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### **Gender, subjectivity and feminist art: the work of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing**

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# **Gender, Subjectivity and Feminist Art: The Work of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor- Wood and Gillian Wearing**

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**Stefanie Kappel**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the University of Westminster  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis provides a missing link between the British feminist art movement from the 1970s onwards and three contemporary female artists, namely Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing and Sam Taylor-Wood. The dissertation demonstrates the influence that feminist art has had on contemporary women's art. It shows how various elements, typically associated with feminist art from a previous generation of female artists, have been either consciously or unconsciously incorporated into the way the three artists in question approach their work.

The ideas, concerns and ways of working of a previous generation of feminist artists are discussed in relation to gender politics, the idea of the traditional male "genius", the question of feminist art practice, the role of the female body, performance versus performativity and the representation of women in visual culture. The contemporary work is discussed in relation to the above issues, drawing out comparisons to feminist art practice where appropriate.

The thesis also contextualises Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing and Sam Taylor-Wood within the generation of the Young British Artists (YBAs) of the 1990s. Here it focuses on ideas such as self-promotion versus patronage, the particular sensationalist art practice of the YBAs, the problematic attitude towards cultural theory and finally, it demonstrates how women artists of that particular period tended to work.

The dissertation does not aim to present a comprehensive survey of *all* feminist visual arts activity in Britain and North America, the geographical locations of interest for this thesis, nor is it an all encompassing art historical overview of the activities in London, during the 1990s. The thesis should be understood as a celebration of the significance of the feminist art movement and as a demonstration of the validity of many of its concerns, even today, as exemplified in the work of the three artists in question.

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## **1. Introduction**

The intention of this research is to provide a missing link between British feminist artists from the 1960s and 70s, and three contemporary female artists, namely Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing and Sam Taylor-Wood. The thesis shows the impact that feminist art has had on contemporary women's art and how various elements, such as ideas and artistic vocabulary, typically associated with feminist art from a previous generation of female artists, have been either consciously or unconsciously incorporated in the way the three artists in question approach their work.

Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing have been deliberately chosen for their association with a generation of artists known as the "Young British Artists" (YBAs), who have been predominantly united by their particular approach to self-promotion, by their general dissociation from a theoretical contextualisation of their works and by their presentation of works in visually accessible and spectacular forms. The thesis argues that Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing and Sam Taylor-Wood are not only connected by their association with the YBAs, but also that their works are associated with three of the main stages in the genealogy of the feminist art movement. Tracey Emin's work with her exploration of her own female experiences will be seen as relating to the first stage of the feminist art movement, namely the consciousness raising activities of feminist artists. Sam Taylor-Wood's work will be interpreted as reflecting upon the interrogations of feminist artists of what it means to inhabit a female or male body, or in other words, the questions of gender, which formed to some extent the second stage of the movement. Finally, linked to a later stage of the feminist art movement, Gillian Wearing's work will be considered as opening up questions about gender and its association, with certain role expectations, to a wider investigation into the possibility of multiple identities and plural subjectivities, or in other words challenging the idea of *a* core individual identity.



Additionally, the thesis addresses the lack of critical writings that link the concerns, ideas, ways of working and achievements of the feminist art movement to the work of contemporary female artists, particularly those related to the YBAs. It also redresses the deficiency of critical writings about the YBAs themselves. The attached literature list shows that there exists a wealth of information and a variety of publications concerning the history of feminist art, as well as a number of monographs highlighting the work of particular feminist artists. However, what appears to be missing is a link between feminist artists, their achievements and contemporary female artists. All feminist art magazines seem to be out of print these days<sup>1</sup> and the whole issue of feminist art has become so complex and so diversified that it is difficult to find common denominators. Gender studies at universities and colleges have diminished over the years. Today one has to show a particular interest in questions surrounding women's art, gender, or more generally subjectivity and possess a certain portion of self-motivation in order to delve into issues that were of the highest priority to feminist artists from the 1960s and 1970s onwards.

Without doubt, times have changed extraordinarily since the dawn of the feminist art movement in the 1960s. We are living today in a highly commercialised art world, where traditional issues about taste or aesthetics seem to have been outstripped by questions surrounding the marketability of art works. These days, the appeal of art works seems to depend on their suitability for auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christies and on their saleability in a more and more globalised art market. Interviews of not only the three female artists in question, but most of the contemporary generation of women artists, give testimony to this fact and reveal that they not only want to avoid being pigeonholed as feminist artists, but much more, that by citing influences for their works, they tend to contextualise their art within predominantly male antecedents. This may well be because of exactly the kind of commercialisation of the contemporary art world, as will be extensively discussed in chapter 3 and 7, whereby a connection to famous male forerunners

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<sup>1</sup> N.Paradoxa appears to be the only exception mainly distributing their articles online. For more information please see: <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/>

seems to be more commercially viable than a connection to a basically less celebrated movement, in other words that of feminist art, or women's art in general.

Nevertheless, as this thesis argues, the concerns, concepts and ideas of a previous generation of feminist artists, might be seen, as foundations for the art produced and exhibited by contemporary women artists. For example, a neon sign by Tracey Emin with the question: "Is Anal Sex Legal?" might not be so easily accepted and exhibited in her own room at the Tate, were it not perhaps for the work previously presented by feminist artists. Also, Sam Taylor-Wood's major retrospective at the Hayward Gallery, might very well be seen as the outcome of her artistic ability or, as some critics argue, the result of her dealer husband's influence and her international celebrity status. Nevertheless, whatever one might think about Taylor-Wood's status as an artist, the consciousness stirring activities of women artists, of the 1960s and 1970s and their efforts to be accepted by art institutions have certainly contributed, as this thesis contends, to some of the success of contemporary women artists. This is not to say that the target of this PhD is to prove that feminist artists are responsible for the success of the three artists in question. However, it is a fact that women artists today are more widely accepted by institutions than they were approximately forty years ago, which could well have been helped by the efforts of previous generations of feminist artists.

The purpose of this PhD is neither to question why debates of feminist art seem to have vanished or why an agreed agenda between the different feminist social, political, and art organisations diminished in the 1990s<sup>2</sup>, nor is it to prove in any way that Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood, or Gillian Wearing *are* feminist artists. Such an approach would merely contribute to an already polarised collection of viewpoints that seems to exist wherever debates about feminist art occur. The main objective of this thesis is to provide an alternative reading to those already available for the three artists' works. The feminist interpretations of Tracey Emin's, Sam

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<sup>2</sup> Harris, J.: The New Art History; A Critical Introduction, Routledge, London, New York, 2001, p.109

Taylor-Wood's and Gillian Wearing's works that connect them to ideas, concepts and approaches of feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s, aim to complement other possible readings already in place, by avoiding the above polarisation that seems to exclude feminist art from all other possible art debates. As a result, this research not only gives feminist art retrospective meaning, but it also shows that its concerns still have validity for contemporary female artists.

With this in mind, the research aims to highlight and acknowledge not only the impact feminist artists had during their active time, but also the influence and effect feminist artists had, and still have, consciously or unconsciously on contemporary female artists. This will contribute to a missing link between feminist artists from the 1960s and 1970s and the three contemporary female artists discussed within this dissertation.<sup>3</sup> The thesis might also contribute to a revival of diminishing feminist art debates. As it appears today, there is no *one* feminist base line anymore (if there ever was). Therefore, there is no recognisable feminist art movement, only a loose alliance of individuals with numerous different viewpoints and critical stances.<sup>4</sup> And last but not least, by dealing with the work of three undoubtedly famous contemporary women artists, with extensive devotees, this thesis will take the opportunity to offer this great potential readership, who would very likely not be confronted with these feminist topics otherwise, the chance to get in touch with issues that were historically of concern to feminist artists and that are still of significance today.

With that in mind, Chapter 2 provides the reader with a literature review and deals with the notoriously difficult question: what is feminist art? At least, what are some of the parameters that might be considered as important for determining something as a feminist approach to the production of art. It draws attention to the difficulties

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that particularly in Tracey Emin's case, there have not been attempts made (by mainly Rosemary Betterton and Mandy Merck, besides others) to relate her work to ideas connected to feminist art, however this paper not only develops part of them further, but also introduces new ideas and thought processes.

<sup>4</sup> Coward, R.: "Do we need a New Feminism?", in: Women: a Cultural Review, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1999, p.193

feminist artists had to face during their time, predominantly in Great Britain and the United States, the places onto which the research is focused. (Feminist art, as will be shown, differs greatly not only in linear terms (historically), but also in horizontal terms (geographically)). Without trying to be an all-encompassing historical overview, this part of the thesis will highlight some of the historical background of the feminist art movement, its role as social change art and its questioning of the construction of gender and the cult of “genius” and “greatness”. The chapter also investigates the possible reasons for the exclusion of women artists from the canon of art. It looks at how women were represented in art and how feminist artists tried to counteract the idealisation and representation of the female body and more generally the patriarchal narrative of art and culture. It demonstrates the different approaches of feminist artists in conceptual as well as material terms. It considers some of the internal debates and viewpoints that existed and changed during that period in time. It examines the role of psychoanalysis in the production of feminist art, feminist aesthetics in general terms and, based on specific examples, feminist aesthetics in particular terms. It shows how women artists of that period explored possible representations of the female form and female experience, in particular female sexuality. Finally, the chapter considers the institutional framework of that time and the need for feminist artists to find alternative exhibition spaces.

Chapter 3 contextualises Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing within the phenomenon of the YBAs, one major art movement beside others of 1990s Great Britain.<sup>5</sup> The cultural location of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing and the general situation of the art market at that particular time are important for the purpose of this research, as they introduce concepts such as the artist as the self-made man and woman in relation to their predecessors, the artist as a media celebrity, the commercialisation of the art market, the idea of the patronage system and in particular, the power of art dealers and curators, for instance the influence of Charles Saatchi, Jay Joplin and Nicolas Serota on the production,

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the other groups that developed at that time are acknowledged within the thesis, but not further discussed. Firstly, because the framework of this thesis does not permit any lengthy discussions and secondly, their activities do not contribute to the purpose of this research.

distribution and value of art. It discusses the rise and promotion of artists such as Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing. It looks at how their practices and the practices of many of the YBA members, changed to reflect the transformation that happened throughout the art market during the 1990s.

Furthermore, this chapter introduces the problematic relationship of the YBA members to cultural theory. It discusses some of the viewpoints, critics expressed, regarding the novelty of the art forms that emerged under the YBAs. It also highlights the antipathy of some of the YBA members towards intellectual discourse and consequently, the celebration of pointlessness with a visually impressive, but intellectually “light” outcome in some of their works. As a final point, the chapter looks in particular at some of the female members of the YBAs and how their concepts and ideas differ or not, from their female antecedents. It introduces the point that artists, such as Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing, who rose to public attention within the YBAs, alongside some of their contemporary female peers, consciously or unconsciously, followed or developed further the ideas and concepts of previous generations of female artists, particularly feminist artists.

Chapter 4, 5 and 6, go on to discuss in detail the work of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing respectively. Emin and Taylor-Wood’s chapters refer to some extent to their biographical background, which is seen as key in understanding the production of their biographical work in general and their self-portraits in particular. Both artists stress the fact that their biographical work might be considered as representative for other women, which is reminiscent of the feminist slogan “the personal is political”. Therefore, the inclusion of the artists’ background is considered an important contribution to the understanding of the production of their art, specifically in the case of Tracey Emin, who is considered to be the founder of “confessional art”. In her particular case, the rare feminist debates surrounding her work have been picked up, referenced, discussed and developed to a more comprehensive outcome. Furthermore, the idea of “l’Ecriture feminine” has been introduced to Emin’s work, which links it strongly to feminist ideas from the

1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Additionally the chapter argues that, similar to feminist artists from the 1960s onwards, Emin is giving a voice to women, with similar experiences to her own. She most certainly disrupts the idea of the male gaze by using the idea of abjection. Finally, by presenting herself repeatedly as the successful artist who is established internationally within the art institutions, she consciously or unconsciously questions the idea of the male “genius” as the only possible creator of art.

The chapter also discusses extensively the artistic representation of Emin’s traumatic experiences of abortions. It deals with the idea of motherhood and subjectivity in the process of termination and loss. Personal experiences, subjectivity, agency versus objectification of the female body and speaking the unspeakable are all major concerns of feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s, as discussed in chapter 2 and are here again linked to Tracey Emin’s work.

Associations are made and discussed between the work of Frida Kahlo and that of Tracey Emin, with Kahlo being considered as one of the precursors to the feminist art movement and adopted by feminist artists as one of their own. The usage of blankets in Emin’s work and the way in which they are reminiscent of political banners used by campaigners for women’s suffrage, as well as alluding to the concept of teamwork and the idea of a traditional female craft versus art (important for some feminist artists), are thoroughly exposed. Finally, the significance of her celebrity status and the Tracey Emin Museum, which underline the notion of the self-made female artist and the creation of an alternative exhibition space, a means for feminist artists are demonstrated and discussed.

In Sam Taylor-Wood’s case, the thesis gives a background analysis, which demonstrates how her art is markedly influenced by her biographical history. In her

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<sup>6</sup> The author of this paper had an extensive interview with Ms. Rosemary Betterton where she introduced her ideas and concepts of this thesis in general and the Tracey Emin chapter in particular. Ms. Betterton is a feminist critical writer who made introductory attempts to contextualise some of Emin’s pieces within ideas of feminist art. These ideas have been taken up in this dissertation, further developed and discussed with Ms. Betterton. The idea of *l’Ecriture feminine* was introduced to her, which she considered as a worthwhile and new approach.

self-portraits, which are discussed in length in this chapter, Sam Taylor-Wood deals with her female experiences in a similar, but perhaps less obvious manner than Tracey Emin does. She speaks about her bouts of cancer, uttering the “unspeakable” and as she puts it herself, speaking for women, with similar experiences.

Furthermore, she renders women in her art as desiring subjects, instead of traditional passive objects. She shows her subjects as active agents and liberates women from their subordinated sexual position as the traditional, objectified muses, something that was of concern for some feminist artists. The chapter also analyses in depth, how Sam Taylor-Wood plays with gender traits, how she generates certain sexual ambivalences, reconsidering the categories of masculine and feminine as culturally defined and how she explores the possibility of subjective pluralities by avoiding a single type of gender knowledge.

This transgressing of borderlines surrounding what is culturally associated with male and female, specifically the idea of masquerade and performance (discussed in chapter 2), have been tools that feminist artists started to explore in depth, in the 1960s and 1970s, to question traditional gender hierarchies, a device that has been picked up in similar ways by Sam Taylor-Wood. Interestingly enough, she uses mainly male subjects in her work. By stripping away essential attributes usually associated with the male form and dealing with the male body and its fragility, she unveils the delusion of the male sexual form. Also by the simple fact that she, as a *woman* artist, “directs” her male subjects, she subverts the traditional power relationships, associated with male artists and female muses. Finally, referring back to chapter 2, the last section concludes with an analysis of the way in which she actively interrupts traditional narratives.

Chapter 6 analyses Gillian Wearing’s work and investigates, how she explores questions surrounding identity. It considers how she works with ideas of masquerade, performance and performing, how she deals with the question of desire, how she transgresses traditional gender hierarchies and how she, in a similar manner to Sam Taylor-Wood, disrupts traditional narratives. Hereby, particular

emphasis is put on the analysis of performance versus performativity, the internalisation processes that take place in the formation of gender characteristics and the role-play that individuals perform in their attempt to conform to society's expectations, all feminist issues that can be found as exemplified in her work. Furthermore, this chapter explores concerns, such as the power of language and speech not only as a spoken or written tool, but also as structuring elements in the dichotomy of male and female positions in societies. Additionally, her use of apparent documentary methods and the subverting and exposing of those means, as false promises in order to deduct certain realities and to confirm traditional handed-down truths, or in other words, her explorations of the reaffirmation of ideologies through representational strategies, are comprehensively discussed.

Finally, the last chapter gives a justification for the importance of a feminist critical reading of the work of the three artists. Hereby, the critical position of feminist art debates, roughly forty years after their inauguration, is analysed and the need for their continuation substantiated. Furthermore, the lack of critical analyses of the YBAs in general and in particular the three artists in question, is once more taken up and debated. The commercialised art market, with some of artists producing work that satisfies its demands, is contrasted with the emergence of young artists who appear to be committed to issues that distance themselves from the formers' priority of marketability. The problematic appropriation of artists, against their intentions for feminist concerns, is discussed and justified and some of the achievements of the feminist art movement are focused on, to stress their influence on contemporary art, an impact that might be taken for granted these days. Last but not least, hopes are expressed and strategies are given that might help the furtherance of issues that were of the highest concern for a previous generation of feminist artists and that are argued to be still significantly valid today.

## Methodology



Methodologically, this research is predominantly a comparative study between the concepts, ideas, and working methods of a previous generation of feminist artists and the work of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing. At first, a historical analysis and literature review helped to determine the parameters that were used for the comparison of the works. This included, for example, questions such as, what was important for feminist artists of this period? What were their working methods? How did they disseminate their works? In addition, how do the three artists in question approach similar issues? To answer these and other questions, certain texts and works dealing with feminist art from the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and Great Britain, were systematically analysed in order to compare approaches to feminist art by women artists of that period, with those of Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing, and Sam Taylor-Wood. Psychoanalytical theories supported the research, by enabling a better comprehension of the production, reading and interpretation of feminist art.

