The Neo Naturists

8 July –
28 August 2016
The Neo Naturists are a performance art group founded in 1981 by Christine Binnie, Jennifer Binnie and Wilma Johnson. The group emerged from a subculture – connected with but not limited to the New Romantic club scene – which developed in London against a backdrop of intense economic, political and social change. In the aftermath of punk, and at the advent of the rise of Thatcherism, a vigorous creative energy developed in the UK which sat outside of mainstream culture, creating its own network of agents, economies, activities and events.

The Neo Naturists were a part of a wide constellation of diverse cultural figures and sometime collaborators, which included BodyMap (David Holah & Stevie Stewart), James Birch, Leigh Bowery, Jill Bruce, Michael Clark, David Dawson, Peter Doig, Simon Foxton, Boy George, Derek Jarman, Princess Julia, Bruce Lacey, Andrew Logan, Marilyn, John Maybury, Maia Norman, Grayson Perry, Psychic TV, Philip Sallon, Test Department, Jill Westwood, Dencil Williams and Cerith Wyn Evans.

We used to go to nightclubs and do performances wearing body paint. Sometimes the performance would be the act of painting each other, sometimes we'd have the paint on already. All the people around us were Blitz Kids doing all that post-punk stuff when it was very trendy to be thin, po-faced and have perfect make-up. We could never really manage that. We were always red and shiny and smiling, and a bit too fat. So we did the opposite and painted ourselves, got messy and had fun.

The group was established organically. While Christine Binnie and Wilma Johnson had been experimenting at St Martin’s School of Art with body painting as a way of expanding beyond the canvas, Jennifer Binnie and Grayson Perry were making parallel experiments at Portsmouth Polytechnic, using body paint as a means to explore body image and identity. United by a belief in the radical and subversive potential of body painting, the Neo Naturists took these private experiments to clubs and parties, one of their first official such performances being at the nightclub Wedgies in the Kings Road in 1980. These public appearances quickly developed into more formalised parts of the group’s artistic practices.

In their performances, the Neo Naturists fused an idea of the liberating potential of ancient, pagan ritual with an unabashedly lo-fi, contemporary vernacular. Their performances at nightclubs, galleries, festivals and unannounced site-specific events celebrated a particular kind of anarchic innocence and deliberate primitivism. Wearing little more than body paint, the group achieved a unique artistic voice, one which contrasted with the highly polished aesthetic prevalent in the New Romantic club scene. In a cultural landscape that was decidedly slick, urban and modern, the Neo Naturists’ work made frequent references to the English pastoral and homely pursuits such as camping, girl guiding and harvest festivals; in later works, themes of seasonal cycles, fertility cults and the pattern of death and rebirth become more pronounced.

Rough edged, consciously unfashionable and unprofessional, the wilfully amateur ideal of the Neo Naturists and their practice can be located within the traditions of punk and bricolage. Their performances and actions were never rehearsed; a schedule would often be discussed just hours beforehand, with props sourced and produced last minute. This refusal to be slick was indicative of the group’s determination for their practice not to be neatly packaged; a deeply non-commercial position. As Grayson Perry remarked, ‘Christine never capitalised on Neo Naturism. It was frowned upon to optimise the career chances of things, she never repeated things and she never...’

Introduction
compromised on the un-entertainingness of it. She wasn’t one to have a rehearsed show – she thought that would be selling out to do a rehearsal because that would smell of entertainment:

In the Neo Naturists’ performances, the body was both spectacle in itself, and metaphor for the social body. Presenting the nude, painted body with an almost Edenic lack of embarrassment, their performances were “body-positive” and celebratory. Though negotiating gender and sexuality, the group’s performances did not present explicit eroticism (although the group were sometimes booked by venues in the misguided hope of such). The Neo Naturists’ employment of the naked body was more aligned with and reminiscent of the counterculture of the 1960s and its experiments in alternative living. This return to a kind of Utopianism and innocence diverged from both the increasingly commodified, ‘sexually packaged’ body promoted in the 80s, and the conservative moral backlash towards it, in the shape of a proposed return to ‘family values’.

