feel and I keep, you know, pushing this, but I really feel that her works urge us to continue that fight.

**AB:** Absolutely. This is maybe a nice slide to end on before we perhaps have some questions, but this is Monica, you know, in the '90s I think. She was still fighting and she was still travelling and heading protests up until, you know, stopping the Iraq war was one of the final protests that she went on holding Picasso's peace posters.

**JW:** It's actually quite beautiful because there was this big march in Stockholm. Just in the early fall with this was Friday's for Future demonstrating. And it gathered, it was a huge conference, and it gathered like 3000 people, young people, and they were carrying Monica Sjuo posters. So it was really beautiful, actually, to see it happen. And they would have, you know, *The Goddess Returning* posters. So they would have made their own posters, they would use ours, but they also kind of did their own versions. And it was really quite special to see. You know, and we had nothing to do with this really, it was just, you know, them kind of finding inspiration in this. And very early on, we had youth councils and young people engaged in the exhibition, actually, before it even opened. And they were so inspired by Monica, I think that's also very interesting and very important.

**AB:** Yeah. And likewise, we... not quite to the level that you have... but we have a Young Creatives programme at the gallery, and I invited some former members to perhaps write some wall text for the exhibition, which you can see upstairs. And I thought maybe they might choose some of the later works and they might like the Greenham material. But they all chose quite challenging works from the '70s Particularly with *Backstreet Abortion*, but also works with the much more, you know, the feminist demands that really spoke to them right now. And I found that really hopeful, I think that they felt kind of inspired and championed by her work. It can translate down.

**JW:** Yeah, it did. I mean, that was actually a great experience. It was the best experience. I mean, it's not often you do an art shows, and you have a crowd, you know, of 17 year olds, but it was great. I feel like I have absolutely no concept of time. Because I feel like if there's I mean, we chat and we chat and chat, and we've been chatting for, I don't know, four years now. So maybe if there's questions or comments, I know, most likely one or two or some or many of you knew Monica or you know, there's always people turning up knowing Monica, in these conversations. And you always kind of feel a little bit silly acting like, "Oh, yeah" and then someone comes up afterwards, and you know, are truly an expert on this, and so forth. So I kind of want to say that if there's questions or comments, yeah...

**AB:** I think we have a microphone going around as well. So if you wouldn't mind waiting for the mic.

**Audience Member:** Thank you. Earlier, you said that a lot of galleries has been avoiding the spiritual works and the spiritual aspects of works of women artists. Can you explain that a little bit? Why that why that is?

**JW:** I was not specifically referring to galleries, that would be unfair. I was saying institutions in the art world. I think this has changed the last 15-20 years. Why? It's a good question. I think in terms of feminist thought this is, I mean, already at the time, I think there were huge internal debates within different communities of feminist artists or feminist activists thinking about the spirituality practice as something that was actually not helpful. Somehow that, you know, again, women were kind of put in to this fold of being spiritual, feminine, you know, these kind of values that were associated, and not, you know, actively, politically, taking part of a conversation in another way. You would see kind of the split, for instance, between concept art and, you know, some artists that were working in a much more spiritual sense, or a spiritual understanding. Sorry, I sometimes, I fail to kind of find the right wording. You have to remember that I'm not a native English speaker. But I think also in terms of art historians, we've been really, really afraid of touching these subjects. And I think it's still rather tricky. I mean, this is tricky for me, giving tours and talking about Monica's spiritual beliefs, that some of them I share, some of them I absolutely don't share. And again, I've been in this position earlier with other artists where I'm, you know, explaining belief systems, and, you know, everyone comes up to me afterwards and thinks that I'm somehow, you know, a cult person or something. And, of course, I think we have to be really precarious and I think we're getting better as art historical, no, associates let's say, to be able to not shy away from these questions.

**AB:** I wonder how much Hilma Af Klimt has shifted the dial on that, that the impact of her work and that re-presentation now. in terms of her - it's a very different spiritualism, but that allowed a reevaluation of an abstract practice, I suppose.

**JW:** I mean, I don't think that Hilma herself, of course, but I think that since the '90s, there is this reevaluation where we talk about abstraction, for instance, in terms of, you know, also including spiritual aspects. We talk about Kandinsky in terms of spiritualism. And I think that's very important, specifically for women artists. I don't know if that was the answer. I mean, it's a very big debate. Why we're afraid of spiritualism. I'm still afraid of it. I'm slowly working towards acceptance.

**AB:** Yeah, I'm not so afraid of it. I think...

**JW:** I know you're better than I

**AB:** I think I'm more... I think I was looking for an alternative way of thinking and experiencing the world. And I think maybe there's a receptiveness to alternative reality. Now, within the collective consciousness, maybe there's a wider interest in, you know, mysticism, maybe in other forms of knowledge and practice. And maybe there has been previously, particularly by younger people, I think it comes through, I guess, you know, you take the temperature of the times and what the appetite is, and I think maybe there's just a more open minded approach to thinking about creativity, and how we all experience our sense of reality, I suppose.

[Pause]

**Audience Member:** This is just in a way as a reply to that, Sue, and I come from the Goddess Temple in Glastonbury, and we are honoured to normally have that painting that

you had on show in the Goddess Hall. We've got some other beautiful paintings in the Goddess House, and being able to experience those paintings in a divinely feminine decorated, soft environment. With carpets and cushions and comfy sofas and places to contemplate and be, you really feel the energy and the the wisdom that she's painted into those paintings on an almost energetic level come alive. I mean, I've had beautiful experiences of in ceremony diving into that tunnel, and just feeling like I'm going into West Kennet Long Barrow. And so that expression of being bringing the spirituality into, painting into art, and having it as a living experience, is just so special and is one of the gifts that Monica was able to translate into an artwork, which I think is really inspiring people. I remember, at university, I did my dissertation on spirituality and art, and it was so hard to try and find examples of that, because it was all about political art, or radical art, and trying to reclaim the spirituality in it is something that was really taboo.