Primary sources such as interviews and the work of the three artists, as well as secondary sources, i.e. critical reviews of their work and the participation in lectures, seminars, symposia and courses at various different institutions, all contributed to the understanding of contemporary art debates and revealed new underlying connections to and dependencies on feminist art, as produced in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the outcome of this research was not only tested in various conversations and interviews with art critical writers, but it was also presented at regular symposia at the University of Westminster and in front of an academic audience at the international “Feminism and Popular Culture Conference” in Newcastle. (Organised by the University of Newcastle in collaboration with the “Feminist and Women’s Studies Association” (UK & Ireland)).

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<sup>7</sup> Interviews with the three artists were repeatedly attempted but failed. At first Tracey Emin was thrilled to be interviewed, arguing that this is the first PhD written about her. However, once she had received the questions via email she failed to respond, despite reminders. Sam Taylor-Wood was excused by her assistant as she had just given birth. Maureen Pailey had originally agreed on answering questions for Gillian Wearing, who herself does not give interviews, but never answered emails or phone calls. As this research is not about the biography of the three artists and in the case of Emin and Taylor-Wood there is an abundance of interviews already available, a personal interview was not considered as essential for the completion of this research.

## Contribution to Knowledge

- ❑ This PhD addresses a missing link between feminist artists from the 1960s and 1970s of Great Britain, and contemporary female artists, namely Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing and Sam Taylor-Wood. Furthermore, it acknowledges the importance of the groundwork that feminist artists from the 1960s and 1970s provided for women artists today and it addresses the lack of critical writings about the three artists in question.
- ❑ The outcome of this research provides a valuable contribution to the revitalisation of critical feminist art discourses. By addressing the feminist elements that might have consciously or unconsciously influenced the art of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing, “abandoned” feminist art debates might be revived.
- ❑ Feminist aspects in the works of Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing and Sam Taylor-Wood have been rarely and insufficiently discussed and this thesis provides the basis for promoting further inquiries relating to the incorporation of feminist elements within other contemporary female artists’ works.
- ❑ The PhD will contribute to a debate, which by discussing the potential feminist resonance of Tracey Emin’s, Gillian Wearing’s and Sam Taylor-Wood’s work and their relationships to the history of women’s practice, *without* confining their work solely within those parameters, tries to inaugurate and advance feminist art discussions that avoid the standard polarised views of female artists’ works as being either feminist art or not.

## **2. Historical and Critical Practices of Feminist Art: A Literature Review**

Trying to explain “feminist art” encompasses a whole variety of different and very complex issues, as will be shown in this chapter. Feminist art historian Lucy Lippard writes that, *‘It is useless to try to pin down a specific formal contribution made by feminism because feminist and/or women’s art is neither a style nor a movement, much as this idea may distress those who would like to see it safely ensconced in the categories and chronology of the past. It consists of many styles and individual expressions and for the most part succeeds in bypassing the star system. At its most provocative and constructive, feminism questions all the precepts of art as we know it.’* (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 172). This quote gives an indication of why feminist art and art theory are somewhat impossible to entirely define. They engulf too much and manifest themselves in too many forms, to enable a simple description of what feminist art engages with.

However, what feminist artists do seem to have in common is a sense of the historic social subordination of women and an awareness of how art practices have disseminated a critique of that subordination.<sup>8</sup> (Korsmeyer, C. 2004 b: 118) Furthermore, it appears that there is a common feminist approach to art and art history that is based on the idea that gender and sexual politics are essential elements in understanding the creation, content and evaluation of art. (Devereux, M. 2003: 648) Despite theoretical and practical differences amongst feminists, they seem to be unified by an understanding of the need to reveal the impact of

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<sup>8</sup> It has to be acknowledged here, that while the first recorded use of the term “feminism” originated circa 1830, coined by the French socialist Charles Fourier, for whom the degree of women’s emancipation was the measure of the emancipation of society as a whole, feminist or protofeminist thought is much older. Some see the beginning of feminist thought in the attacks on literary misogyny made by Christine de Pisan’s “Book of the City of Ladies” (fourteenth century) which presented an early attempt at feminist thought. Most others would agree that the idea of modern feminism originated in the wake of the American and French Revolutions of the late eighteenth century. For more information see: Pollock, G. (Ed.) (1996) Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts; Feminist Readings, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 5-12. Also: Macey, D. (2000) Dictionary of Critical Theory, Penguin Books, London, England, pp.122-126.

patriarchy in society through uncovering and analysing the way social practices, institutional arrangements and patterns of thought differentially serve male interests, beliefs and desires. This also includes revealing the means by which patriarchy makes this domination difficult to recognise or resist. (Pollock, G. 1993: 12/13)

## **2.1. Historical Background**

Influenced by geographically and politically diverse situations, the undertaking of feminist art differs from country to country and has extensive local variations. (Reckitt, H./ Phelan, P. (Eds.) 2001: 19)<sup>9</sup> Feminist perspectives in art first arose in Great Britain in the late nineteen-sixties, from a combination of political activism in the contemporary art world and critiques of the historical traditions of philosophy and the arts.<sup>10</sup> (Pollock, G. (Ed.) 1996: xviii) This development has to be seen against the revolutionary social and political backdrop of that particular moment in time. If the 1950s were more about conservatism, the 1960s were about social unrest and political upheaval. Peace activism, civil rights, social equality, women's and gay liberation defined the culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Love and peace, Beatlemania, flower power, long hair and short skirts were not just about fashion, but were visible signs of a fundamental revolution taking place in British society. Young

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<sup>9</sup> Feminist art in the United States and Great Britain (predominantly London), are the focus of this thesis, as Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing not only got their education at colleges in London, but also came to prominence and are still working there. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged here that feminist art has differing histories depending upon its geographical location. In addition, feminist arts in the United States and Great Britain have been the most prolific areas considered in the Anglo-American literature, which forms the basis of this thesis. See: Deepwell, K. (2002) "Art and Feminism", papers from session at ARCO '02 Madrid, February, in: N.Paradoxa, Issue 16, July, see: <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/arcol.htm>, accessed 9.1.2006, 2pm

<sup>10</sup> For a good account of the differences between the feminist movements in Great Britain and the United States see: Gamble, S. (Ed.) (2001) The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism, Routledge, London and New York, pp.29-40. For the purpose of this paper, with its aim being to discuss the relationship between the work of contemporary female British artists and feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and Great Britain, it is sufficient to discuss feminist history on a more general level. Chapter 2.3 "Feminist Art Practice" addresses this differentiation by discussing different geographical and socio-political approaches towards the production of feminist art.

people, (and the sixties generation was a culture of youth, as the post-war baby boomer came of age), in their clothes, music and opinions, were reacting to the conservatism of the previous generation and questioning the political and social structures by which that generation had lived. It is against this radical backdrop that the artwork and art scene of the 1960s and 1970s should be viewed. (Gaiger, J./ Wood, P. (Eds.) 2003: 167) Not only was there a socio-political thrust to the content of much conceptual art, but the radical spirit of the age was very apparent in the challenges made to the fundamental structure of the art world. (Rorimer, A. 2001: cover) As well as questioning the stylistic concerns of the earlier generations, artists in the sixties questioned the very framework within which art was made, exhibited and viewed.<sup>11</sup>

The call for widespread social change that grew out of the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement and a concern for the environment, constituted a serious challenge to mainstream values. (Reckitt, H./ Phelan, P. (Eds.) 2001: 20) The reconsideration and critique of these values also included art world structures and power relations that were prevailing at that moment in time. Dissatisfied with existing structures for making and exhibiting art, artists began instead to create an alternative scene in which they determined their own activities and roles. They were not reliant on the commercial galleries for presentation of their work, or traditional academic institutions for the dissemination of their ideas. This led to a blurring of the boundaries between the art world and the everyday, as artists began to explore art forms that did not rely on a traditional gallery space for exhibition, such as performance, land art, video art and book art. (De Salvo, D. (Ed.) 2005: 12-14) They developed a wealth of approaches including post-minimalism, conceptualism, pattern and “New Image” painting. Art in general embraced popular culture as well as being conceptual and political in nature. (Ibid.) This period, in which women played a significant role, is now seen as the beginnings of ‘postmodernism’<sup>12</sup>, when

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<sup>11</sup> The following chapters deal with various aspects of how the art framework was questioned. See in particular chapter 2.3 “Feminist Art Practice”.

<sup>12</sup> For an extensive account on “Modernism” please see the excellent essay by Charles Harrison “Modernism”, in: Nelson, R., S./ Shiff, R. (Eds.) (2003) Critical Terms for Art History, second

our notions of what constitutes art, what form it takes, what languages and styles it uses, the content and reception of it, the intention of its author and who was considered to be an artist, were thrown open for questioning. (Collings, M. 1999: 176/177)

The feminist movement played a vital role in this post-modern expansion. Amidst the charged atmosphere of radical reorientation, 1970s women artists banded together to repudiate the established canon. (Pollock, G. 1999: 23) As with the women's movement in general, white women originally dominated the women's art movement. However, it must be noted that women of colour, lesbian and bisexual artists were also present and influential from the beginning. (Allan, T., J. 1995: 2/3) As Lucy Lippard pointed out, '*Difference is what it's all about, but not just gender difference.*' (Lippard, L. 1989: 29)<sup>13</sup> She was referring to the fact that insights on representation and stereotypes were rarely applied to women outside the white majority and that artists of colour were only just starting to be included in articles and exhibitions by the end of the 1980s.

Concurrent with the founding of women's studies departments, women's periodicals and the new feminist and post-modern revisions of art history, artists started to become their own advocates for greater access to exhibition opportunities in galleries, alternative spaces and specialised museums. (Parker, R. / Pollock, G.

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edition, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, pp.188-201. The term "Postmodernism" is accessibly discussed by Eleanor Heartney in: Heartney, E. (2001) Postmodernism: Movements in Modern Art, Tate Publishing, London and by Homi K. Bhabha in "Postmodernism/ Postcolonialism", in: Nelson, R., S./ Shiff, R. (Eds.) (2003) Critical Terms for Art History, second edition, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, pp.435-451. It becomes clear by reading these articles that the term "postmodernism" specifically is a highly disputed one, seen as either a *real* "post" to modernism, or as forming part of the still ongoing process of modernism. A general discussion of these terms would lead too far for the purpose of this paper. Nevertheless, the term "postmodernism" will be taken up again in the following chapters and some of its elements that can be seen as relevant to feminist art will be at that stage elucidated.

<sup>13</sup> There seem to have been some kind of competition between gender and race/class. Socialist theorists wanted to embed for a long time race and class issues within feminist theory and they have accused radical and cultural feminists '*...of bourgeois romanticized elitism...*' and of supporting all women regardless of their politics. (Lippard, L. 1989: 29) The opposition defended their position by stating that women's struggles were always neglected in favour of class and race issues, that Marxism was not compatible with feminist issues and that all models that put women in power, regardless of how abusive, had to be supported. (Ibid.)

1981:134/135) European and American female artists came together to organise exhibitions and consciousness-raising groups. The Women's Liberation Movement, for instance, which '*...has had a radical impact on women artists...*', brought with it demands for social, economic and political change. (Parker, R. / Pollock, G. 1981: 157) Women began to join to demand greater representation and an end to the marginalization of women socially, economically, artistically and politically. The first 'Women's Liberation Movement' group exhibition was held in March 1971, at the Woodstock Gallery in London, while at the same time in New York 'The Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee was founded.<sup>14</sup> Judy Chicago started women-only studio classes at Fresno State University and with Miriam Schapiro, prompted the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute for the Arts. (Reckitt, H. / Phelan, P. (Eds.) 2001: 68)

Women artists first focused on the fact that few women were represented in galleries and museums and that they were excluded from the canon of art history. Also there were only a few women who taught in art schools, despite the fact that the majority of art students were women. It was common and acceptable for exhibitions to be made up of all white males. Women of colour were doubly discriminated against. For example, artists like Faith Ringgold, as a Black woman in a predominantly white movement, had to confront not only the exclusion of Blacks from the art world, but also the controversial position of feminism in the Black Movement. (Broude, N. / Garrard, M. D. (Eds.) 1992: 479)

The Feminist Art Movement profoundly influenced contemporary art practices. (Kelly, M. 1996: xxiii) It introduced feminist content and gender issues, non-hierarchical uses of materials and techniques and the idea of a multiple-voiced, fluid subject. The women's art movement championed the idea that gender is socially, rather than naturally constructed. It also validated art forms such as craft, video and

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on which exhibitions were held and where please see the excellent section about exhibitions by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in: Parker, R. / Pollock, G. (Eds.) (1987) Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985, Pandora, London, pp.4/ 185-260

performance art, that were not considered “high-art”. Furthermore, it questioned the label of “genius” and the understanding of “greatness” and in doing so placed an emphasis on the concept of pluralist variety rather than totalising universalism. (Pollock, G. 1993: 10-13)

## **2.2. Intention of Feminist Art**

In the early 1970s, women artists and activists demonstrated at museums and exposed the sexist practices of galleries and art schools. Women visual artists, art educators and art historians formed awareness raising groups, woman-centred art education programmes, women’s art organisations and cooperative galleries to provide the visibility that they had been denied. (Harrison, M. 1977: 214) However, feminist artists sought more than just equal representation. They believed that art could help bring about social and political change. (Cottingham, L. 2000: 28-30)<sup>15</sup> Exploring the kind of art women made, when creating from their own life experiences, led to a call for a re-examination of the criteria that defined what art and which artists were to be “valued”.<sup>16</sup> (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 40)

It also led to a reassessment of the concept of ‘genius’ and the criteria that had been used in the past to exclude women artists from the art history texts, that formed the basis of contemporary art education. (Gouma - Peterson T. / Mathews P. 1987: 327)

Art history professor, Janet Wolff has identified the three main areas of feminist concern as the study (and rediscovery) of women artists and their work, the representation of women and gender in visual culture and the question of feminist art practice. (Wolff, J. 2000) Fiona Carson considered the marginalisation of women as artists and the objectification of the female body in art, as the two most important issues in feminist theory and practice over the past thirty years. (Carson, F. /

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<sup>15</sup> This idea of the power of art to be able to change the self and society is still central to many feminist artists’ work these days. (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 27/28)

<sup>16</sup> “Valued” in terms of a re-evaluation of traditional male criteria for who was to be included and who was not to be included, within the art canon.



Pajackowska, C. (Eds.) 2001:26) In addition, Hilary Robinson stressed the aesthetic mediation of lived experience, as one of the main factors of feminist art. (Robinson, H. quoted in Deepwell, K. 1996)

The following chapters will try to elucidate why women might not have been included within the canon of art, how the representation of women in art reflected their patriarchal society, what it means to speak of “female experience” in relation to the production of art, what a specific “feminist” art practice might imply and finally, how women artists tried to circumvent the problem of the objectification of the female body. It is important, for the contextualisation of contemporary female artists and for the acknowledgement of the achievements of previous generations of feminist artists, to be aware of these issues. Especially, as will be shown, as these concerns are still valid today and contemporary women artists not only produce certain art works, but very likely get them accepted by art institutions due to the foundations laid by their female predecessors.

### **2.2.1. Gender, Genius and the Canon of Art**

In 1985 a group of women artists in New York organised themselves in protest against sexism in the art world. The so-called “Guerrilla Girls” created billboard-style posters that highlighted sexism in museums and galleries. One of them, for example, read, *‘Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.’* (Flynn, P., Jb 1993: 30) Another poster listed *‘Advantages of being a woman artist’* such as *‘not having to deal with the pressure of success’*. (Isaak, J., A. 1996: 4) Yet another poster listed more than 60 female and minority artists and told the art buyer that he could have acquired one from each artist, for the \$17.7 million spent on a single Jasper John’s painting. Their target was the inclusion of women in standard art histories and in museums. (Schor, M. 1997: 107) More conventional art

theorists have also addressed some of the problems that the Guerrilla Girls identified.<sup>17</sup>

In 1971 Linda Nochlin wrote an influential essay, “Why Have there Been No Great<sup>18</sup> Women Artists?”, where she noted, ‘*There are no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cezanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol, any more than there are black American equivalents for the same.*’ (Nochlin, L. 1971: 5) There is no doubt that women’s exclusion from art has never been absolute. Women artists have always existed, though they have often been written out of history. Even Pliny the Elder (died 79 AD) noted already in his encyclopaedia “Natural History”, which includes many chapters on artists of the ancient world, ‘*...women too have been painters...*’ and he goes on to name seven. (Korsmeyer, C. 2004 b: 17) As Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock explained, the work of women artists was at some point recorded and written about in all the centuries prior to their effective exclusion from dominant accounts in the twentieth. (Harris, J. 2001: 106)

For instance standard art history books such as Ernst Gombrich’s “Story of Art” (1950 + 1967 in Great Britain)<sup>19</sup> and Horst Woldemar’s and Anthony F. Janson’s “The History of Art” (published in 1962 in the United States), with their surveys of western art from the Greeks to the present contain no mention of women artists at all. (Devereux, M. 2003: 651) Both books follow an approach that had already been established in earlier twentieth-century art history textbooks, such as David Robb and J.J. Garrison’s “Art in the Western World” (1935). These books implied in their

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<sup>17</sup> For more information on the “Guerrilla Girls” see: Schor, M. (1997) Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, pp.87-98

<sup>18</sup> Greatness is obviously a vague concept that is heavily dependent on a person's perspective and biases. See the following paragraphs for some possible explanations. For an interesting account of contemporary and not always acquiescent responses to Linda Nochlin’s essay see: Hess, T., B./ Baker, E., C. (Eds.) (1971) Art and Sexual Politics, Collier Books, London, New York

<sup>19</sup> A closer look at The History of Art, compiled by Professor Sir Ernst Gombrich, first published in 1950, now in its sixteenth edition revised, expanded and redesigned version from 1995, and reprinted each year reveals that out of 278 sources used for the research of this book only 24 are written by women. Furthermore, a look through the index and glossary shows that both the words “feminist/m” and woman/-en are omitted and the subject of women’s art and/or feminist art is completely missing. See: Gombrich, E., H. (1995) The Story of Art, Phaidon, London, New York

omissions, that women never had made nor even could make art that was aesthetically or historically significant. This suggestion to some extent influenced for instance Mary Beth Edelson to produce her poster “Some Living American Women Artists/ Last Supper” (1971)<sup>20</sup>, or Judy Chicago to make “The Dinner Party” (1979). Both works unearth women artists who have been neglected throughout art history. (Broude, N. / Garrard, M., D. 1996: 16)<sup>21</sup>

One of the reasons that Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock found for the exclusion of female artists from standard history texts was that during the nineteenth century, women artists generally changed. They started, by subverting the traditional images of women, mothers and female children, to depict and reveal more and more about women’s social and ideological constraints, something that was not highly regarded by their critics. (Ibid.) Nevertheless, women remained only a small minority in the art world and even smaller in the history of art. As it will be shown, artistic creativity was solely attributed to men.