This exhibition offers an opportunity to experience a significant selection of the Neo Naturists’ extraordinary practice first hand. In doing so, we hope the exhibition promotes a wider recognition of the importance of the group’s work and approach, which remain as sharply radical and affective in the present moment as thirty years ago. This publication has been produced as an introductory guide to the works and material on display.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Arts Council England, The Henry Moore Foundation and Thomas Dane for their generous financial support, which has enabled the largest presentation of the Neo Naturists’ extraordinary practice within a wider context. The booklet also includes a guide to key performances and moving image works.

In the sharp-edged, power-dressed, ruthlessly professional climate of the Thatcherite early 1980s, the Neo Naturists were an incongruous presence. The ideal of female nudity was buffed, honed and diluted. The art world was dominated by macho neo-expressionist figuration and heavy duty theorising; performance art was strictly off the radar. Even the emerging post-punk, New Romantic club-land where the Neo Naturists found their early home was a place of straight-faced posing in elaborate costumes and immaculately-applied makeup, with excess and exuberance only encouraged amongst cross-dressing males.

Not that any of this deterred the Neo Naturists. The unsympathetic climate instead only provided them with a greater incentive to devise performances and events that flew in the face of convention. Their unashamedly voluptuous naked bodies and their seriously playful rituals (revolving around cooking, eating and femuradored snook at both the earnestly exquisite dandyism of Steve Strange et al, and the streamlined pneumatic amazons of Helmut Newton. Instead of the cool sounds of new wave or synth-pop, Neo Naturist performances were accompanied by records sourced from charity shops – Middle of the Road’s Chirpy-Chirpy Cheep-Cheep and the then outrageous fashionable ABBA being particular favourites.

“Neo Naturists are not interested in making themselves look like something else; they want to look like Neo Naturists” declared the group’s co-founder Christine Binnie in a wry 1985 manifesto, published in the International Times magazine. In the same manifesto, Binnie defined Neo Naturism as being “casual to the point of excess” and the belief that “gorgeousness is the ultimate intelligence” But undoubtedly the most important element of the Neo Naturist ‘look’ was the way in which their barely bodies were transformed into living art works by the expert painting techniques of the group’s other co-founders, Jennifer Binnie (Christine’s sister) and Wilma Johnson. As Christine observed, “even though they were into knitting, weaving and crafts and lived in houses filled with carrier bags of wool.”iv It was this strangely irresistible combination of quasi-anthropological primitivism and sixties let-it-all-hang-out hippy-dom with a benignly British aesthetic of village fete, camper stove and bring-and-buy, which made the Neo Naturists so unique. As Christine observed, “even though we were completely naked on stage and with a very tight time limit, we could still make a very nice Scottish pancake!”v

A crucial element that underpinned Neo-Naturism was what Christine described as her and Jennifer’s “sensible girl upbringing”vi in rural Sussex, where their mother was a Girl Guide Leader and bastion of the village choir and Women’s Institute. One of the things that Christine and Jennifer first found appealing about Wilma Johnson was that they all “had Mums who were into knitting, weaving and crafts and lived in houses filled with carrier bags of wool.”v It was this strangely irresistible combination of quasi-anthropological primitivism and sixties let-it-all-hang out hippy-dom with a benignly British aesthetic of village fete, camper stove and bring-and-buy, which made the Neo Naturists so unique. As Christine observed, “even though we were completely naked on stage and with a very tight time limit, we could still make a very nice Scottish pancake!”v