**JW:** Yeah. No, I think you're very right, I think. I mean, I just came out as this kind of hardcore person, of course, I'm not really. But I always, I always say the same thing to my team when I'm doing an exhibition: "I can't believe the energy of these paintings when you actually see them, you know, Okay, that looks a little bit so so on the images, but really". And I think I came to them for like, the 15th time with this Monica Sjöo exhibition and I was like, really serious "this energy when you see them"? And actually, for the first time, they kind of said, "Okay, you were right". Again, we had the privilege of having them within the museum for such a long time. And they were actually all gathered in this room very tightly in the Conservation Department. And, you know, people were kind of spending time there, and, you know, trying to understand them, and it almost became this kind of thing that everyone in the museum went in there. I mean, this sounds terrible. Not everyone, they were very safe. But, you know, you had to come back to them, and they have this kind of pull on you, and they have the energy. And I think this is very present in the show here. I mean, we're looking at images from Stockholm, but this last gallery that you devised, is so powerful, it was actually quite overwhelming for me to come in. And I think there is something there. You're absolutely right. And of course I apologise I should never say that I'm pissed when someone is in the audience. You should know your audience, that's the cue. Yeah.

**Audience Member:** I'd like to say the other thing about Monica's political work. The group that I'm involved with which has been promoting and supporting Monica for the last five years, her *Mother Earth in Pain* we took to COP 26 as placards. We had broad sheets, you know, big billboards made around the streets of Bristol, and they are very, very powerful, powerful for the present moment. And I just want to say another thing, which is in Bristol, there is now a blue plaque that celebrates Monica's life and work and the time she lived in Bristol. Oh, for those who don't know, a blue plaque. Oh, is it green? I don't think you have them in Sweden.

**JW:** We don't, but I've seen them. I know what it what it is. Yeah. Thank you, though. It's a plaque.

**Audience Member:** I noticed one of the the young creative captions that you that you mentioned, made reference to cultural appropriation and just sort of said, well, she didn't think it was or he or she didn't think it was. But there were so many images there, I must say that did give me some sort of pause for thought in that direction. And I wonder whether that was, you know, is it just because we've become more sensitive to these things since the

1970s? You know, was that something that you were sort of aware of or concerned about? Together?

**AB:** Yeah, it's something that we, I am, I think we are both aware of the references in the way that Monica is referring to entering cultures and how that manifests in her work. And it's something that as well, I think, in preparing for the exhibition talking to the art historians is also very useful. And I think it's understanding that Monica was working from a very early intersectional context, I think she was creating images from the spirit of universal kinship with women from all cultures, and wanting to mobilise the demands of the feminist movement in order to emancipate all women from across the world. So that does take place, it formalises in a way that I think, from a contemporary point of view, seems perhaps outdated in places. But I think it's... we have to... I mean, I feel I'm respecting her position as an activist and really wanting to kind of create the most direct messages to communicate to the audience her ideas. So her treatment of certain motifs and symbols and archetypal figures, certainly, you know, from a contemporary point of view, it might read differently, but in making the exhibition, I was concerned to not want to apologise for the work. I think we have to live with the contradictions that she states. And I think we have to accept the times that we live in and how politics and feminism discourse changes over time. But I think there's still so much to be had in the work, I think we were conscious of just letting Monica speak for herself and the movement that she was working in. And these are complex works. They're very complicated and complex. They were challenging from the start, she was controversial from the start. But the works, their complexities deal with the complex times she was also living and working in, I don't want to suggest that the women's art movement or feminism was a cohesive movement. It was very divisive and divided at times. But I think it's being able to accept the extraordinary trajectory of an artist's career and all the complicated nuances within it. And to be able to still understand what this practice was achieving. I think that was something that I personally felt when we were working on this exhibition. Do you have any other questions?

**JW:** Have anyone - have you had the chance to see the show? And it becomes very abstract. Okay, if there's no questions now, I mean, sometimes it's intimidating to ask questions in a mic with, you know, 100 people here. We're here.

**AB:** Yeah, I'm around. I would love to talk, I would love to hear what you think about the show. Oh, we have one more. Oh, hang on. Would you mind just waiting for a mic? Then everyone can hear.

**JW:** Here I just promised you that the mic free possibility of asking questions!

**Audience Member:** Well the Stockholm exhibition had a catalogue, didn't it?

**AB:** Yes.

**Audience Member:** Will there be one for this exhibition?

**AB:** It is the same catalogue, only in English. So we have one, so yeah.

**Audience Member:** Do you know when we can buy it?

**AB:** It is in our shop. So we have, just go through to the end we have a bookshop and then there's many copies, they're available.

**Audience Member:** So that is my question.

**AB:** Oh, yeah, please go to the shop and buy the catalogue and please read about it. And just while we wrap up, I just wanted to thank Jo, again, so much for being here. And for going on this journey together. It's been a wonderful collaboration. And I have, I've had a great time working with you. And also to Annie as well and her family for being just completely fantastic and committed and so generous and really great guidance on bringing all this work together. And also my team at Modern Art Oxford, to Jess Robertson for her support and making the event today, for our technicians and our Front of House staff for hosting the event. To interpreter Robert's signing - Richard McCormack. Sorry, not Robert. Richard. He's signing for us this evening. Thank you so much for coming. Yeah, please enjoy the evening. You can go upstairs and see the show.

**JW:** Thank you.