The origins of art history's focus on the personalities and work of exceptional individuals, can be traced back to an early Renaissance desire to celebrate Italian cities and their achievements, by focusing on the remarkable men whose talents were nurtured in these urban contexts. The result was a view of art as being the aggregate work of particularly gifted individuals. (Roskill, M. 1976) The mythology surrounding the figure of the artist as an empowered white man and a canon of “great artists” that was class, race and gender exclusive, developed out of the increased social status guaranteed to artists during the renaissance, in which they were considered as more than mere craftsmen. (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 15)

The reception of art often cemented women’s place at the margins of aesthetic practices. Gender prejudices have permeated the reviews of men’s and women’s art

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<sup>20</sup> This example will be taken up once again in reference to Sam Taylor-Wood’s work. See: chapter 5.3

<sup>21</sup> Also in a survey of American art periodicals in 1972, researchers found that on average 90% of words and reproduction on their pages were devoted to the work of male artists. (Parker, R. / Pollock, G. 1987: 172)

and in turn influenced the process of canon formation. One has to look closely at the metaphors and myths of creativity that define women and artist, as mutually exclusive terms. Such myths reached an apogee in the Romantic celebration of genius. Here, creativity became a quintessentially male act, even as the artist was paradoxically seen to possess feminine qualities of emotional openness and sensitivity. As Christine Battersby noted, the great artist, the genius, is a “feminine male”. (Battersby, C. 1989: 5)

Women’s art was frequently read as an expression of the limits of their sex. The transcendent and universal qualities of great art remained, almost by definition, beyond their reach. (Felski, R. 2000: 176) Women, as it was generally understood, lacked the power, energy and near divine inspiration necessary for the highest levels of artistic achievement, a lack generally attributed to female biology. (Devereux, M. 2003: 651) Women were associated with emotions that were considered unreliable, while the agent who exercised responsibility, executed free choice and clear decision-making, was male. Consequently, women were insufficiently equipped to hold public power and they had to concentrate on the domestic domain, while the governance of society, law-making and the public sphere of policy, were male dominated. (Chadwick, W. 2002: 40/41)

Overall, the world of male values was abstract and associated with the mind, while that of the female was emotional, passive, domestic and associated with the body. As might be obvious, the male sphere was considered as more important and therefore, hierarchically above the female one. This had deep implications for notions of creativity and even though the idea of the artist obviously changed and developed in different historical contexts, the split between femaleness and the exercise of the highest and most difficult human capabilities, always promoted an image of women as closer to nature and more distant from the construction of civilised achievement. Women were, therefore associated with procreativity, a natural function that ties them to their bodies and to “animal” reproduction, while

men were assigned the role of artistic creativity, free from biological destiny.  
(Korsmeyer, C. 2004 b: 14)

In the history of art, the distinction between amateur and professional status was also part of the network of factors, that influenced and often inhibited women's accomplishments. The absence of professional standing can be seen as part of the answer to Linda Nochlin's question, "Why have there been no great women artists?" In most cases in the past and also today, decorative tasks were the work of women and those endeavours were not only seen as domestic, but more importantly, as amateurish. (Nochlin, L. 1989: 166) They were not considered to represent what makes a profession or career. To achieve professional status, one needed the expertise provided by extensive education and training. These opportunities presented themselves only to persons, who were relatively independent, free to move about and who had economic means provided or earned, neither of which were usually available to women. (Graeme Chalmers, F. 1998: 17)

The role of middle and upper class women was to be the "angel in the house".<sup>22</sup> If being part of a family stifled some women, for others it provided one of the sole means of learning to be an artist, especially when professional training was nearly impossible to obtain.<sup>23</sup> Those who were part of an artistic family were sometimes able to gain access to the studio. (Graeme Chalmers, F. 1998: 26-31) Throughout much of the history of western art, women were stubbornly denied access to teaching studios, which were considered improper places for women. (Nochlin, L. 1989: 159) Even advocates for women's education cautioned that their

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<sup>22</sup> The popular Victorian image of the ideal wife/woman came to be "the Angel in the House," who was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive and powerless, redemptive and idle, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing and above all, pure. The phrase, "Angel in the House", comes from the title of a poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women. Believing that his wife Emily was the perfect Victorian wife, he wrote "The Angel in the House" about her. (Originally published in 1854, revised through 1862). For Virginia Woolf, the repressive ideal of women represented by the Angel in the House was still so potent that she wrote, in 1931, *'Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.'* (Marcus, J. 1981: 45) For more information see: [http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel\\_19c/thackeray/angel.html](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/thackeray/angel.html), accessed 5.9.2005

<sup>23</sup> At least during the Victorian period and earlier

accomplishments needed to be moderated so as not to interfere with their chief roles as wives and mothers. (Betterton, R. 1996: 27-29) Institutions, as for instance, “The Royal Academy” in London, placed restrictions on women. Even though Angelika Kauffman and Mary Moser were among the founder members of the Royal Academy in 1768, they were nevertheless not included in the group of artists portrayed in Johann Zoffany’s “Life Class at the Royal Academy” (1771-2), but were depicted as portraits hanging above the heads of their male colleagues. (Parker, R. / Pollock, G. 1981: 87-90)<sup>24</sup>

The basis for teaching in the Academies was working from the life model and this remained the key aspect of fine art study. Women were barred from the life room until the late nineteenth century, as it was considered inappropriate. Consequently, this meant that they were unable to compete in historical painting or representing the nude, the most prestigious aspects of professional practice. (Nochlin, L. 1989: 158-164) When women finally gained access to education and to the life room at the academies at the end of the nineteenth century, a major strand of modernism had coalesced around the female model, as a sign of the creative and sexual power of the male artist. Ideologies of sexual difference, which have permeated society throughout different periods of time, have often positioned the female persona as *other* to the male, his binary opposite, nature to his culture, as confined to the private sphere, rather than taking part in the public world of professional work.<sup>25</sup> These ideologies were translated into the art world, in so much that the female was often represented as image/object/model and muse for the male viewer/subject/artist. Historically, such demarcations were usually absorbed, acted upon, and hence had a profound impact on the lives of many would-be women artists. (Foster, A. 2004: 8)

To summarise: Feminist artists, starting in the late sixties of the last century, have attempted to bring an awareness of gender to the investigation of fundamental

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<sup>24</sup> For more information on Angelika Kauffmann see: (Wassying Roworth, W. 1988: 209 – 221)

<sup>25</sup> “...confined to the private sphere rather than taking part in the public world of professional work” was mostly referring to middle and upper-class women, as working class women, prostitutes, artists’ models and women of rural origins had to make their living in one way or another in the “public world of professional work.”

concepts and to traditional questions about the art history canon, as well as the under-representation of women within it. The purpose of feminist art history must then have become clearer. Firstly, it showed how previous writings about art history had been blind to the achievements of women. Secondly, it discovered institutional reasons for women's different (ostensibly lesser) achievements in the visual arts. Last, it followed the excavation of the histories of female artists and the addition of their work to the canon of art. The time for the single-female-artist study had come. However, the matter was not that simple...

*'What if the whole construct of "remembered significant historical figure" was a corrupt construct of patriarchal ideology? What if the whole scenario of institutional training - learning from a master, rejecting the style of that master to emerge significant in one's own right - was a masculine scenario unrelated to the experiences of women, impossible in the collective, collaborative social structures open to them? What if the linear progression from style to style in the time line was irrelevant, because the artist's style was outside the dominant paradigm? What if the defining of each forgotten female artist in terms of her relation to some significant famous male artist was just another instance of the traditional cultural practice of identifying women primarily in terms of their relation to men and therefore was undesirable to feminist art historians?'* (Frederickson, K. / Webb, S., E. (Eds.) 2003: 3/4)

It became clear for many feminist artists that the history of art itself was an area of scholarly work formed within a masculine tradition.<sup>26</sup> The modes of writing about art and artists have always privileged the work of male artists and merely adding women artists to the pre-existent norms and to the canon of art history would do nothing to further the understanding of their artistic production. It became imperative to explore the significance of gender difference in both the making of the

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<sup>26</sup> It was also obvious for feminist artists that this male dominance within the art world extended to art educators (see chapter 2.1), critics, funding bodies and collectors (see: chapter 3). Also: Isaak, J., A. (1996) Feminism and Contemporary Art; The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter, Routledge, London and New York, p.1/2

work and in the reading of it. (Broude, N. /Garrard, M. D. (Eds.) 1992: 3/4) It was crucial to understand that women artists produced and still produce their work within a male dominated art world and within an aesthetic system that is based on a patriarchal language, or as Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrad so persuasively point out, it is man who writes '...*his-story*.' (Broude, N. / Garrard, M., D. 1996: 16) It is not straightforward to override these masculine-normative structures and to integrate women's art within them, without running the risk of seriously misinterpreting their work, as the very language in which such interpretations are written is itself gendered. (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 69)

### **2.2.2. The Representation of Women and Gender in Visual Culture**

The early 1970s saw the political explosion known as the Women's Liberation Movement.<sup>27</sup> Fine art, as well as other cultural forms, was used as a medium for the expression of feminist politics. (Rosser, P. 1994: 76) Feminist artistic practice was seen as social-change art, an art practice that saw representation as a political issue and that questioned women's subordination within patriarchal forms of representation by analysing the idea of a socially constructed femininity. (Barry, J. / Flitterman-Lewis, S. 2003: 53)

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<sup>27</sup> The Women's Liberation Movement was the contemporary women's rights movement of the 1960s (mainly in United States and parts of Europe), out of which the feminist art activities of the late 1960s grew. (Chadwick, W. 2002: 344) Its legacy was the nineteenth century women's rights and women's suffrage movements. The movement aimed to destroy the myths surrounding women (namely that they are inferior to men in almost every aspect, with the possible exception of cooking, cleaning and having babies) and requested, political, and economic equality in a male-dominated society. Actions organised by its members were public protests, the creations of flyers and posters, the establishments of underground abortion hospitals, women's health centres and specialist bookstores. Most importantly women organised themselves into groups all over the countries to talk and deal with their problems, usually male chauvinism. A very useful website for online archival documents from the Women's Liberation Movement see: <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/>, accessed 11.1.2006; also: <http://www.feminist.org/research/chronicles/fc1953.html>, accessed 11.1.2006 for information on feminist chronicles and a timeline of significant events between 1953 and 1993.



Women in patriarchal societies were not only oppressed economically and politically, similar to the Marxist theory of class oppression<sup>28</sup>, but also through the ways in which they were represented and seen by their members and in the languages of art that were used to represent them. Like language itself, art is a symbolic medium. Some feminists saw it as disproportionately reflecting and promoting male beliefs, desires and ends, ultimately leading the world and themselves to be seen through male eyes. From this perspective, one could say, that all forms of artistic representation play a key role in the social construction of gender and in teaching society to see women as passive objects of active male desire, an alignment supportive of male privilege and useful to patriarchal culture. (Devereux, M. 2003: 655)

According to Gouma-Peterson and Mathews in their influential essay “The Feminist Critique of Art History”, ‘...representation legitimises culture’s dominant ideology and is therefore inevitably politically motivated. It constructs difference through a re-presentation of preconditioned concepts about gender that inform all of our institutions and that are the very foundation of our ideology and system of belief. The same is true about our cultural definitions for male and female identity.’ (Gouma - Peterson T. / Mathews P. 1987: 335)

*Female* is obviously the antagonistic position to *male* and until the 1970s there were two main explanations in existence, which defined this structuralist notion of binary

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<sup>28</sup> Marxist theory was appealing to feminists in the beginning of the 1970s, because there was no other theory, which accounted for the oppression of women, cross-culturally as well as throughout history, in such an explanatory manner as the Marxist theory of class oppression. By the late 1970s, some feminists started to question the concept of universal female subordination and the usefulness of models based on dichotomies. The question of sexual divisions could not be derived from the Marxist critique of capitalism. Things such as for instance sexual difference and questions surrounding desire could not be answered. Also, the Marxist model, centred around labour and property relations, did not take into account the separation of the family from the arena of production, where the work of the housewife had no exchange value and was not regulated through the market. Another criticism made, was that these dichotomies were western categories and they were therefore not useful for cross-cultural studies and analyses. Many feminists turned to psychoanalysis as the theory that seemed to offer most toward the explanation of the whole realm of “the personal” and that seemed to fulfil the need to address the psychic roots of women’s experiences. To help to overcome the use of dichotomies, the concept of gender was developed, in which the term “gender” replaced the term “woman”, to free the issue of inequality from biological connotations. (Hemingway, A. 1996: 24-29)

opposites. Firstly, there was the biological determinist notion of the “essential nature” of gender, based on pre-given anatomical identity and secondly, the Marxist-based theory that gender roles as female and male are intrinsic to capitalist social relations. The 1970s dissatisfaction with these existing theories led in the 1980s to the consideration of psychoanalysis as a tool to explore and understand the position of female versus male.<sup>29</sup> (Mitchell, J. 1990) Psychoanalysis, as Emily Apter so rightly explains, became in the hands of feminists a tool to challenge

*‘...paradigms of phallic lack, egoic deficiency, pre-oedipal infantilization, passivity, perversion, hysteria, penis envy, compensatory narcissism, hyperdefensiveness, performative masquerade, fetishism, maternal pleasure, and the exclusion of feminine signifiers from the Symbolic order.’* (Apter, E. 2006:327) As Lisa Tickner explains, psychoanalysis *‘...was so important in the 1970s, both for what it offered, but also for the objections that it aroused. The reason why it was so important was because it imported the question of desire.’* (Tickner, L., interview by Kathy Battista, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2000)

It was important to understand how male and female positions developed. Psychoanalysis opened up a new way of explaining women’s internalised oppression, (Marxists’ false consciousness), as opposed to the existent biology and/or social learning theories. Freudian and Lacanian theories have been developed and used by feminists to explore such issues as the representation of women, especially in film, advertising and the media, photography, paintings and other ‘high’ arts, as well as in performance art, literature and other cultural forms. Feminists have used psychoanalysis to explore gender and sexuality issues, the ‘making of women’ in our culture and to understand the ‘sub-text’ in these cultural

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<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that psychoanalysis was the only tool at that point in time nor was it considered as necessarily useful by *all* feminist artists. As Lisa Tickner stresses, many women artists from the seventies onwards looked at a wide range of disciplinary tools that were considered as feeding into the analysis of the image. This was necessary, as *‘...art history didn’t have a decent set of disciplinary tools. It was a very feeble kind of connoisseurship... we needed a much more sophisticated political understanding of what the issues were. Whether they were class issues, gender issues, or slightly later postcolonial issues. One needed a kind of nuanced set of understandings of what they were about. And for that one needed to look at different disciplines as well as different kinds of writers.’* (Tickner, L., interview by Kathy Battista, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2000)

forms by applying the theory of the unconscious. They have examined our responses to, for example, the visual arts as viewers. By applying the Freudian concepts of voyeurism, narcissism, fetishism and so forth, psychoanalytic feminists looked at how the unconscious works in terms of pleasure, pain, desire, etc... and examined various cultural forms and our responses to them. Lacanian-based ideas were used to understand the role of signs and “Woman” as a unit of meaning (sign).