Appropriately for a group that set so much store by informality and spontaneity, the Neo Naturists had no official start point (or indeed end date). Christine remembers writing “the Neo Naturists were born today” in her diary on 24 October 1981, but this only referred to their name, a knowing reference to punk’s much-discussed flirtation with Neo-Nazism but which was inspired by Christine’s genuine admiration for the naked German punks she observed on a trip to Berlin.vii For by this time the naked, body painted performances of Christine, Jennifer and Wilma were a familiar occurrence in the burgeoning London club scene, at Blitz in Covent Garden, Le Beat Route
in Soho, and a wide range of other venues, from the Spanish Anarchist Asso-
ciation at one end of the cultural spectrum and the socialite Dai Llewelyn’s
Wedgies in the Kings Road at the other.
Satirists of the post-punk London scene, the Neo Naturists were none-
thless at the centre of it. Having completed a ceramics diploma at Eastbourne
College of Art, where she was influenced by the surprising number of tutors
interested in Fluxus and conceptual art, Christine had arrived in London in
the late 70s. Her first jobs in the city were as a life model at Ravensbourne
art college and as an attendant at the Hayward Gallery – where the 1979
Hayward annual, curated by Helen Chadwick and featuring performances
by Bobby Baker, Anne Bean, Cosey Fanni Tutti and Sylvia Ziranek made a
particularly impression – and later at the Tate Gallery in Millbank. Her fellow
guards at the Tate included St Martin’s School of Art students Cerith Wyn
Evans and Holly Warburton (both to become film artists of note) and through
them she met and befriended Wilma Johnson, who was studying painting at
St Martin’s.
Wilma decided to use Christine as her ‘personal life model’, but on discov-
ering a mutual interest in performance art was soon applying paint directly
on her friend’s body, and then her own. As Wilma recalls, “I swapped my
Flesh Tint oil paint for some blue and gold body paint and transformed her
into a voluptuous version of Tutankhamun’s sarcophagus, with the help of
a feather boa I happened to be wearing”. Then at that time, the fine art and
fashion departments at St. Martin’s freely mingled; dressing up was man-
datory. Christine and Wilma were soon experimenting with different styles
of body painting, with faces, handprints or trompe l’œil clothes painted
directly onto their skin. Taking their provocative new look out to the clubs
in the evenings, Christine said, they were “really excited at how shocked
everyone was – it seemed to be something to do with appearing naked,
yet body painted, not sexually packaged, yet enjoying ourselves”.

In 1980 Christine was sharing a derelict squat in Carburton Street in Fitzrovia
with a pre-Culture Club Boy George and his friend, and fellow New Romantic
Blitz Kid, Marilyn. She’d set up a short lived, word-of-mouth café in a nearby
derelict Lewis Leathers shop which she named The Coffee Spoon, after
T. S. Eliot’s line ‘I have measured out my life with coffee spoons’ from ‘The
Love Song of Alfred J Prufrock’ (1915). There was a basic menu, a type-
writer for anyone to hammer out their creations on and also occasional
cabaret evenings. One of these included a performance by Jennifer, who
was studying painting at St Martin’s. Other Crowndale Road occupants
including Marilyn (soon to be called Marilyn), the fine artist and
impressario Andrew Logan, from his Alternative Miss World extravaganzas
to spending several days cooking and rock painting alongside his mirrored
Cosmic Egg sculpture in Portland, Dorset.
Were there any impromptu public Neo Naturist events: Christine being
photographed by Wilma as she flashed her face painted body in the galleries
of the British Museum or in the streets of Soho, and the now notorious
Swimming and Walking Experiment, with the lavishly decorated Wilma,
Jennifer and Christine (and Prince the Dog) cavorting in the fountains of
the Centre Point building on New Oxford Street, until the police put an end to
the performance. In 1985 the trio even appeared on Noel Edmunds’ BBC
television show The Time of Your Life alongside David Attenborough and
Desmond Morris.
As the 80s art world started to expand, the Neo Naturists also performed
an increasing number of live events in art galleries, most notably a mem-
orable week long residency at David Dawson’s B2 Gallery in Wapping in
1982, during which an expanded group of Neo Naturists enacted a different
theme daily, including a ‘Five Minute Macbeth’, an ’Art Day’(when an array
of artists were invited to use their bodies as living canvases) and a ‘Black
Rapport Day’, instigated in large part by regular Neo Naturist Dencil Williams.
Whenever Jennifer and Wilma had solo exhibitions of their own paintings,
they would invariably make the opening a vociferous Neo Naturist perform-
ance mocking the art world pretensions of the ‘Private View’, with particip-
ant posing naked but for high heels, body paint or cocktail dresses made
from Sellotape. For the launch of her 1985 solo show at James Birch’s gallery,
Jennifer rode naked and unadorned on a white horse down the King’s Road.
By the end of the 80s the original core trio of Neo Naturists had physically
disperssed. The Crowndale Road squat closed in 1986 and Jennifer, who