Juliet Mitchell was one of the first feminists to put forward the idea that psychoanalysis could be used to understand ideology in general and in particular the concept of patriarchy. She argued that ‘...*psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for patriarchy, but an analysis of one.*’ (Mitchell, J, 1990: xv) She posited that it was necessary as women, to look at how we are gendered as “feminine” and how the unconscious contributes to our gender and sexual identities, which then determines our position in society and ultimately our oppression. The artist Mary Kelly claims that there is ‘...*no pre-existing sexuality, no essential femininity; and ... to look at the processes of their construction is also to see the possibility of deconstructing the dominant forms of representing difference and justifying subordination in our social order.*’ (Kelly, M. 1982: 35)

Feminists wondered whether psychoanalytical theory could be useful in the production, understanding, or experiencing of feminist art. Abel contests that ‘...*seduced by psychoanalytical accounts of subjectivity, much feminist theory... has come to seem... to have lost its material grounding and with them the possibility of interpreting (and thereby promoting) social change.*’ (Abel, E. 1990: 184)

Nevertheless, psychoanalytic feminists argued that using psychoanalytical theory enables us to deconstruct and understand ideology, both as an outside system and, as it works inside us, in our unconscious and in our construction as sexed individuals. In being able to do so, psychoanalytical theory also enables us to understand what strategies are needed to counteract women’s oppression. Rosi Braidotti wrote, ‘...*although psychoanalytical theory has done a great deal to improve our understanding of sexual difference, it has done little or nothing to change the*

*concrete social conditions of sex-relations and of gender-stratification. The latter is precisely the target of feminist practice.* ' (Braidotti, R. 1990: 97)

The problem for feminist producers of culture has been how to counteract the patriarchal narrative of art and culture and how to change its symbolic meaning to reflect more of women's beliefs, desires and ends. This could not be done solely by just changing the images of art works. Additionally, one had to alter their narratives and the way they were embedded within the institutional arena. Laura Mulvey argued that to create feminist art, which destabilises the patriarchal narrative of the unconscious is problematic and to do this it is necessary to flaw the '*...satisfaction, pleasure and privilege...*' of the viewer and create new visual forms, which make us engage differently with the image. (Mulvey, L. 1989: 26)

The question of *how* to subvert the idea of the male gaze and how to disrupt the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the predominantly male viewer, became a dominant factor in many feminist art works. For instance, female sexuality was one of the major concerns of feminist artists. Since the 1970s, they have been '*...getting in touch with and reclaiming their bodies, their sexual feelings and expressing those in art.*' (Hammond, H. 1979: 77) One of the most important slogans of that time was "the personal is political", which opened the door for dealing with personal experiences, the body, the family and the domestic life, to give but a few examples. These were marginalised issues for a previous generation of artists. The female body and its objectification in patriarchal societies was one of the major concerns for feminist artists. (Rosser, P. 1994: 76) With this in mind, one way in which some feminist artists tried to direct the viewer to a point where this objectification would become obsolete, was to transgress traditional boundaries of the body. The aim was to draw the viewer to a place where traditional meaning collapsed and therefore, satisfaction and pleasure in viewing the female body became problematised.

Elizabeth Grosz argued that the body<sup>30</sup> '*...becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read, and read into. ... A storehouse of inscriptions and messages between its internal and external boundaries.*' (Grosz, E. 1989:35) The body can be seen as a symbol controlled through rituals and rules, which honour its boundaries, the transgression of which became the target for feminist artists. The symbolic seeks to resist abjection, to suppress and dispel it in order to protect one of the most important boundaries, the one between subject and object, between the inside and the outside.

Abjection is, for Julia Kristeva, the experiencing of a place without a definable object that draws her to '*...the border of [her] condition as a living being...*' (Kristeva, J. 1982: 3) Kristeva argued that when approaching abjection, '*...there looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. ... The object has only one quality of the object- that of being opposed to I. ...what is object, is the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me to a place where meaning collapses*' (Kristeva, J. 1982: 1)

If, as Kristeva claims, abjection draws us towards a place where meaning collapses and where an experience occurs which, in its moment, is beyond representation, beyond words or explicable meaning, then this particular point in the experience can be considered as fundamental in the construction of new meanings in art, particularly for feminist art. Considered in this way, abjection<sup>31</sup> involves experiencing, however briefly, a gap made possible by destabilising the system of representation. In other words, such a gap means change, a change that was of highest priority on the agenda of feminist issues and feminist art.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> This is valid for both types of bodies: the actual as well as the representation of it.

<sup>31</sup> The idea of abjection is part of the psychoanalytical theory. For more information see: Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York and: Kelly, O. (1993) *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind*, Indiana University Press

<sup>32</sup> According to Catherine Elwes, the "Aktionist" performance artists of 1960s Vienna were there first to employ the object and used shock tactics, ritualised humiliation, self-mutilation and '*...an*

This gap might have been consciously or unconsciously searched for by the early feminist artists, with their emphasis on and enactment of personal experiences, the exploration of vaginal imagery and menstrual blood, their general revelation in feminine experience and their defiant use of media, which was more commonly associated with women's work. The idea of female experience and feminist political ideas, to which the artist claimed loyalty, were significant factors in determining whether art work could be read as contributing to feminist issues or not. Feminist art was often characterised by a self-conscious appropriation of the conditions of one's own existence and identity. It was a faithful, comprehensive representation of the contexts and complexity found in women's lives. (Lippard, L., R. 1995:172-174) Feminists emphasised the importance of giving voice to personal experiences and to expressing and documenting women's oppression, as well as their aspirations. (Barry, J. / Flitterman-Lewis, S. 2003: 53)

But appealing to experience as the basis for a feminist aesthetic, according to Felski, could not form the common basis in works by feminist artists, '*...simply because artistic creation passes through conventions of imagery, language, and representation that are social and intersubjective, not just personal.*' (Felski, R. 2000: 179) In other words, the assumption that art should reflect personal experience is itself a socially constructed belief and a historically specific way of thinking about art. It is wrong to believe that women's art bears witness, or should bear witness, to some *shared* essence of femaleness. She argued further that just because women acquire their ideas about gender from the society in which they live, as do men, it is not an automatic process that all women, given the choice, will make feminist art. They might in fact hold and express highly traditional views about men and women. (Felski, R. 2000: 179)

This can be seen as one of the reasons why early feminist art was accused of being essentialist. There is no *one* female experience, but a multitude of culturally and

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*orgy of bodily fluids to induce a cathartic disruption of bourgeois conditioning in the audience.*' (Elwes, C. 2005: 180) Many of these performances were recorded at that time and influenced the next generations of live artists, including Gina Pane and Marina Abramovich. (Ibid.)

ideologically different ones. Women artists cannot be treated in feminist art history as representatives of their gender and their work as expressing the visual ideology of virtually a whole sex. (Harris, J. 2001: 111) The production of feminist art and how it is read '*...are made from the spaces of politicized and theorized feminist subjectivities and social positions. These are necessarily plural.*' (Pollock, G. (Ed.) 1996: xv)

Whilst early feminist artists began with a desire for affirmation and solidarity, signified by the notion of sisterhood, they soon became aware of the conflicts, diversity and ensuing tensions between the political alliances signified by feminism and the real divergences and distances between the socially constituted women within the feminist art movement. The social role of art, according to Pierre Bourdieu, is closely tied to the game of distinction. Art is one of the means by which particular classes and class factions display the superiority of their taste and feminist art is certainly not free from such acts of distinction. (Bourdieu, P. 1984) Griselda Pollock concluded therefore, that the historically specific and varying enunciations of feminist art must be seen '*...as elements of spaces and temporalities of sexual difference.*' (Pollock, G. (Ed.) 1996: 9) In other words, there is no *one* definition of feminist art, but a multitude of different aesthetic forms in various national, ideological and temporal contexts that continuously changed over time.

### **2.3. Feminist Art Practice**

It seems to be notoriously difficult to define how feminist art differs from other art forms and what the essential elements are that enable it to be considered as feminist and not simply women's art. In the past, Lucy Lippard, one of the most prolific art historical writers about the feminist art movement, not only in the United States, but also Great Britain, considered herself unable to clearly separate feminist<sup>33</sup> art from

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<sup>33</sup> She is here clearly talking about feminist not women's art. Women have proven throughout centuries that they were capable of producing art that was indistinguishable from the one produced

art made by men, but still believed that there is a core difference that cannot be identified in formal terms alone. (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 151) Nevertheless, even though falling short of explaining this “core” difference any further, she seemed to be convinced that there are certain aspects in women’s art that are inaccessible to men, as a woman’s political, biological and social experience in the society, differs from that of a man. (Harris, J. 2001: 115/116)/ (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 82)

This clearly opens up the question whether it is possible for men to *produce* feminist art, something Lippard, according to the above statement, rightly negates.<sup>34</sup> Judy Chicago, in contrast, made the following statement around the same time Lippard gave hers. ‘...*feminist art education is about making art which is authentic to one’s lived experience. The same process could be applied to anybody who wishes to make art that comes from the reality of their own concerns...*’ adding to this she continued, ‘...*feminism, even though it starts with f-e-m, does not mean female only...*’ and further that ‘...*feminism is a set of principles, and a way of looking at the world that, for me, is rooted in a redefinition of power...*’. (Interview: Broude, N. / Garrard, M., D. 1996: 66)

These principles are in her opinion as valid for men as for women, something the author of this thesis would like to strongly reject and propose that in Chicago’s quote the words “from a female point of view” are missing. Rather she agrees with Elizabeth Grosz’s point that, ‘*The sex of the author has...no direct bearing on the political positioning of the text, just as other facts about the author’s private life do not explain the text. Nevertheless, there are ways in which the sexuality and corporeality of the subject leave their traces or marks on the texts produced, just as*

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by their male peers. Sometimes they worked under male pseudonyms (for example Grace Hartigan who used George as her pseudonym) or as regularly happened, their work was not recognised as produced by a woman, but attributed to either one of her male relatives or her husband. (Borzello, F. 2000: 210/211)

<sup>34</sup> For the author of this thesis, this does not include the reading of art works as possibly contributing to feminist issues, as long as the gender of the artist is unknown to the viewer of the art work. The reader also needs to be reminded that the feminist art movement was predominantly a women’s movement and the term “feminist” art was developed out of this specific socio-political period.



*we in turn must recognize that the processes of textual production also leave their traces or residue on the body of the writer (and readers).* ' (Grosz, E. 1995: 18)

For instance, according to Chicago, all art that deals with the redefinition of power, can than be considered as feminist art. This is a conclusion that does *not* take into account the *differing* socialisation processes that men and women undergo and the *differing* role expectations that are imposed on them by their societies and consequently the *differing* experiences that women and men have.<sup>35</sup> Rightly, feminist art should be attributed to the introduction of explorations of power mechanisms in societies, which men can obviously investigate as well. However, for *women*, these power mechanisms are specifically referring to *patriarchal* societies. (Chapter 2.2.) Therefore, to produce feminist art that reflects *female* experiences in a male dominated world, it requires, at least for this author, a knowingly female subject position, which men will never be able to inhabit.

Classifications that attempt to define “the *feminist* artist” range from “the female artist who practices feminism outside her studio and therefore comes to her work with a developed feminist sensibility”, to “the female artist who needs to produce art about women from the woman’s point of view and to teach others about the conditions of women in a way that leads to changing those conditions”. (Roth, M. 1980: 36-38) Suzanne Lacy, for instance, sees feminist art as an art practice ‘...*that shows a consciousness of women’s social and economical position in the world and that demonstrates forms and perceptions that are drawn from a sense of spiritual kinship between women.*’ (Roth, M. 1980: 37) For Harmony Hammond, a feminist artist is one who makes art ‘...*that reflects a political consciousness of what it means to be a woman in patriarchal society,*’ and she insists that feminist art is not a style, since the ‘...*visual form this consciousness takes varies from artist to artist*’ (Hammond, H.: 1984: 99)

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<sup>35</sup> This argument will be taken up once again in Judith Butler’s discussion of performativity. See: - 2.3.2. Feminist Art and Explorations of the Body

Generally speaking, feminist art can be discussed in relation to the women's movement:<sup>36</sup> In the first phase, underway in the 1960s, women struggled for equal rights and feminist artists fought for equal access to the art world.<sup>37</sup> The main '*...task at this point in time was to separate the women from the men so we could see who the hell we were.*' (Lippard, L. 1995: 22) At the same time, their goal was to change the character of art, which involved moving away from Modernism, whose authoritarian history was mistrusted by feminist artists. (Lippard, L., R. 1993a: 4) Some feminist artists also started to rebel against the notion of "quality", holding that such ranks were used by the male patriarchal society to exclude them. (Lovelace, C. 2003: 68)

The second phase, underway by the late 1960s, was characterised by a more radical approach than the first egalitarian stage, with women insisting on the fundamental differences between men and women and claiming the right to express a special and essential womanhood. (Foster, H./ Krauss, R./ Bois, Y.-A./ Buchloh, B., H., D. (Eds) 2004: 570) Hereby, feminist artists set out to document the world of women and their experiences that had been previously excluded from the analysis. They reclaimed devalued forms of craft and decoration associated with women, contested oppressive stereotypes and advanced positive images of women. (Lovelace, C. 2003: 67/68) This position, sometimes termed essentialist, conceived woman as a fixed category and often attempted to characterise, or even celebrate, specific female attributes within a separatist mode, or to reveal the history and the nature of the repressions of woman. (Gouma - Peterson T. / Mathews P. 1987: 346)/ (Eisenstein, H. 1983: 46/ 47)

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<sup>36</sup> These phases were not necessarily consecutive, but could coexist, conflict and recur. Furthermore, there were various positions. Some saw "women" as constructed, others as essential. Nevertheless, these positions were never absolute. The terms first stage, first phase and first generation, have to be differentiated into first stages of the feminist movement (much older, see footnote 1) and first stages of the feminist *art* movement, which are located sometime around the end of the 1960s and which fall within second wave feminism. See: (Lovelace, C. 2003: 67-73); (Cherry, D. 2000); (Pollock, G. 1993: 12); (Harrison, M. 1977)

<sup>37</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the development of feminist art from the 1970s to the 1990s see: Lippard, L., R. (1993)(a) "In the Flesh: Looking Back and Talking Back", in: Women's Art Magazine, issue 54, Sept./Oct., pp. 4-9

The third phase, underway by the mid 1970s, was sceptical of both the equality pursued in the first phase and the separation proclaimed in the second. The positioning of women, within the patriarchal structure of society, was still criticised, but women became aware of the fact that this order could not simply be transcended. (Foster, H./ Krauss, R./ Bois, Y.-A./ Buchloh, B., H., D. (Eds) 2004: 570) Feminist artists acknowledged the importance of studying the distinctions between men and women. Women were no longer considered a fixed category, but rather an ongoing process constructed in social history and no longer grounded in natural biology or in “essential” being. (Cherry, D. 2000) Feminist artists examined women through their representations and ideological constructions within the male system. (Gouma - Peterson T. / Mathews P. 1987: 346)/ (Eisenstein, H. 1983: 46/ 47)

In addition to these different stages in the development of feminist art, there were geographical distinctions between what constituted feminist art and what did not. For instance, Lippard drew the distinction between American and British feminist art and in doing so observed that feminist art in England was more concerned with notions of what art is and with making strong statements about the position of women in culture. In contrast, North American feminist art swayed more toward images of women and their representation, than ideologies. (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 155/156) Women artists in North America generally operated within early feminism’s autobiographical and celebratory stance vis-à-vis the female body, while European women, with a more pluralistic feminist tradition, often worked in more confrontational, sociological and psychoanalytical ways. (Chadwick, W. 2002: 366)

As Lippard explains, the states of British and American art were very different and feminist artists operated from different political assumptions. While America basically ignored social art and artist-organised tentatives toward a socialist art movement were marginal and temporary, artists in Britain could join Left political parties and work in collaboration with them. This lead to a more advanced level of theoretical and formalist discussions about what feminist art meant and to a stronger

emphasis on direct artistic statements, about the position of women in British culture. (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 155/156) In America, on the other hand, there was a resistance to defining feminist art at all, or to accepting predetermined concepts of feminist art. This led to a generally anti-formalist and more self-centred way of producing feminist art, which in turn rapidly led to a focus on topics considered to be outrageous such as rape, menstruation and abortion, or not putative such as motherhood and domesticity. (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 22)

Nevertheless, what most feminist artists seemed to agree upon was the necessity for a specifically formulated female consciousness, which had to be detectable in women's art works and which differed from those works that were produced by men. (Felski, R. 1989: 18) They also shared the belief in a '*...necessary or privileged relationship between female gender and a particular kind of literacy [or artistic] structure, style or form.*' (Felski, R. 1989: 19) Therefore, for instance, French feminist, Julia Kristeva, came to equate avant-garde arts in particular experimental writing, with resistance to a patriarchal symbolic order.<sup>38</sup> In turn, the determinate meanings, artificially imposed structure and linear logic of conventional narrative, came to be identified with bourgeois masculinity. (Kristeva, J. 1987: 110-117)

Obviously, there were many voices in the women's art movement with an equal number of different goals, that were reflected in the way they produced their art works. (Chadwick, W. 1989: 23) Some wanted to transform traditional fine art media such as painting and sculpture, with feminist awareness. Others sought to introduce aesthetics and values from non-European traditions into the visual vocabulary. Still others gave up object-making altogether in favour of performance art and video and called for an elimination of the division between craft and fine art. Many feminist artists explored an aesthetics that emerged from female experience and female-coded labour, the female body, women's history and individual

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<sup>38</sup> This is an important aspect, which will be taken up at a later stage, particularly in relation to Tracey Emin's work. See: chapter 4

autobiography. (Schapiro, M. / Wilding, F. (1989): 6-12) Other women artists sought to reclaim the female body, by representing women's bodies and bodily experiences in ways contrary to the sexualised and idealised representations dominating the images of women created by men. (Schor, M. 1989: 15/16)

### **2.3.1. Feminist Aesthetics and Material Strategies**

The term feminist aesthetic can be categorised into two main areas, depending on whether the stress is on the feminist angle or on the aesthetics. The first area deals with a historical review of art from a feminist standpoint and proposes a woman-centred canon of art, as suggested by Christine Battersby. This involves making a case for the importance of art by women and describing the distinctive female traditions and genres within which their art acquires much of its meaning. Hereby, the plea is for the distinctiveness of female “genius” that clarifies the specific qualities of women’s art and ultimately leads to the inclusion of women in art history, on artistic rather than political grounds. (Battersby, C. 1989: 232)

The term “genius” is intrinsically problematic, as it raises the question of what determines a genius. Genius is a concept that was first developed in Kant’s “Critique of Judgement”, in order to label the quality in an artist that enables *him*, within a certain inexplicable state of mind, to create work with “beauty”, another term that was highly discussed throughout history and still is. Genius is what gives the rules to art. In other words, a genius is able to set an example for later artists to follow. This concept itself, however, is devoid of a rule to predict or to explain how this can be done. (Freeland, C. 2001: 130) When Christine Battersby uses the term genius in connection to feminist artists, she is not returning to Kant’s romantic notion. She is much more praising women artists, while at the same time omitting the idea that their “great” work has been produced in some special psychological state of mind.