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had by then parted from Perry, settled with Wilf Rogers in East Sussex, where their son was born in 1987. She continues to work as an artist. Christine remained in London and took a degree in Anthropology but still makes ceramics. Wilma left London for a year in Mexico in 1987, then spent ten years in an Irish fishing village before moving to Biarritz where she now lives, paints and writes. Yet the Neo Naturists continued to perform, largely under Christine’s direction, but with Jennifer still frequently contributing her painting skills, her body and her love of nature. An expanded and shifting cast of collaborators and fellow travellers included the artists Liz Finch, Mary Lenny and Genesis P Orridge, Perry’s new partner (and wife-to-be) Philippa and the designer Maia Norman. The performances increasingly reflected Christine’s interest in feminism and tribal customs. “They became more primal and ritualistic and less mediated by painting, artiness and Ye Olde Englishness”, she remembers. Yet Neo Naturism never relinquished its sense of fun, nor its ability to provoke. This was amply confirmed when the original trio reconvened in June 2012 to run a well-attended ‘Neo Naturist life class’ at the Hayward Gallery’s Wide Open School, described as “a performative soup of participation, paint and art.” In 2014, Christine and early Neo Naturist stalwart Jill Westwood, accompanied by a violin-playing Jennifer, made a dramatic appearance at Andrew Logan’s Alternative Miss World at London’s Globe Theatre, for which a resplendently be-frocked Grayson Perry was the compere. Dubbing themselves ‘Miss Marina Psychopomp of the Counter-Intuitive Homeostasis’ – a characteristically satirical side-sweep at reigning performance art superstar Marina Abramović – the trio outraged the dressed-to-the-nines audience and fellow participants alike by first appearing on stage in downbeat jeans and T-shirts. After a costume change, they reproduced this ordinary garb in body paint, before changing for a final parade into – shock, horror! – the most conventional of real underwear: flesh-coloured Spanx pants and pristine white support bras. Christine may state that “Neo Naturists are looking forward to being body-painted octogenarians”, but it can be guaranteed they will only do so on their own terms.

Key Works

1 Swimming and Walking Experiment, Centre Point Fountains, Tottenham Court Road, London, August 1984.

ix  Christine Binnie, in conversation with the author, 25 April 2016
x Leaflet for ‘Neo Naturist life class’, The Wide Open School, Hayward Gallery, London, 2 June 2012
In the summer of 1980, Christine Binnie and her friend Guy Thomson opened a temporary café in a derelict shop next to the squat Christine was living in on Carburton Street, Fitzrovia. Named the Coffee Spoon Café after T.S. Elliot’s line ‘I have measured out my life with coffee spoons’, the café hosted events and happenings for a network of key peers, including screenings by film students John Maybury and Cerith Wyn Evans; Flambé Bananas, a performance by Jennifer Binnie and Grayson Perry; and poetry events where guests would write poems on an old typewriter to be read aloud to each other.

Wannock Weekend
May 1980

Wannock Weekend shows Christine Binnie, Jennifer Binnie, Wilma Johnson, Grayson Perry, Cerith Wyn Evans and an extended group on a weekend at the Binnies’ childhood home in Wannock, East Sussex.

The English countryside provides the backdrop to the film’s depiction of a group of friends eating cream teas and frolicking in chalk pits and the South Downs. Wannock is in close proximity to Charleston, the home and country meeting place of the Bloomsbury Group, and the film’s free-thinking, bohemian protagonists can be seen as channeling something of that movement’s implanting of radicalism and queerness in the countryside. Attention to queer and female sexuality runs through the film. At one point, Christine Binnie simulates sex with The Long Man of Wilmington a hill figure carved into the steep slopes of Windover Hill – an action at once comic and quasi-ritualistic.