Great art becomes then not a matter of inspiration, but the effectiveness of a body of work, in terms of promoting feminist ends. (Battersby, C. 1989: 232/ 232)<sup>39</sup>

The second area that implicates a feminist aesthetic is an approach in which feminism takes precedence over aesthetics. As Rita Felski writes: *'Any appeal to artistic value is viewed with mistrust, as a sign of elitism and a residual attachment to a patriarchal worldview. Instead, critics celebrate diverse forms of creativity as part of their general affirmation of a woman-centered culture.'* (Felski, R. 2000: 178) This leads to a reversal of traditional hierarchies of value. For instance, craft orientated processes, quite often based on everyday materials, became as valid as "high" art. Furthermore, artworks that appeared spontaneous and unskilled were praised for expressing the process-oriented nature of female creativity. By contrast, art that followed a certain structure and symmetry was accused of copying the questionable traits of the masculine, product-orientated aesthetic. (Felski, R. 2000:178)

Feminist artists, of the 1970s, mistrusted the authoritarian structures of modernism and the *'...destruction of derogatory myths was one of the tasks....'* (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 27) For many women artists the ultimate goal was to subvert modernism by inserting feminist issues and ideas and to fundamentally change the character of art. Refusing their outsider role, women artists transgressed the traditional boundaries, by adapting any art practices from previously male dominions, to their own causes. Subverting the vision of the single male genius, women artists started to work collectively or collaboratively, sometimes even in communities. Acceptable forms

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<sup>39</sup> The problematic issue is to decide on what grounds women artists are or are not included in the canon, what actually makes great art and who is producing art that promotes feminist ends. Considering that the whole nature of art history and criticism is patriarchal, or as said above "history", it is difficult to see how a new art language that is distanced from the traditional writing about art can be developed. Feminist critics went as women through a socialisation process that is male dominated and in which the male language system has been incorporated into their whole thinking process. To think outside these borders would require a new language structure to begin with. The topic of genius has also been addressed in the chapter 2.2.1. The idea of the human socialisation process and the coming into language and being can be studied in Lacan's works. See: (Mitchell, J./ Rose, J. (Eds.) 1982: 5)

and unacceptable contents further destabilised the idea of what could and could not be understood as acceptable art forms.

Women artists, i.e. Carolee Schneemann, constantly produced art that provoked censorship by working with erotic and political taboos, that has offended and at the same time been defended by both men and women, agencies and institutions. She is an example of an artist who has worked on the margins of the tolerable, by destabilising the system of representation and confronting issues that transgressed traditional visions of female public behaviourism.<sup>40</sup> (Rahmani, A. 2001: 149)

Generally speaking, many feminist artists opened up previously taboo subjects for artistic presentation such as, female sexuality, desires, menstruation and childbirth. They also began to employ female body images widely in their work. All of these moves were controversial, including within the feminist community. For example, when Judy Chicago made her large collaborative installation “The Dinner Party” in the early 1970s, she was both praised and criticised for the thematic use of vaginal imagery in the table settings, that represented each of thirty-nine famous women from history and legend. Critics objected that she was both essentialising women and reducing them to their reproductive parts. Admirers, on the other hand, praised her transgressive boldness.<sup>41</sup>

Another challenging approach for feminist artists was the employment of food as the medium for their works. The presence of actual food in art installations, as opposed to its depictions in still life painting, confounded traditional aesthetic ideals on a number of fronts. First, it challenged the idea that art had lasting value, because the food literally decayed in front of the viewer. Secondly, while such art was to be viewed, it aesthetically played with the senses of taste and smell as well. In fact, rather than being pleasing to the sense of taste, this art frequently traded on the

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<sup>40</sup> See chapter 2.2.2

<sup>41</sup> For more information on Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party” see: Chicago, J. (1979) The Dinner Party; A Symbol of our Heritage, Anchor Books, Anchor Press/ Doubleday, Garden City, New York also: Chicago, J. (1975) Through the Flower; My Struggle as a Woman Artist, The Women’s Press Ltd., London

arousal of disgust in the sensuous imagination, to subvert traditional readings usually associated with the representation of food. (Korsmeyer, C. 2004 b: chs. 4-5)<sup>42</sup>

While at the beginning of feminist art it seemed to be possible to suggest common denominators in feminist art works, for instance, '*...an overall texture, often sensuously tactile and repetitive or detailed to the point of obsession; the preponderance of circular forms, central focus, inner space...; layers, or strata, or veils:...windows; autobiographical contents; animals; flowers; a certain kind of fragmentation; a new fondness for the pinks and pastels and ephemeral cloud colors that used to be taboo unless a woman wanted to be accused of making feminine art.*' (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 58) Over time, feminist artists have adopted many new strategies and materials to produce their art, as long as they provided a means to an end. Consequently, although feminist work contained similar themes e.g. domesticity, the body and its traces and sexuality, feminist art had and has no one stylistic representation. Even if works of art can be described as feminist, because they have been influenced by sociological and psychoanalytical theory or revolved around the above issues, nevertheless, they each had and have their own aesthetic<sup>43</sup> and could not be easily grouped according to a formal style.

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<sup>42</sup> For instance Jana Sterbak's "Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic" (1987) foregrounded the association of foods with female bodies. In her work, slabs of beef were stitched into a garment and arranged on a model for a period of display, during which the heavily salted beef dried and turned. Art such as this did not present food as elegantly edible, but as prone to rot and decay, emphasising the grossness of the substance. The uses of food on the part of the female artists were particularly significant, given the traditional association of women with the body, with feeding and nurturance and with transience and mortality. By combining the female dress with meat '*... Sterbak commits a major gender infraction, naming the equation between meat and women - both objects for male consumption - that patriarchal society would prefer to leave unspoken.*' (Milroy, S. 2001: 152) Another example for a woman artist, who used meat in her performance art would be Marina Abramovic. See: (Grosenick, U. (Ed.) 2001: 18-22)

<sup>43</sup> The term "aesthetic" refers here not to "beautiful", but to certain visual, social and/or moral criteria used for works of art made by female artists. "Their own" in a sense that female artists employed any kind of strategy or style, any material and any way of working, either in groups or alone, that provided them with a means to an end. (Lippard, L. 1995: 36/ 37)



### **2.3.2. Feminist Art and Explorations of the Body**

Possibly, there is and was no topic more discussed in both feminist art and feminist theory than the female body and its role in society. This interest represents continued exploration and critiques of traditional mind-body dualism, the role of gender and the self and the association of women with matter and physicality. Both the aesthetic and the theoretical modes of exploration of the body can be viewed as complementary elements of feminist aesthetics.

Women artists who were actively involved in the social unrest and political upheaval from the 1960s onwards, '*...where one's physical body engaged in public display held a potential for meaning and even effect...*', considered their bodies not only as an ideological issue but also as an important site for making and exhibiting work. (Kaplan, A. 2000: 3) In the United States, Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta and Cindy Sherman, to give but a few examples, used their bodies as both material and site.<sup>44</sup> In the UK, Bobby Baker, Rose Finn-Kelcey, Catherine Elwes and Sally Potter, adapted similar methods.<sup>45</sup> The more politically minded artists, especially those who participated actively in the feminist movement, often turned their art to the goal of freeing women from the oppressions of male-dominated culture.<sup>46</sup>

Soon after the employment of their own bodies within art making, a significant debate emerged around the use of the artist's own body and the connotations linked to the female body in art. This divided women artists into two opposing poles. One

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<sup>44</sup> For more information on Schneemann and Wilke see: See Freuh, J. (1989) Hannah Wilke Retrospective, University of Missouri Press, Missouri; Wilke, H. (1995) Intra Venus, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York; Schneemann, C. (2002) Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects, MIT Press, Cambridge

<sup>45</sup> The above list of artists consists only of white women and refers mainly to the beginning of the feminist art movement. Most female artists of colour only later became visibly involved in the feminist art movement. One of the rare exceptions, as already mentioned, is Faith Ringgold. She was previously concerned about black visibility and the identity of black art and she already became involved in the feminist art movement at the beginning of the 1970s. (Taylor, B. 2005: 28)

<sup>46</sup> Examples of such work include the Los Angeles anti-rape performance project of Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Leibowitz, "In Mourning and in Rage" (1977) and "Womanhouse" (1972) a collaboration of 24 artists. See: Sandler, I. 1996: 129/130

group of feminist artists tried to avoid using their own bodies and adopted a conceptual strategy, which tried to find a form of representation that did not simply objectify the body of woman, but rather one which represented women as subjects. (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 27) The second group of feminist artists found a liberating tool in the employment of their own bodies, quite often nude, which they used to make powerful statements about gender and sexuality.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time there were male artists using their bodies in their works, including Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, and Paul McCarthy in the States and Stuart Brisley, Richard Long and John Latham in Britain. However, for female artists the issue had an added charge. The female body had iconic status as muse and model. Hundreds of years of art history attested to the depiction, idealisation and fetishisation of the female form. For feminist artists the body then became a contested site and a problematic locus for work. The question that remained for these artists was, how to liberate the female body from its position as submissive model without being criticised of self-exploitation.<sup>48</sup>

Amelia Jones has described the latter position, *'The feminist articulation of this turn away from the corporeal was particularly vehement about the absolute need to remove the female body from representation; any presentation or representation of the female body was seen as necessarily participating in the phallogentric dynamic of fetishism, whereby the female body can only be seen ... as "lacking" in relation to the mythical plenitude represented by the phallus.'* (Jones, A. 1998: 24)

Predictably, a double standard existed in the critical reception of works by women, who have used their nudity in parallel investigations of representation and sexuality. Female artists, who used their bodies, had to deal with accusations of narcissism and sluttishness. Instead of *'...phallic validation...'*, they had to struggle to keep the

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<sup>47</sup> To give two examples: Mary Kelly best represents women artists, who did avoid using their own bodies, while Carolee Schneemann fits into the second category.

<sup>48</sup> For more information see: Meskimmon, M. (1996) *The Art of Reflection*, Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century, Scarlet Press, London in particular chapter 3/ 4

perception of their work from collapsing into issues of notoriety. (Schor, M. 1997: 23) While male artists' use of their bodies in connection with the exploration of male sexuality or trans-sexuality was validated as "high art" and quite often linked to Duchamp's work<sup>49</sup>, women's efforts in the same subject area were condemned as vulgar, examples of self-exploitation and so forth. (Schor, M. 1997: 22-24)<sup>50</sup>

The general feminist opinion was to avoid making the female body the subject of the male gaze, regardless of the end to which this approach was used. However, turning away from the corporeal representation of the female subject, it was assumed that the audience understood connotations and shared identical perceptions of it. Consequently, different types of feminist art were differently valued. As the perception of the female form in the visual arts cannot be controlled, the most difficult issue among feminist artists became how to display the female body, without being reduced to it.<sup>51</sup>

Resulting from the discussions surrounding the issue of the female body in art, the notion of performance art became an integral element of alternative practice in 1970s Britain. Originating from Dadaism and Futurism at the beginning of the twentieth century, performance art became a viable alternative to a practice based on a trajectory from studio production to gallery exhibition. At the same time, ideas about performative practices became very important for the exploration of sexual and racial identities.

Performance art provided a way for artists to use their bodies as material and site at the same time and to some extent influence the perception of their bodies, by

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<sup>49</sup> Duchamp is often cited as the "father of conceptual art"

<sup>50</sup> Just compare the scandal created by the Lynda Benglis ad in the November 1974 issue of Art Forum, where she wears nothing but sunglasses and a huge double dildo, to the reception of Vito Acconci's performance, "Conversions" (1971), where he tries to walk and run, while attempting to hold his penis between his legs only to find a "hiding" place in a woman's mouth. While she and her work were considered as '*...deeply symptomatic of conditions that call for critical analysis...*' (Schor, M. 1997: 24) his work was compared to Duchamp's. (Schor, M. 1997: 23/ 24)

<sup>51</sup> The influence of live performances on the audience will be taken up once more in chapter 6. Please see footnote 247.

directly addressing the audience. Performativity, as understood by Judith Butler, provided a model by which to understand the fluid notion of gender and identity in society. (Perry, G. 2005)

The difference between the two is not always obvious. Firstly, '*...in performance the artwork is an artist, an animate subject, rather than an inanimate object, whom viewers see as both the subject and the object of the work of art.*' (Stiles, K. 2003: 75) A performance '*...asserts embodiment and interconnection in time, space, and place.* (Ibid.) The term "performative", on the other hand, was first described by the British linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin, as a component and essential element of speech-act theory. It was later applied in other forms of discourse analysis, such as in Judith Butler's work. (Macey, D. 2000: 295)

Judith Butler applies the theory of performative to the production of gender, arguing that gendering is a reiterated performative process that begins when someone says of the neonate, "it is a girl". She pursues the idea that gender is a daily, habitual, learned act based on cultural norms of femininity and masculinity.<sup>52</sup> These norms are oppressive, as a person's social legitimacy and normalcy is dependent on conforming to one of the two genders. For Butler, neither sex nor gender is natural. They are only naturalised through repetition and people's beliefs in the correct performance of their designated sex and gender, their designated term in the man/woman binary. (Butler, J. 1999) Both terms, "performance" and "performativity" are related to feminist art, in so far as feminist performance art brought the idea to the forefront that being a woman is always a performed role and therefore, preceded Butler's more recent argument of gender performativity.

Critical consideration of the norms of female beauty and the artistic depiction of women, influenced the way in which feminist artists employed their own bodies, in

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<sup>52</sup> According to Butler, little girls learn in subtle ways to arrange their bodies to be feminine and to attain approval as "normal", in a culture that differences people into man and woman. Women and men then continually cite these gender norms in their day-to-day behaviour, usually without realising it.

creating art. In the history of art, bodies were always used in different cultural and political contexts, but within feminist theory there was and is no such thing as “the one” female body, only a plentitude of different concepts of the female body, marked by the differences of their historical situation. The most dramatic way in which feminist artists employed their body was through performance, which in comparison to male performances was more problematic. As Susan McClary pointed out, speaking of performance artist Laurie Anderson, *‘The fact that hers is a female body changes the dynamics of several of the oppositions she invokes in performance. For women’s bodies in western culture have almost always been viewed as objects of display. Women have rarely been permitted agency in art, but instead have been restricted to enacting - upon and through their bodies - the theatrical, musical, cinematic, and dance scenarios constructed by male artists. Centuries of this traditional sexual division of cultural labor bear down on Anderson (or any woman performer) when she performs.’* (McClary, S. 1991: 137/138)

The binarism of male/female throughout history, created a structure in society, in which masculinity was considered as stable and in control of representation, while femininity was defined as different from this norm. Men therefore, were more frequently in situations, which permitted them to represent themselves, while women had to be represented. Consequently, women seeking to become subjects and agents of art works had to examine those gender differences and representational strategies, in order to subvert them. In order to counter popular representational stereotypes of women and to question the socially determined nature of these types, women considered in particular the sexual body, the gendered body and the maternal body. By using their own bodies, feminist artists tried to rid the works of some of the inherent objectification involved in representing others and to potentially liberate the images from stereotypical patterns of looking and from meanings generated exclusively by and for men. (Parker, R. / Pollock, G. 1981: 126) As Marsha Meskimmon pointed out, *‘These images are the site where women artists can grapple with their own gendered identities and their subject positions as*

*“women” but, moreover, they allow the space to encourage female pleasure in viewing.*’ (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 103)

The target for feminist artists was to find new strategies for contextualising the representation of women, which defied the conventions of objectification and which avoided the problematic critical misreading. The area most open to reappropriation was the representation of female sexuality, by women artists. Women artists reassessed male-defined ideas of female sexuality, by renegotiating concepts of passivity and submission, by visualising the pleasures of activity and passivity, dominance and submission and by addressing the problematic of pleasure and power as they operated through the very structures of looking.<sup>53</sup>