Evoking the spirit of Romanticism associated with British artists William Blake and Samuel Palmer and the pastoral surrealism of Cecil Collins, the bucolic English countryside and rural Sussex in particular was a large influence on the Neo Naturists and key to their combination of ‘English village fête practicality with Girl Guide common sense, hippie idealism, the spirit of love, a child-like innocence and amateurism, all in a post-punk context’. 

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1 Andrew Wilson, Grayson Perry Guerilla Tactics, Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2002.
The Private View  
1981

In this early Standard 8 film, Christine Binnie, Jennifer Binnie and Wilma Johnson can be seen painted in abstract colourful body paint in Wilma’s parents snow-covered garden. The film shows the artists playing out the social conventions of a private view, posturing and posing while looking at Wilma’s paintings. Towards the end of the film, Jennifer and Wilma break their pseudo seriousness and freely dance around in the snow, imprintsing their multi-coloured bodies onto the white ground.

The Forest  
1981

Jennifer Binnie appears in this film in a man’s three-piece suit, cutting open the breast of a paganistic painted sculpture in some Sussex woodland, bringing together concerns with gender and identity and ideas around nature, ritual and performance. The soundtrack features A Forest (1980), an early single by The Cure.

Autumn in Folkington  
1981

This film by Jennifer Binnie drew influence from Bruce Lacey and Jill Bruce, who had performed at Portsmouth Polytechnic when she was studying. The film features Jennifer in some Sussex woodland covered in red body paint, and reveals an early interest in ritual and performance, as well as Jennifer’s fascination with nature and spirituality. One scene sees the outline of Jennifer’s body being painted directly onto the floor of the landscape, a gesture which would be repeated in a later work, Neo Naturist Epic (1983–).

Don’t you want me baby  
1982

This Super 8 film features Jennifer Binnie and Grayson Perry hanging out in a suburban café, eating chips, smoking cigarettes and playing music on a juke box. The film is interspersed with flashes of Jennifer enthusiastically dancing in body paint, an early example of body painting before it became a fully cemented component of the Neo Naturists’ practice. The film’s title is drawn from its soundtrack – Don’t You Want Me (1981), an early synth-pop hit by The Human League.
May Day Performance  
Centro Iberico, Notting Hill  
& The Fridge, Brixton  
1982

For their performance at Centro Iberico, a squatted Spanish anarchist centre in Notting Hill, the group painted themselves with Communist style uniforms. They held placards bearing portraits of themselves sketched by Jennifer Binnie and parodic “Chinese” versions of their names, including MA-SON and JEN-SU-BIN.

The performance began with the Neo Naturists goose-stepping into the room to a recording of the Red Army Choir. Cerith Wyn Evans then gave a reading from Chairman Mao’s Little Red Book, while on stage the performers made pseudo-political gestures and smashed a plaster poodle. Grayson Perry remembers:

We were cavorting and having a very good time, with no political message involved, but when we goose stepped out of the room at the end of the record there was a dead silence. There were around a hundred anarchists in the audience as well as some punks and they all hated it, not one of them clapped…

Christine recollects that Whitehouse were also playing at the venue that evening and their fans, who made up a large part of the audience, took the performance very seriously, and seemed rather confused.

The same performance was repeated later that evening at The Fridge, a nightclub in Brixton. On this occasion, the audience’s reaction was of aggressive hostility, particularly in reaction to the inclusion of male nudity; the group were removed offstage by security halfway through the performance.

ii Grayson Perry, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl, Wendy Jones.
iii Whitehouse were a pioneering English power electronic band formed in 1980, an important part of the industrial music scene.


Christine Binnie and Wilma Johnson began working with body paint whilst Wilma was a student at Central St Martins. Wilma documented a number of these formative experiments with staged photographs of Christine. At roughly the same time, Jennifer Binnie and Grayson Perry were also experimenting with body painting while they were studying in Portsmouth.