Obviously, there was a social stigma attached to women who started to openly demonstrate their sexuality in any form of public visual media.<sup>54</sup> The female body and its representation had to be within certain patriarchal norms and had to comply with certain stereotypes of beauty. “Woman”, as a biologically defined object in a patriarchal society, had to conform to the regulations of female sexuality, in the form of restrictions surrounding virginity, menstruation and fertility, imposed by religious institutions and by the male hierarchy in society. (Meskimmon, M. 1996:

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<sup>53</sup> The pleasure of looking, as defined through psychoanalysis, has been used by feminist theorists to examine gender power relations in society. It is based on Sigmund Freud’s model of subjectivity and elaborated by Jacques Lacan. Lacan posited the centrality of seeing oneself as a separate and whole body, as the critical moment in attaining a sense of self. This sense of self is brought through a negation of the other. In this sense the separation of mother and child is a traumatic and aggressive experience. (Lacan, J. 1977: 1-8) The viewing position, as it is implicated in this model and which permits voyeuristic and fetishistic looking, is the masculine position. Women who engage with the gaze in this traditional sense do so by identifying masochistically with woman as object, or by taking up the masculine role. Both voyeuristic and fetishistic looking divides the subject from the object in such a way as to empower the viewer (masculine) and disempower the object of the look (female). These theories have been mainly explored in film theory, as for instance by Laura Mulvey. (Mulvey, L. 1989) See also: (Pollock, G. 1988: 120-154)

<sup>54</sup> It has to be acknowledged here that there have been women artists before this period, who dealt with female sexuality in their art, even though not through self-portraiture. See for instance Kaethe Kollwitz who explored heterosexual relationships in the interwar years in Germany. For more information see: (Betterton, R. 1996: 20-46) It also has to be noted that women, who were involved in the surrealist movement, tended generally to have more freedom in expressing sexuality in their works. The indebtedness of the surrealists to Freudian theory and the link between sexuality, creativity and the unconscious, were the reason for this liberty. See: (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 108)

166/ 167) Consequently, female artists, who depicted their sexuality in visual art, including the rejection of heterosexuality, were doubly ignorant of these rules. Firstly, they worked within the male domain as artists and secondly, they took over the agency of their own bodies. Nevertheless, women artists quite often attempted to celebrate women's bodies, their differences from male bodies and the idea of female pleasure, in a playful and excessive way that allowed female spectators to find a space for a pleasurable reading of the image as masquerade. (Tucker, M. 1994: 22-30) These representations were often criticised for transgressing the boundary of the very objectifications, which they sought to dismantle and for coming dangerously close to the realms of pornography. (Wolff, J. 2003: 415)<sup>55</sup>

Masculinity, femininity and androgyny, constructions that changed over time, were representational strategies that female artists employed to question gender constructions and to reveal that these gender definitions were not stable, but open to revision. The issue of cross-dressing, for instance, as shown in Frida Kahlo's works, became a tool for feminist artists to question the power associated with the accessories of masculinity and to subvert it through parodic appropriations. Masquerade and masking combined with the idea of excess, have also been powerful tools through which feminist artists have brought femininity into representation. As Mary Ann Doane wrote: *'The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask, which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as precisely, imagistic...By destabilising the image, the masquerade confounds this masculine structure of the look.'* (Doane, M., A. 1982: 81/82)

Masquerade allows fantasies to be acted out, body boundaries to be blurred and identities that are normally fixed by social rules to be temporarily removed. *'As a*

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<sup>55</sup> Cases in point would be the work of Cosey Fanni Tutti, for instance "Magazine Action, getting together foursomeexcitement" (Butler, C. 2007: 116/310) and Betty Tompkins' "Fuck Paintings" (1969), (Butler, C. 2007: 388). The works of both come dangerously close to pornography, as without any further explanation their intended criticism of the pornographic industry will get lost and they will be read as purely pornographic.

*concept, masquerade identifies femininity as a gendered performance enacted to conceal an authoritative female subject, the presence of which would threaten the bi-polarisation inherent in sexual difference.* ' (Spector, N. 1995: 44/45) Feminist artists using masquerade, quite often questioned the commodification of "woman" through mass-media and the artificiality of beauty ideals communicated through advertisement. The artificial body in the mass media evades forms, which would "normally" define "woman". Some feminist artists employed masquerade to unveil this artificiality and critique the idea of the woman as a commodity fetish and in doing so, they offered women the opportunity to enter into role playing dialogues, as the masquerade was excessive, obvious and parodic. (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 125)

The use of androgynous self-images made it much more difficult to re-appropriate the mainstream binarism, which holds masculinity as the privileged signifier and femininity as its other. Either feminist artists combined gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, or they blurred the distinctions between the two. The result points to the lack of fixed gender positions and allows us to think outside the former binary pairs by representing the body as an unnatural, constructed icon, without permitting the viewer to make any definite assessments about the body's situation as masculine or feminine, subject or object. (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 127-129)<sup>56</sup>

In generalised and simplified terms: during the 1960s and 1970s of the last century, a broad interest in the body was exemplified by an exploration of the relationship between the body and the image and by the alliance of the body and performance art. (Kelly, M. 1996: 17-19) This time saw also the emergence of what was later widely considered as "radical" art, by feminist artists. (Brooklyn Museum 2007: cover) From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, also seen as the time of conceptual

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<sup>56</sup> Androgynous self-images were equally used by female as well as male artists. The difference between the two was that feminist artists generally used androgynies to explore the constructed visual and linguistic identities of gender, sexuality and race and to expose the incorporated hierarchies of power. In comparison, male artists did not generally question the stereotyped category of male gender and the representation of femininity, but they were more interested in questioning the notion of a stable identity and sense of self. (Warr, T. 2000: 13)



feminist art, visual art discourse tended to question considerations of embodiment and furthermore, was concerned with the representation of the female body as possibly playing into the fetishist structure of the male gaze. (Chadwick, W. 1989: 23) The late 1980s and 1990s witnessed a re-emergence of more nuanced views about the usefulness of addressing embodiment, in relation to visual experience. (Lippard, L., R. 1993a: 4/7) Here, a new generation of women artists, from previously marginalised groups, returned to the body, sometimes in explicit reaction against the anti-body arguments of previous dominant feminist discourses. (Lippard, L., R. 1993a: 7) This time a number of female artists began to explore the body through abjection, aiming to provide a more powerful tool of intervention than commenting on or seeking to reverse the male gaze through avant-gardist strategies of distancing. (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 17)

But, by the mid-1990s as Emily Apter explains, '*...the subjectivity feminism has become increasingly embattled: accused of being too straight, too white, too smug about assumptions of consensus; too generationally rivalrous, unfashionable in an era of "postfeminism", deferential to phallogentric theoretical constructs, and insufficiently engaged with issues of race, postcolonialism, and public policy; too academic, and overtly abstract.*' (Apter, E. 2006:327/328) This period was also understood as the starting point, when the intersections of race, class, sex, and gender were placed at the forefront of feminist artistic production. Such issues had been explored throughout the 1970s, but it was only from the mid-1980s onward that they began to be articulated more consistently and the 1990s finally marked a move away from the western domination of feminist art toward the inclusion of work by feminist artists from all over the world. (Brooklyn Museum 2007: cover)

## **2.4. Interpretative Framework of Feminist Art**

Art is usually exhibited within some sort of institutional framework and the various possible meanings of feminist art works are not created exclusively by feminist artists and critics. Relations of consumption i.e. the conditions under which the works are curated, viewed and read are of crucial significance in the generation of cultural meanings and values, as they provide one of the material circumstances for the context, without which cultural objects cannot signify meaning. (Partington, A. 1987: 230) As Sherri Irvin states: *'Holding the artist responsible for a work means, in part, holding the artist responsible for having released it into a context where particular interpretative conventions and knowledge are operative.'* (Irvin, S. 2005: 136)

Feminist art and other alternative art practices in the 1970s, questioned the existing structures for making, showing and viewing art, and were noted for their shift away from gallery and museum based exhibition spaces. Criticising male dominance in art education, as well as in principal public institutions, feminist artists developed strategies, which involved the creation of autonomous spaces and organisations. Women organising themselves into art groups, founding their own exhibition galleries, putting on collective shows, teaching each other, sharing skills and support, attested to their insurgence against the institutions of art making and consumption. (Parker, R. / Pollock, G. (Eds.) 1987: section 2/3)

In Postmodernism, art-as-object was outmoded and the advocates of conceptual art were the most extreme in their attacks on these traditional art processes, particularly on painting and sculpture, as they connoted to a whole convention of specific art language that could no longer be used to produce innovative art. This denial, coupled with a growing revulsion against the commodification of art, lead some artists to move to more extreme art forms that were rarely marketable. (Sandler, I. 1996: 11/12) As art critic, Barbara Rose concluded: *'A dissatisfaction with the current social and political system results in an unwillingness to produce*

*commodities which gratify and perpetuate that system. Here the spheres of ethics and esthetics merge.* ' She went on to say that artists '*...who aspire to radicality try to take positions so extreme that they will finally be found unacceptable,*' and thus, by '*...denying that art is a trading commodity erode the very foundation of the art market.*' (Rose, B. 1969: 46-48)

The exploration of new art forms that did not conform to the traditional categories, such as painting and sculpture, coupled with the recessive economy in England during the 1980s<sup>57</sup>, which '*...initially fostered a sense of political defeat among feminists and artists...*' (Reckitt, H./Phelan, P.(Eds.) 2001: 244) and which drastically reduced '*...public funding for exhibition spaces, performance venues, and alternative presses that had been instrumental in the development of feminist work in previous years...*' (Reckitt, H./Phelan, P.(Eds.) 2001: 23), meant that there was virtually no market for contemporary art in general and even less for feminist art in particular.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, according to Chris Townsend, artists, especially women artists, had to find alternative ways of making a living. As the system of grants and minor teaching opportunities had largely disappeared, the only way out of this situation was to create an autonomous market. (Townsend, C. 2005) The ill-fated drawback of this retreat from the gallery system, partially voluntarily as a protest against the patriarchal structures in the art world and the still dominant ideology of a separate sphere and partially involuntarily, because of the economical circumstances, was that these artists also moved away from visibility, documentation and acclaim.

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<sup>57</sup> Inflation went into double digits at the beginning of the 1980s. The gross domestic product (GDP) (or in other words the total value of goods and services produced in the UK) fell by 2% and by the end of the 1980s, unemployment peaked. One of the main reason was the consequence of the second oil shock in 1979, that exacerbated the economic downturn and helped to boost inflation. For more information please see the report by the Bank of England.

<http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/speeches/2000/speech102.htm>, accessed 6.9.2007

<sup>58</sup> This should not give the illusion as if there had ever been an extensive market before. At the end of the 1980s, there were only about twenty galleries in total in London that dealt with contemporary art. In comparison, today there are over 200 galleries in London that deal with contemporary art. (Townsend, C. 2005) See also Sandy Nairne who comments on government cuts in arts funding in the 1980s, in: Nairne, S. 1987: 15/16

Artists searching for alternative exhibition spaces, chose to site their work in places such as in nature, (e.g. Ana Mendieta) magazines or print, (e.g. Lynda Benglis) or domestic settings. (e.g. Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro) In New York, a network of alternative structures emerged, such as the “Art Workers’ Coalition” and “Women Artists in Revolution”. (Broude, N./ Garrard, M., D. (Eds.) 1996: 90), while in London spaces, such as “Acme” and “Air” provided important sites for new work. (Battista, K. 2003: 109) These alternative spaces, far removed from the looks of the traditional exhibition sites and the idea of the white cube, defied the notion of elitist culture and took art to new and increasingly radical venues. As Brian O’Doherty pointed out, there was an organic relationship between galleries as “white cubes” and the objects exhibited in them. *‘The history of modernism is intimately framed by . . . a white, ideal space. . . . The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is ‘art.’ . . . Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of aesthetics.’* (O’Doherty, B. 1976: 24) It was exactly this idea of modernism and the institutionalisation of art that feminist artists saw as their biggest enemy, as they had been virtually excluded from both in the past.

For feminist art practice concerned with ideology, alternative spaces and sites for showing work were an absolute essential. The notion of being outside the conventional art site meant freedom and gave artists a sense of being outside the law of the dominant culture. Those who showed their work in those sites did not have to follow traditional art principles and could freely present their art and perform to the invited public, in whatever way they wanted to. Works made by women artists during the 1970s were shown in various types of spaces, that were often in opposition to the commercial system. Some feminist artists employed public sites to present their work, usually placing it in highly visible and unexpected locations. Other options were alternative galleries, which were born out of the 1960s/1970s conceptual practices, where women artists were encouraged to exhibit, in some cases alongside male colleagues. Finally, some female artists used domestic spaces

to produce their work, quite often due to financial or familial constraints. (Battista, K. 2003)

Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago for instance, consolidated the groundbreaking Feminist Art Programme, in Los Angeles, through their “Womanhouse” project (1972). Central to this programme was the establishment of a women’s studio, where women could meet in a shared work environment and take part in the group processes of collaborative performance art and feminist consciousness raising. “Womanhouse”, the result of this exercise, was conceived as a collaborative art piece that transformed seventeen rooms of a mansion building into art installations, which reflected upon the difficulties women experienced in making art and the general nature of femaleness. The outcome was arguably the first public exhibition of feminist art. (Edwards, J., L. 1996: 42-44)

Kate Walker and six other women followed this example in London, with a project called “Woman’s Place”, in Radnor Terrace. They transformed a building and used discarded everyday objects for their art works, firstly because they were freely available and secondly ‘...it was also a means of creating art quickly within the limited amount of time available to them outside domestic obligations.’ (Reckitt, H. / Phelan, P. (Eds.) 2001: 94) The result, as Rozsika Parker notes, ‘...exposed the hidden side of the domestic dream.’ (Parker, R. 1975: 38)

The publication of texts like Germaine Greer’s “The Female Eunuch”, Juliet Mitchell’s “Woman’s Estate”, and Eva Figes’s “Patriarchal Attitudes”, together with the foundation of magazines such as journals such as, “Red Rag”, “Shrew”, “Wires”, “Fan” and “Spare Rib”, became vehicles for connecting like-minded people with additional sites for activism. These publications turned into voices for women’s issues, world politics, alternative art projects and public demonstrations. (Moore- Gilbert, B. 1994: 8) Even mail developed into a channel, through which members of a postal art project known as “Feministo”, could send their works of art to one another. (Auricchio, L. 2001: 27-29)

“Womanhouse”, “Woman’s Place” and “Feministo”, were important milestones in the movement of an art practice concerned with the transformation of gender politics. They literally repositioned questions of gender and domesticity and initiated a movement of thinking from female identity as an essential category, towards an investigation of socially constructed gender differences. The idea of working in collaborations, as an antidote to the heroic, male individuality associated with artistic success was pursued in these projects. The domestic setting provided them with an ideal site for their exploration of gender issues, as it alluded to the very notions of womanhood that the artists were trying to undermine. (Battista, K. 2003: 113)

Artists<sup>59</sup> such as Ana Mendieta, who turned away from painting to take on performance and land art using mainly her own body, expanded her activities into other spaces, both public and private, in order to confront a larger audience with the prohibitions that envelop the female body in Western culture. Taboos such as birth, sexuality and death, were topics that she considered as inseparable from each other. (Blocker, J. 1999: 56) For Martha Rosler, who abandoned Abstract Expressionist painting, montage and photography became socio-political instruments, which she employed purposefully in a mass-media context, in order to raise issues such as the connection of war and women, following to some extent the tradition of Hannah Höch. (Richard, F. 2005: 173) French artist Gina Pane, leaving sculpture behind, pushed herself, by self-inflicting wounds on her body, or by putting herself into humiliating situations to both her physiological and psychological limits. By regularly making her own body the instrument of pain and the site of recognition, she ‘...made it an epistemological space, accessed by the gaze of the onlooker...’ and by ‘...undergoing pain in her own person, Pane was attempting to shake the audience out of their lethargy.’ (Grosenick, U. (Ed.) 2001: 431)

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<sup>59</sup> The following examples should give the reader an idea into which areas feminist artists of the 1960s and onwards ventured, to explore issues that concerned female artists at that time.

Finally, the principal feature of Jenny Holzer's work was the fact that it was composed of either moving or still words, printed, carved, or electronic. (Danto, A., C. 1990: 213/214) After abandoning abstract painting, she concentrated on the medium of language, giving expression to messages, statements, theses and antitheses on the subjects of sex, violence, love, war and death. (Grosenick, U. (Ed.) 2001: 234) She treated the public space, social representation, or artistic language in which she interposed, as both a target and a weapon. As Hal Foster pointed out: *'This shift in practice entails a shift in position: the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacular.'* (Foster, H. 1985: 100)

Considering that many feminist artists worked in conceptual art with ordinary and inexpensive media, as opposed to the costly materials, painters and sculptors usually operated with, one could have expected that some kind of socialisation and democratisation of art would have happened. However, as Lippard stressed *'...the trip from oil on canvas to ideas on Xerox was, in retrospect, yet another instance of "downward mobility" or middle-class guilt.'* (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 121) What Lippard addresses here, has been a serious issue for feminist artists of that time.