As a way of covering their painted bodies in between performances and venues, Wilma made floor-length fake fur coats for each of the group. The coats also enabled the group to experiment with covertly wearing body paint in more open public spaces, Christine and Wilma having become bored of the studio and wanting to perform in the daylight.

One of the outings that followed was to the British Museum, where Christine flashed amongst the ancient artifacts. This was one of the group’s first experiments in making unannounced, site-specific performances.

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10 Neo Naturists, Andrew Logan’s Alternative Miss World at Olympia, 1981.

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Neo Naturist performances were never rehearsed. Instead, a schedule would be discussed with plans and drawing made, as well as shopping lists for props and materials drawn up. Although not many plans for the performances survive, those for Pink Punk Yoga Performance are relatively complete.

The initial idea for this work was 'an anarchic exploration of everyday actions and ritual action, ‘common sense’ and nudity, and a celebration of our bodies.' The performance's combination of two seemingly disparate elements – punk and yoga – attempts to highlight a shift in popular culture from hippy ideals of love and peace to the angst and anarchy associated with punk. Christine recalls being interested in the outfits worn by people who went to places like the Pineapple Dance Center and would practice yoga, recalling: "Skin tight lycra was new then, it was intriguing that people walked around wearing that, but wouldn’t be seen dead naked. Those clothes, and that pink and black colour scheme, were also worn a lot by punks."


One of the most ambitious Neo Naturist events took place in July 1982 and involved 15 people living in the nude at David Dawson’s B2 Gallery for five days, sleeping in a large roped-off bed in the middle of the gallery. Audience and participants included Derek Jarman, Duggie Fields, Bruce Lacey, John Maybury and Andrew Logan. Every day had a different theme: Private View Day, Fashion Day, Macbeth Day, Black Rapport Day and Punk Day. Black Rapport Day, which heavily featured Dencil Williams, involved the participants painting themselves in black body paint and only consuming black food and drink, such as black pudding, black olives, black bread, burnt food and Guinness.
**Sexist Crabs**

**1983 onwards**

...An adolescent shocker in which three hefty women appeared nude but for crustaceans sellotaped to their loins.*

Ritual eating is a recurring element in the Neo Naturists’ performances, with food often cooked on a calor-gas hob and then fed to audience members, evoking equally the ceremony of communion and the world of Girl guideing. Sexist Crabs was one such performance, debuting at The Zap Club, Brighton in June 1983 and revisited multiple times.

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**Neo Naturist Epic**

**1983 onwards**

This series of unfinished films bears a characteristically Neo Naturist mix of the serious and the ironic, expressing earnest concerns with about contemporary society in a slightly lowbrow comedic style, reminiscent of the Carry On films (1958–92). The group were influenced by the writings of evolutionary anthropologist Elaine Morgan and her “aquatic ape” hypothesis – i.e. that the evolutionary ancestors of modern humans spent a period of time adapting to a semiaquatic existence – a theory which in works like The Descent of Women (1972) grounded some of the first claims about the pivotal role of women in human evolution. In the film we see the Neo Naturist protagonists cavorting at the beach and cooking fish over a stove.

In the scenes of the group drawing around each other directly onto the rocks of Portland quarry, the group chose luminous paint for its modern, even punk-like look, to disrupt the natural or primitive connotations of painting onto rock. Moving away from canvas to body, rocks, animals, fabric etc, the Neo Naturist approach to painting is apparent here as an attempt to connect with and celebrate the environment. Evoking ancient cave painting, it also repositions the (female) body within history and in the landscape.
Mermaids with Marilyn
Henley Regatta, Henley-on-Thames 1984

The Neo Naturists were invited by Andrew Logan to perform at an arts festival following the Henley Regatta. The group’s attendance at the event with singer Marilyn, along with the sight of naked body painted women, attracted significant tabloid attention.

Upper crust types choked on their cocktails as the two shapely sisters – peeled off and began painting each other’s bodies. As the girls began performing in the exclusive stewards enclosure a blushing copper discreetly ushered them into a nearby refreshment tent. Men in dinner jackets and women wearing expensive ball gowns stared open-mouthed as the pair coated themselves in green and silver paint and sticky tape to “look like fish.”

The Sun, 9 July 1984


Sellotape dresses with Marilyn, Crowndale Road, 1984.

The Sun, Monday, 9 July 1984.
Following their experience with Marilyn at the Henley Regatta, the group wanted to test further the effects of being nude in more public settings. This performance took place in the fountains at the foot of the iconic Centre Point Building, one of the first skyscrapers in central London. At the time, there had been a number of stories in the press about streakers at football games. Christine Binnie was struck by the fact that in such stories the streakers generally ran away from the police, but were inevitably still arrested. ‘I thought it would be good to experiment with turning and facing the police and seeing what happened. Also we were not very good at running and wouldn’t have got very far, it seemed very uncivilised to run away’.

In the ensuing Swimming and Walking Experiment, the performers avoided arrest, but did have an extended discussion with a passing policeman about the difference between indecent exposure and insulting behaviour.

Simon Foxton had invited the Neo Naturists to perform as a part of a catwalk show for the fashion label Parachute. The group were told that they could do whatever they wished and the disruptive performance which ensued caused shock and upset, according to one press report, with publicist Lynne Franks said to have watch in tears as the group ‘trashed the stage’.

It’s nearly time to start and Wilma quickly paints some sexy underwear on to Jen. The fashion models gawp and enjoy the display. We put our kit on the catwalk and take our positions sitting in the audience, with our ordinary clothes on. The performance started with us clambering onto the catwalk, just after the show had started à la feminist protest beauty contest style. It was like a dream come true being able to jump onto the catwalk with all those glamorous models and parade up and down with our ordinary clothes on – it’s a gorgeous experience. We take our clothes off as we walk along, and then start painting. We get bored and get into the audience and pretend Wilma is an unawares audience member, we drag her on stage and make her join in. To start with we paint sexy underwear on and all swagger up and down the catwalk several times, then print on the backdrop then sellotape Wilma’s bra to the backdrop and write; FLAMBÉ YOUR BRASIERE. Then paint fashions like the models onto our bodies, (The models seem to enjoy it). Out comes the coloured porridge. A few prints and a few venus signs AND suddenly it’s the end.

During this performance at The Fridge nightclub, Christine, Jennifer and Wilma paint themselves in a tartan pattern, invoking the witches in Macbeth. The group were inspired by the speculative origin of the word bonfire as “bone fire”, an ancient tradition of burning animal bones after they had been slaughtered for winter as a ritual preparation for the cold months. During the event, the performers recalled this pseudo-tradition by themselves burning bones on a calor gas stove, creating a noxious smell and setting off the venue’s fire alarms.
Art for Money
Michael Clark, The Royal Opera House, London
1986

Art for Money was created by Michael Clark for the gala Save The Wells, held at the Royal Opera House in aid of Sadler’s Wells Theatre. Clark’s production featured an appearance by performance artist Leigh Bowery as well as the Neo Naturists, whose performance involved body painted cheerleaders chanting “money money money”.

Easter Chicks
Performance at Andrew Logan’s Easter Party
The Glasshouse, Worship Street, London
1988

The Neo Naturists performed Easter Chicks… at Andrew Logan’s Easter Party. For the performance, the group ‘painted on lacy underwear, made a nest from shredded paper, crucified a chicken, rolled hard boiled eggs on our bodies, drank Bitter to symbolise our bitterness, and gave out Easter eggs’. The group sang the refrain ‘He was despised and rejected’ throughout, a Biblical line found in Handel’s Messiah (1741), and which Christine and Jennifer Binnie had learned in Jevington Church Choir as children.
From 1987 Christine and Jennifer Binnie continued the Neo Naturists in a more sporadic manner with a changing cast of members. Though they continued to perform rituals, household tasks, cooking, singing and giving communion, during this time themes of seasonal celebrations, the planet’s annual cycle, and death and rebirth assumed increasing significance for the group and their practice. A performance which formed part of Cave of Desire presented by Psychic TV, taking place at the gay club Heaven, featured bags of fish in water sellotaped to the bodies of the performers, who then ‘birthed’ the fish by extracting them from the bags. In turn, the fish were used to make kedgeree, which was cooked and fed to bewildered clubbers. Taking place on Mother’s Day, the performance was intended to celebrate maternity and ‘invoke that aspect of the Goddess.’ Towards the end of this documentation of the performance, a member of the crowd tells the group that they were disgusted by the performance; the Neo Naturists seem unfazed by this reaction and discuss how increasingly moralistic the young have become, calling the woman a ‘child of Thatcher’.