The term "essentialism" appeared regularly in the discussions about and the criticism of feminist art, either in connection with female experience, or with the use of the female body in feminist art. As most of the work was done by white, middle-class, young and heterosexual women, the question quickly arose: How could feminist artists produce work that would address *all* issues of *all* women? Moreover, how could their quite often beautiful bodies possibly stand in for all women? The personal might have been political but according to Lippard, certainly not universal. Individual female artists were, therefore, only able to express their own ideas and create new images to validate their own viewpoints. (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 142/143)

However, Lippard's charge does not relate to the *production* of feminist art, but much more to the *reception* of it. What she points us towards here is the problem of "elitism". If feminist artists really wanted to produce social change art and raise consciousness, then it would have been expected that they would generate work, which was easily accessible to a wide audience, especially to *all* women? On the contrary, conceptual art itself was not only hardly marketable, but also very demanding to comprehend. However, for feminist artists, whose highest goal was to make the personal political and to raise awareness about female experiences, it was, and still is, even more important to reach their audiences. Lippard concludes that as *'...women, therefore, we need to establish far more strongly our own sense of community, so that all our arts will be enjoyed by all women in all economic circumstances. This will happen only when women artists make conscious efforts to cross class barriers, to consider their audience, to see, respect, and work with the women who create outside the art world..'* (Lippard, L., R. 1995: 127)

The problem of communicating through art and reaching the target audience has been and remains to be a major difficulty for feminist artists. (Chapter 7)

## **2.5. Summary**

Feminist art can be understood as a product of the twentieth century Zeitgeist. Its dawn should be seen as standing in direct correlation with the overall revolutionary uprising, during the 1960s of last century. Women were fighting for equal rights in all areas of their existence. The representation of women within art works as objectified muses, as well as their role as artists within the art world, were to be renegotiated. The whole idea of aesthetics, the myth of artistic creativity and the canon of art, all predominantly based on masculine values and language, had to be re-evaluated and new ways and forms had to be found that allowed women a greater voice within and beyond the art world.



Gender assumptions and the way in which women were associated with certain obligations, often based on physiological rather than psychological differences between men and women, had to be overthrown and consciousness raising was one of the main agendas of feminist artists of that time, not only in society in general, but particularly between women themselves.

Craft had to be elevated to the status of art and the hierarchy of different forms of art making had to be subverted. Questions surrounding the female body and female experience became the main areas of artistic research. Alternative art processes were proposed and women quite often employing their own body in varying explicit forms, explored feminist issues and slowly infiltrated the traditional art system. Existent traditional boundaries were regularly transgressed and the various audiences had to adapt to new and rapidly changing forms of representation. Common criticisms of art, for instance, essentialism, narcissism and elitism had to be conquered by widening and /or changing the spectrum of applied art practices and by extending the socio-geographical context within which this art was produced.

The cultural tendency of women artists of that period was to move away from the mainstream art institutions to sites that were more marginal and to demonstrate how women could navigate their way through the male dominated art world. Forming their own social networks that provided them with the necessary backup instead of relying on a gallery system for support, gave female artists the freedom to produce work that expressed their real interests, rather than producing what was expected by institutional or commercial forces. Women artists of that period paved the way for younger generations of female artists, by raising discussions about taboo subjects and by opening up the rigid institutional art system that for so long had denied women access to the same places in the art world as men, who defended their positions throughout art history.

Looking at the many discussions of contemporary art today, “feminist” art became a label for work produced sometime during the later 1960s to about mid 1980s. The

term “post-feminist” art is now in use for a subsequent generation of artists who pursue some of the ideas and interests of the earlier period. These terms are far from precise and there are many artists practicing today, who continue to identify themselves with the term “feminist”. Perhaps an even larger group does not particularly attend to labels, but their work about the subject of gender and sexuality is provocative and has become a focus for feminist interpretation, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters.<sup>60</sup> (Roth, C. 1996: 18/19)

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<sup>60</sup> The work of Cindy Sherman is a case in point. See: Meagher, M. (2002) “Would the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up? Encounters between Cindy Sherman and Feminist Art Theory”, in: Women: a Cultural Review, Vol. 13, No. 1

### **3. The Cultural Location of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing**

*'Imagine a kind of artist you've never met before: she's openly sexual, bawdy, mischievous and wants to show you how good at football she is; imagine an art world that is less governed by formal hierarchies and engorged by lovers of fine art; imagine a social world in which art plays a more informal role; imagine an artist who is indifferent to theory as armour-plating or gentrification; and you have a familiar picture of the British and international avant garde of the 90s.'* (Roberts, J. 1996b: 3)

#### **3.1. Introduction**

Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing came to public attention with the rise of the "Young British Artists" (YBAs)<sup>61</sup>, a group of artists active in London from the late 1980s onwards<sup>62</sup>. This moment in time succeeded a period in Britain during which, as Michael Craig-Martin<sup>63</sup> pointed out, *'...there was very little in London of what one calls the "art world"...*'. (Buck, L. 2006) As it was, the 1970s and 1980s saw the consequences of the political and social disturbances of the late

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<sup>61</sup> As Julian Stallabrass pointed out, the name "YBAs" was a Saatchi creation and somehow it is nowadays misleading, as neither all of the included artists were British, nor were they all young. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 2) Patricia Bickers furthered this argument by adding that some of the artists included within the YBAs had already been established in their own right. (Bickers, P. 1995: 11) Who was and who was not a member of the YBAs is not that simple to define, as this changed over time and there also seems to be no single consenting idea about its members.

<sup>62</sup> Patricia Bickers stated that developments outside London, e.g. Glasgow, should not be ignored, but as stated in the introduction of this paper this research concentrates on the immediate working environment of Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing and Sam Taylor-Wood and therefore, developments outside of London will only be touched on. Also it seemed to be the case at this point in time, that some curators, for example Karsten Schubert, did not consider art produced outside of London as *'...worth looking at.'* (Bickers, P. 1995: 9) As David Christopher argued, within Britain, London is the most vital and active city for the artistic avant-garde and home of the most innovative and influential schools, institutions and galleries. The Royal College of Art (RCA), the Slade, St Martin's College, the Central School, the Euston Road School, Goldsmiths' College and the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), among others, have helped to develop and encourage the work of almost all the significant and influential British artists. (Christopher, D. 1999: 158)

<sup>63</sup> Michael Craig-Martin is a conceptual artist, who started as a tutor at Goldsmiths in the mid-70s and ended as professor in 2000. He is considered as a key influence on the YBA generation. (Buck, L. 2006)

1960s, which became visible in a general critical attitude of established values and in terms of art, as art critic Germano Celant remarked, in an '*explosive rejection of a philistine culture... People spoke of a revolutionary imagination ... and a universal renewal... It opened up to multiplicity, no longer categorizing itself as painting or sculpture; it went into the streets... It was a period of feverish experimentation, which liberalized the creative processes.*' (Sandler, I. 1996: 87)

During this period, art schools had to adapt to the fact that lectures and courses on the history of industrial design, advertising, photography, film, television, video, computer graphics, fashion and youth sub-cultures were required, in addition to those already given on painting, sculpture and architecture. Because of the growing dominance of the mass media and the fact that more and more artists adopted new media technologies, as for instance photography, video and computers, fine art students were joined by photographers, film- and video-makers and craft-students. The question arose, what was to become of the relationship between traditional art forms, new media technologies and the mass media? And this very much included the '*...mass mediation of art itself.*' (Walker, J., A. 1994: 2) The viewer of art works was now confronted with all the new publicity materials that had been developing during the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, press releases, colour reproductions, catalogue essays, newspaper and magazine reviews, photographs and films of artists, interviews with them, radio and TV arts programmes were all manner of ways of disseminating art and ultimately influencing the reception of these works.<sup>64</sup>

At the same time, art became more and more of a commodity. Auction houses, such as Sotheby's and Christies, began to play a major role in the marketing of contemporary art. In contrary to private galleries, they made the buying of art public and the prices of artworks known to all, validating the prices at the same time. (Sandler, I. 1996: 427) Artworks increasingly resembled stocks and bonds, becoming liquid commodities and their liquidity encouraged speculation. Auctions were turned

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<sup>64</sup> This is not to say that this did not exist before, but certainly not in this ever expanding way and in the quality of reproduction of art works as for example in colour catalogues.

into spectacular events, enhanced by new record prices. Growing numbers of investors began to buy recent art, not only to satisfy their aesthetic requirements but also to publicise and glorify their financial power. All of these developments helped to change the discourse in the art world. Matters of money and careerism entered into art talk as never before. Monetary issues were even taken up at colleges by offering courses in the mechanics of the art world. (Sandler, I. 1996: 427-429) While some artists might have remained committed to countercultural values inherited from the late 1960s others, especially the YBAs, quickly embraced the new consumerism with its modern yuppie culture.

Many of the artists, who were involved with the YBAs, went through the same art education in the late 1980s<sup>65</sup>. They showed in the same exhibitions, (mainly self-organised), were represented by the same dealers<sup>66</sup>, came to the public attention at about the same time, lived and socialised together in the same city (London) and became as well known for '*...their grubbily glamorous lifestyles...*' as for what they created. (Chilvers, I. 1999: 665)<sup>67</sup> The group gained widespread attention from the time Damien Hirst curated the exhibition "Freeze" in 1988<sup>68</sup>, which set a scene in motion that culminated with the Royal Academy's exhibition of Charles Saatchi's collection in "Sensation" (1997)<sup>69</sup>. The two best-known featured artists at that time were Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread. (Adams, B. 1997: 35/36) Among the others were the brothers Dinos and Jake Chapman, Tracey Emin, Gary Hume, Sarah

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<sup>65</sup> The core members of the group all attended Goldsmiths' College in London, which had encouraged for some years new forms of creativity, abolishing for instance the traditional separation of media and art. See: Tate Glossary at <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=320>, accessed 5.10.2005 As Michael Craig- Martin stated, '*What Goldsmiths did was to maximise the freedoms and the educational opportunities that the education system enabled at that time. We were given exceptional trust and freedom. We were able to treat our students with respect as artists, because we were treated that way ourselves by the education system at the time.*' (Buck, L. 2006)

<sup>66</sup> Very influential in this respect was and is Jay Joplin.

<sup>67</sup> It has to be said here that not all the artists associated with the YBAs were as much in the media lime light as for instance Damien Hirst's persona. Gary Hume the most prominent painter of the YBAs, for example, was more referred to in the press through his work than through his personal lifestyle. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 32)

<sup>68</sup> Patricia Bickers refers to the "Freeze" exhibition as the point "Zero" from which everything that was exciting and "hot" in contemporary British art emanated. (Bickers, P. 1995: 6)

<sup>69</sup> "Sensation" was shown in London, Berlin and New York between 1997 and 2000.

Lucas, Marc Quinn and Jenny Saville. (Chilvers, I. 1999: 666)

The forerunners of what was to become known as the “Freeze” generation were chiefly British sculptors of the late eighties: Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, Anish Kapoor, Richard Wentworth and Richard Deacon, to name but a few. Primarily showing at the Lisson Gallery, they were united in their highly professional outlook and ambition for international success. The phrase “New Object Sculpture” was used to describe some of their work, which dealt with, albeit in novel ways, the traditional sculptural concerns of form and content. Tony Cragg, for instance, collected hundreds of similarly coloured plastic objects, arranging them on the floor or the wall into politically loaded silhouettes, while Richard Wentworth tweaked and teased a strand of Marcel Duchamp’s legacy of the ready made. In contrast, Julian Opie and Michael Craig-Martin did not stick with any particular style, but were making three-dimensional pictures rather than sculpture. They shared a fascination for sixties and seventies minimal and conceptual models, creating a kind of domesticated modernism. Opie’s transition into large-scale sculpture was another important step forward. He mimicked mass-production and made objects that looked like stranded industrial units. Already at the beginning of the 1970s, Gilbert and George and Richard Long put themselves into their art, making a more permanent art out of performance. Rebelling against formal sculptural concerns, Gilbert and George pre-empted the nineties cult of personality, while Richard Long was busy dematerialising the art object with his documented walks into nature. (Price, D. 1999: 71)

These artists, along with other influential European and American<sup>70</sup> artists of that time, produced a new impetus and a shift became apparent in the early 1990s, a re-definition of content as the primary motive for making art. While as Carl Freedman

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<sup>70</sup> Of particular importance was the two-part “New York Art Now”, an exhibition in Charles Saatchi’s Gallery in St. John’s Wood, that ran between September 1987 and April 1988 and included work rarely seen in Britain by Ashley Bickerton, Robert Gober and Jeff Koons. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 8) Koons specifically was influential in his recognition of the value of presentation as both an artistic and a promotional principle. (Bush, K. 2004: 103)

pointed out, the “older” generation of artists engaged ‘...with essences and metaphysics and, conservative in their compliance with the institution of art, depend(ed) on it to validate their illusionism and mystification...’ (Freedman, C. 1997: 49) the YBAs combined Dadaist humour, minimalist art and Situationist strategies, to question the very status of art. (Ibid.)

The YBAs referred to day-to-day existence (often with an emphasis on the consumer), both revelling in it and attempting to throw an ironic slant on it. They showed a new and radical attitude to realism, or rather to reality and real life itself, which they combined with a complex knowledge of recent art developments in Britain, at the same time challenging and extending them. (Rosenthal, N. 1998: 10)

“Freeze”<sup>71</sup>, a warehouse show in London, where Damien Hirst exhibited works by himself and sixteen of his fellow Goldsmiths’ students, including Angela Bulloch, Gary Hume, Sarah Lucas, Richard Patterson and Fiona Rae, received little publicity<sup>72</sup>. Nevertheless, driven by a desire to terminate the painting revival of the 1980s<sup>73</sup> and to launch an interest in everyday banalities, unashamed sexual implications and the rudimentary realities of life and death, this show started an inevitable process of change in British art. A further feature, ‘...massive doses of student-level irony and street humor...’ made this generation of artists attractive to

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<sup>71</sup> “Freeze” was in three parts from 6<sup>th</sup> of August until the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 1988 after Angus Fairhurst, only in his second year at Goldsmiths College, had already organised a curtain-opener in form of an exhibition at The “Bloomsbury” Gallery earlier the same year. Included in this show were, Fairhurst himself, Mat Collishaw, Abigail Lane and Damien Hirst. (Shone, R. 1997: 16) “Freeze” was also not the only show that Hirst had organised: in April 1990 he staged “Modern Medicine” in a semi-derelict former biscuit factory and “Gambler” followed the same year in July. (Kent, S. 1999: 8/9)

<sup>72</sup> There was one contemporary review of “Freeze” by Sacha Craddock. The BBC filmed the exhibition and interviewed some contributors. Although the footage was not aired at the time, it has been used in programmes since. The catalogue for the show had surprisingly high production values for a student exhibition, being designed by Tony Arefin and included an essay by art critic Ian Jeffrey. The title of the show came from the catalogue's description of Mat Collishaw's macro photograph “Bullet Hole”, which showed a bullet striking a human head - 'dedicated to a moment of impact, a preserved now, a freeze-frame'. The catalogue is now a collector's item. See: Answers.com [http://www.answers.com/main/ntquery?method=4&dsid=2222&dekey=Freeze+%28exhibition%29&gwp=8&curtab=2222\\_1&linktext=Freeze](http://www.answers.com/main/ntquery?method=4&dsid=2222&dekey=Freeze+%28exhibition%29&gwp=8&curtab=2222_1&linktext=Freeze), accessed 22.1.2006

<sup>73</sup> See also Nairne, S. (1987) *State of the Art: Ideas & Images in the 1980s*, A Channel Four Book, Chatto & Windus Ltd, London, p.17 for more information on the revival of painting.

dealers and of interest to wider international observers. (Taylor, B. 2005: 180) Hirst and his peers have proved, by instigating “Freeze”, that it was possible to take the initiative, rather than waiting to be noticed by dealers or curators, artists could organise and finance their own exhibitions. Subsequent group exhibitions cemented the artists’ reputations for independence, entrepreneurial spirit and the ability to manipulate the media<sup>74</sup>. Even though alternative shows in warehouses<sup>75</sup>, outdoor spaces or even in the home of the artist, had made precedents in the nineteen-sixties, what differed was the self-confidence with which the group of young artists organised “Freeze”, explicitly stating their intentions and believing that they had something interesting to say. (Price, D. 1999: 95) The gallery contracts for most of the participating artists that resulted from the “Freeze” exhibition, led Hirst and some of his peers to develop direct strategies for generating publicity and media attention.

Until the popularity of Hirst and his contemporaries, artists, for instance, Richard Long, Tony Cragg and Gilbert and George, had to build their reputation abroad before being taken seriously at home. (Christopher, D. 1999: 157) The reason for this was that museums were cautious at that time and with no major collectors of contemporary art in the country, galleries like the Lisson, which represented young artists, had to rely largely on foreign buyers. Therefore, it was essential that those artists were already known outside of Britain before British galleries would consider the risk of taking them on.