x Christine Binnie in conversation with Jessica Vaughan, 2016


Selected Neo Naturist Performances and Events

1982 Little Swiss Misses Cabaret, The Beat Route, London
1983 Cro Magnon Woman, Neo Naturist Film Show and Performance, B2 Gallery, London
1984 Neo Naturist Cheer Leaders with Leigh Bowery and James Birch Gallery, London
1986 Neo Naturist Cheer Leaders with Leigh Bowery and Michael Clark, Royal Opera House, London

1988 Communion with Christine, The Diorama, London
1989 Cupid and Amorini (The Diorama, Sexuality Festival, London), The Diorama, London
1989 Music Day Performance, Cave of Desire presented by Psychic TV, Heaven, London
1990 The Miss 70 of Avalon at Andrew Logan’s Alternative Miss World, Business Design Centre, London
1991 The Last Weekend, The Edge Biennale Trust, Alston Cumbria
1993 Red Oche Goddesses, Criminal Justice Bill March, Hackney, London
1994 Sewing with Alex Binnie, The Gas Light Club, London
1996 Neo Naturists Ladies Choir, London
1997 Shit/compost/land/love performance in honour of Mary Barnes and RO Lang, Kingsley Hall, London
1999 Neo Naturists Ladies Choir, The Assembly Rooms, Gortonbury
2002 Neo Naturist Paintings, the performances, ceramics from the 1980s, England & Co Gallery
2003 Neo Naturist Films, Derek Jarman Super 8 Festival, Gate & Ritzy Cinemas, London
2004 Neo Naturist Films, Tramway Festival, Tramway, Glasgow

Reading List

Bay George, Take It Like a Man, 1995. London: Harper Collins
Louisa Buck, Shards and Barb: A Potted History of my Friendship with Grayson Perry, in Mike Baird MF and Rachel Hart, Grayson Perry: My Pretty Little Art Career, 2016, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia
Grayson Perry, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl, 2007. London: Verso
Jeanette Parker

Selected Neo Naturist Exhibitions and Screenings

1983 Cro Magnon Woman, Neo Naturist Film Show and Performance, B2 Gallery, London
2008 Neo Naturist Films, Derek Jarman Super 8 Festival, Gate & Ritzy Cinemas, London
2011 Neo Naturist Archive and Films, Camulodunum, Fishstone, Colchester
2012 Neo Naturist footage in the British Guide to Showing Off, Curated by Andrew Logan, Guadalajara International Film Festival, Guadalajara, Mexico
2012 Neo Naturist Life Drawing Class, Wide Open School, Hayward, London
2013 Wilma Johnson, Jennifer Binnie, Christine Binnie with current work and The Neo Naturist Archive, Gallery 286, London
2013 Neo Naturist Films go into the BFI Archive, British Film Institute, London
2013 Neo Naturist Films, ICA, London
2013 Neo Naturist Films, Tramway Festival, Tramway, Glasgow
2013 Andrew Logan’s Studio, Appold Street, London
2017 Ken Hollings, Neo Naturists, Performance Magazine, 1982
2021 Stefan Kamal & Daniel Pies (Editors), Be Nice, Share Everything, Have Fun, 2010: Munich: Kunstverein München and Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König
2022 Catherine McDermott, Street Style: British Design in the 1980s, 1987: London: Rizzoli
2024 Elaine Morgan, The Descent of Woman, 1974, London: Corgi
2027 Andrew Wilson, Grayson Perry Quenata Tactics, Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2002