Hirst was the first artist to create this kind of publicity since the early 1960s, when David Hockney initiated a glamorous art scene in London, where ‘...*magazines like Vogue regularly ran photographs of artists and celebrities sipping champagne at private views*’. (Kent, S. 1999: 8) Hockney was also a prototype artist who managed

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<sup>74</sup> As Adrian Searle rightly pointed out: these exhibitions - and Freeze was not as “epochal” as it quite often was described - have to be seen in the wider context of a network of artist run spaces which co-existed with the mainstream of commercial and publicly funded ventures. In other words, they did not exist in a vacuum, but were correlated to other art activities. (Searle, A. 2002a: 42)

<sup>75</sup> Stallabrass made the interesting point that these relict warehouses or alternative spaces could provide very stimulating environments for exhibitions, enhancing the reception of the art works. As Stallabrass wrote: ‘*The art was, in a sense, an excuse for being there.*’ (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 51)



to achieve international success by the time he was in his mid-20s, an accomplishment that was not only based on the flair and versatility of his work, mainly pop art, but also on his colourful personality, which has made him a recognisable figure even to people not particularly interested in art. (Chilvers, I. 1999: 282)<sup>76</sup> This was a great achievement evaluated against the backdrop of the time when ‘...*British avant-garde artists were footnotes to British cultural life...*’, and only ‘...*painters such as Bacon and Hockney impinged on national consciousness.*’ (Guardian 2003)

In addition, Andy Warhol<sup>77</sup> in the United States and Gilbert and George in Great Britain, were setting precedents of combining their work with their media image and their celebrity status. They were important examples in the way they manipulated and provoked the media, in their overt populism and in the performative aspect of their art. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 47) Warhol disrupted the notion of the unique artwork by mass-producing his silkscreens, or by creating large series of sculptures of household objects. Gilbert and George, designating themselves as twenty-four-hour “Living Sculptures” and not only dedicating their entire existence to art, but also broadening the definition of what art can be, were role models for making art that prioritised the widest possible accessibility and that pushed questions of taste and conformity into the mainstream. (Collings, M. 1999: 22/24/53) While Warhol was considered an artist, Gilbert and George became, by including their own personas in all perspectives of their work, “artworks”. (O’Grady, C. 2003 b) Implicit in their art is the idea that an artist’s personal investment is a necessary condition of art and the communication of their ideas and feelings through their own presence. (White Cube 2005) Consequently, through inserting self-images in all their work, their prominence and celebrity status rose according to the recognition and popularity of

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<sup>76</sup> So much so that a film about him, “A Bigger Splash” (1974) enjoyed some popularity in the commercial cinema. (Chilvers, I. 1999: 282) Hockney graduated from the Royal College of Art with the gold medal for his year in 1962. His fellow students included Derek Boshier, Allen Jones, R. B. Kitaj and Peter Phillips and with them Hockney was regarded as one of the leaders of British Pop art after the Young Contemporaries exhibition in 1961. (Chilvers, I. 1999: 283)

<sup>77</sup> In contrast to Gilbert and George, Warhol did not present his life and acting as art, or at least he did not call it art. (Collings, M. 1999: 23)

their art. Their image in the media was then carefully developed by the artists themselves in co-work with their dealers and curators, a method that was to become familiar with the YBAs. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 47)

The YBAs were closely linked to the tabloid press and lifestyle magazines, in addition to, or even instead of, the traditional art press. (O'Grady, C. 2003 a) In order to interest the tabloids, the new art had to take up tabloid themes. The readiness with which the YBA artists dealt with sensational topics such as crime, sports, gossip, fashion, music, pop culture and so forth, was one way in which they were markedly different from preceding generations. (Ray, G. 2004: 121/122) Part of the publicity garnered by this group was due to the fascination, not so much with their work, but with their personal lives. They represented a return to the bohemian lifestyle traditionally known from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Lucie - Smith, E. 2000: 13) To all intents and purposes, one could say, the group rose to prominence through a mixture of talent and self-promotion, encouraged by the patronage of new collectors, in particular that of Charles Saatchi.

Saatchi, who was considered to have the greatest collection of British art in the world from the past two decades, was certainly not the first influential art collector that helped the rise of certain artists or even artist groups. (Jones, J. 2003)<sup>78</sup> A precursor was, for instance, the wealthy British industrialist Samuel Courtauld. He was an art collector who not only had a passion for avant-garde art, but who also donated funds to the government for the purchase of paintings to be exhibited to the public, a gesture that was followed by Saatchi in later years. Courtauld could be seen as one of the first collectors in Great Britain from the 1920s onwards, who influenced certain art trends through buying strategies that can be seen as similar to the marketing strategies of Saatchi. Courtauld's art dealer Percy Moore Turner ran the

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<sup>78</sup> The target of this section is not to give an all-encompassing overview of art collectors in Great Britain, but much more to show some similarities and differences between a collector such as Saatchi and some examples of a previous generation of collectors. For an extensive list on wealthy, international art buyers that consistently acquire art works see:  
[http://www.forbes.com/2005/03/09/cx\\_ahg\\_0309hot\\_print.html](http://www.forbes.com/2005/03/09/cx_ahg_0309hot_print.html), accessed 26.1.2006

“Independent Gallery”, in a similar way as Saatchi had and still has, art dealer Jay Joplin running the “White Cube Gallery” - two dealers who provided commercial expertise in assessing the balance between market value, quality as a work of art and the status of the artist. (Jardine, L. 1997: 40/41) Sir Kenneth Clark and Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, are just two examples of the great British connoisseur collectors of the middle decades of last century, who regularly gave practical and financial support to artists whose work they admired and through their involvement with contemporary art institutions, extended interest in the artist’s work to a wider audience.<sup>79</sup>

*‘Sustained and intermittent financial support, commitment to artists judged promising, commissioning and funding fabrication of new work...are typical of many patrons or new art.’* (Jardine, L. 1997: 42)<sup>80</sup> Saatchi also gave financial support to artists and displayed their work to a broader audience. However, it might be criticised that his motives were much more economically driven than his predecessors were.

One of the paradoxes that characterises contemporary art nowadays is that its main influence has shifted from academies, art schools, museums or some patrons to the art market and its economy. (Timms, P. 2004: 48/49) Consequently, this *‘...reflects a dereliction of duty on the part of our major public museums and art galleries...’* as Patricia Bickers declared back in 1997, referring to the lack of representation of challenging new work within public institutions. (Bickers, P. 1997: 3) Generally speaking, the rule among 20<sup>th</sup> century British collectors was to buy and collect art for which they had developed a certain taste and expertise. The crucial difference between former collectors and collectors these days seems to be that the “old” ones did not think of collecting art as a way of making money. (Sandler, I. 1996: 433) Art was not understood as having a secondary market. It was understood as an

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<sup>79</sup> One example here for is for instance Francis Bacon who commanded modest prices in the 1950s and through the patronage of the Sainsburys, his paintings were selling in six figure sums only two decades later. (Jardine, L. 1997: 42)

<sup>80</sup> See also: Bickers, P. (1997) “Sense & Sensation”, in *Art Monthly*, No.211, November, pp.1-6 for more information about British collectors of the distant and recent past. Bickers draws here a parallel for instance between Joseph Duveen and Charles Saatchi - both being dealers, collectors and associated with public and private institutions.

investment into something one believed in. Collectors such as Saatchi, belonging to the “new” generation of collectors, were often accused of viewing art as a speculative investment, similar to stocks and bonds and using the market forces, they would buy and sell of art works for mainly commercial reasons. (Ibid)

The direct influence of wealthy collectors on public taste became an issue as market value and personal preference were brought into proximity with one another. Some of those, who managed to build up distinguished collections of modern art began their careers as dealers, or combined dealing with collecting. At a certain point then, the art preferred by purchasers in the bounded world of private buyers and dealers penetrated the public domain either through private galleries or through donations to public institutions. Once situated there, these works started to influence public taste, by setting examples for what was worth collecting and what was not. (Jardine, L. 1997: 44) Patricia Bickers pointed out that it is difficult, in a capitalist system, to separate the aesthetic value of an art object from the economic one, but it is necessary to maintain some critical distance between these two. Especially, in the case of Saatchi, she saw the danger in taking him as the sole arbiter of the art of an era and warned not to take his personal taste as ‘...*the gold standard against which all contemporary art practice is to be judged.*’ (Bickers, P. 1997: 3) She feared that Saatchi’s dominance not only supports but also distorts the art market, not only in Great Britain but also abroad, by suggesting a consensus about the relative significance of his art collection. Even worse, she furthered, ‘...*despite the apparent variety of work in the Collection, it in fact subsumes the real diversity of contemporary art practice into a false homogeneity.*’ (Ibid)

Nevertheless, as Andrew Sinclair pointed out, by the time the YBAs rose to prominence, it had already become a fact that commerce had overcome the consensual ruling class in Britain as the arbiter of culture and the judges of quality in art were becoming those who dealt with them commercially. Even an institution as big as the Tate, at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, had less than two million pounds per year to spend on art, which was just about enough for the

acquisition of one painting, for example, a Lucian Freud in 1989, but not enough for setting the value of works of art. (Sinclair, A. 1990: 168) The art critics no longer dominated. None had the authority of for example, Victorian Ruskin or the American Greenberg. For the artists themselves, many had succumbed to the promise of riches. Some were helpless against predatory buyers and most lost control over their works, once they were on the open market. Auction houses<sup>81</sup> started to boom and the high prices they achieved excluded all those from the market, who had not become rich, through industry or finance, for instance. Museums now had to rely on donations by wealthy collectors, who in turn, through their buying power, influenced what was considered as valuable art and what was not, as well as what was to be seen and what was not. (Sinclair, A. 1990: 167/168)

From the 1960s onwards, the nature of contemporary art started to have a significant impact on the relationship between private collecting and public gallery spaces. Besides the commercialisation of art, art was no longer wall-hung and it became too large and complicated for domestic-scale display. (Jardine, L. 1997: 45) Between the 1970s and 1980s some of the new art moved in the direction what would be called today “installation art”, where artists increasingly created environments that established independent space to be entered by the viewer, rather than simply modifying the space given by the museum. (Hopkins, D. 2000: 228) By 1985, the Saatchi Gallery in Boundary Road was underway, which was a logical response to art that increasingly demanded to be displayed in rooms of warehouse scale.

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<sup>81</sup> John E. Conklin's point is interesting here: auction sales before the middle of the last century were attached with a stigma because many followed death, divorce, or bankruptcy and quite often art received lower prices than the prices paid to dealers. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, Peter C. Wilson of Sotheby's of London started the process of employing scholarship and promotional skills to increase the auction house's influence over the price of art. He used aggressive sales tactics to convince collectors that practically anything was worth buying. He optimistically viewed the value of art as endlessly increasing, due to a combination of limited supply and new wealth that would be spent on art, if buyers could be assured that they were making a good investment. To expand Sotheby's business, Wilson tried to attract middle-income collectors to the art market, in part by making the auction house less intimidating to potential clients. He also hired a public relations officer to build public confidence in the lasting value of art and convince people that they could afford to buy art. This process expanded over the following decades so that auction houses these days, not only sell art, but many other objects, while at the same time pushing art prices to unprecedented heights.. (Conklin, J., E. 1994: 38/ 39)

The interactions between artists, dealers and collectors<sup>82</sup> have always been complicated and were often strained. During the 1990s the relationships between artists and dealers became even more complex and taking the YBA generation as an example, there is a temptation '*...to believe that disorder is, as it were, the order of the day.*' (Jardine, L. 1997: 46)

### **3.2. The YBAs and the Patronage System**

The rise of the YBAs and the phenomenal success of some of its members need to be evaluated against the art institutional backdrop of this particular period. At the beginning of the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government was responsible, for introducing entrance fees to museums and for massively cutting grants for artists and art organisations. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 53) The future for the arts in Great Britain looked very bleak at that time and mainly only art sectors, that showed commercial potential and provided tourist attractions, had a chance of receiving funds.<sup>83</sup> (Sinclair, A. 1990: 147) It took until the end of the 1980s before the importance of sponsoring the arts was finally re-discovered<sup>84</sup> and therefore,

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<sup>82</sup> For the purpose of this thesis it would lead too far to trace back interactions that have taken place between artists, dealers and collectors - something that could probably be addressed in a separate paper. For now, it seems sufficient to acknowledge the fact that Saatchi seems to be different from his predecessors, in the sense that his actions appear to be much more market orientated, something that was not common before. There are certainly other buyers as well who bought major pieces from artists of the YBA generation, but nobody came anywhere near to the power and influence of Charles Saatchi.

<sup>83</sup> This is not to say, as Sandy Nairne points out, that there were no artists who for instance became involved in art that dealt with communities, minority groups, or other social issues. These artists responded closely to local needs and initiatives and received money from British funding boards, such as the Art Council of Great Britain, Greater London Arts, or other regional arts boards. However, the government cuts in arts funding undermined greatly the potential of these activities and generally speaking, funds were concentrated towards more prestigious galleries and museums. (Nairne, S. 1987: 15)

<sup>84</sup> One of the reasons was, that the economy had improved significantly and the arts themselves were being considered more and more as major providers of income as well as '*standard-bearers of British excellence*'.<sup>84</sup> (Sinclair, A. 1990: 163) In the speeches of the royal family at the annual awards, made to those companies who best supported the arts, the Prince of Wales pointed out, that more donations were being made to sponsor football in Britain, than the arts. In fact, nearly one in four listed companies donated more than 230 million pounds to sports, nearly eight times the total

artists, including some of the YBAs, had to draw upon resources other than those of the conventional art world. This way of facilitating their art became one of the particular characteristics of the group.<sup>85</sup> (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 6)

During the mid-1980s, works of art slowly became popular investments and privately owned galleries increasingly showed work by promising new artists. (Gaiger, J. 2004: 92) Some of the reasons for this development were the economic recession during the 80s in Great Britain, a falling stock market and the decline of buyers from East Asia, who were themselves hit by the collapse of their economies. For these reasons, art galleries tended to turn away from expensive international stars and focused on younger and cheaper British talents.<sup>86</sup> (Gleadell, C. 1997: 52) One of the largest galleries in London, the “Saatchi Gallery”, was opened in 1985 by Charles Saatchi, who has since, as already mentioned, become a chief patron of young British art. Other key galleries in London included the Marlborough, the Mayor, the Lisson, the White Cube, Leslie Waddington and Anthony d’Offay. These galleries specialised in modern work and offered opportunities for artists to show and sell their art. However, at the same time many young artists did not like to depend on gallery owners and powerful institutions for opportunities to become established. Instead, they began to look for sites where they could exhibit their own work and soon afterwards improvised shows were held in basic, unpretentious locations. Among the most popular were empty warehouses, sometimes without water or even electricity. The move represented a form of empowerment, freedom from the art establishment and ‘...an enterprising if not entrepreneurial D-I-Y ethic, in perfect harmony with the spirit of the times.’ (Christopher, D. 1999: 172)

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sponsorship for the arts. The following year, the Duchess of York referred to the arts as ‘...a commodity which had to be fought for’. See: (ibid.)

<sup>85</sup> It is worthwhile to take notice here, that Great Britain, in its economical development in the field of art, was behind various other countries that, to a certain degree, set examples for the YBAs. According to Sandy Nairne, some contemporary art markets grew noticeably after 1980, with some art works achieving enormous prices, particularly in the USA, former West Germany, North Italy, Switzerland and Belgium. (Nairne, S. 1987: 14)

<sup>86</sup> See also Gleadell, C. (1996) “Market Measures”, in: *Art Monthly*, No. 200, October, pp.74-75 for more information on how the British art market saw its revival.

Following the American example of private art sponsorship, Charles Saatchi with his brother Maurice, one of the main shareholders in one of the largest international advertising agencies (Saatchi& Saatchi), used his wealth to acquire a substantial collection of contemporary art<sup>87</sup>. Originally, he began by buying American photorealist and minimal art and, because he was willing to purchase large-scale pieces, often acquiring several works at a time by one artist, he was able to contribute to a deeper understanding of the artist's work.<sup>88</sup> The stylistic range of his collection made it difficult to discern a specific taste. From Julian Schnabel, Anselm Kiefer and Frank Auerbach, to the well established Lucian Freud and Andy Warhol, by purchasing them in bulk, Charles Saatchi seemed to be able to set a trend. (Sandler, I. 1996: 432/433) As Lisa Jardine pointed out, buying more than one piece at a time, not only provided the artist with enough funds to carry on producing new work - quite often Saatchi commissioned those works - but also '*...the golden seal of Saatchi approval...*' established the artist's name and helped to shape the contemporary artistic landscape. Saatchi not only included the artist's work within his collection, but also loaned the work to the national galleries, influencing the experience and taste of the gallery-going public. (Jardine, L. 1997: 38)/ (Townsend, C., personal interview, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2006)

In 1982, Saatchi founded a group of rich and influential people called the "Patrons of New Art". They supported the Tate Gallery in showing and collecting contemporary art and were the instigators of the Turner Prize.<sup>89</sup> In the same year, for example, Saatchi was the lender of nine of the eleven canvases in Julian Schnabel's solo show at the Tate Gallery, the first in a series arranged by the patrons of the New Art Group. (Sandler, I. 1996: 432) Other showings seemed to validate Saatchi's choice of artists. Nevertheless, his motives were frequently questioned. In making his

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<sup>87</sup> For an extensive account on Saatchi's development as a collector/dealer see: Bickers, P. (1997) "Sense & Sensation", in *Art Monthly*, No.211, November, pp.1-6

<sup>88</sup> He purchased for instance 21 works by Sol LeWitt, or commissioned Max Gordon to convert a motor repair shop and paint distribution depot into the largest gallery for showing contemporary art, in London. (Sandler, I. 1996: 432)

<sup>89</sup> For more information on the Patrons involved please see: <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/history/faq.htm>, accessed 18.6.2007



collection available to the public, was he really being generous or was he self-serving, by enhancing the worth of his holdings and their image in the art world? Speculation flared, that Saatchi was exercising undue influence on the Tate's administration of exhibitions and that the covert intent of his loans was to put the stamp of a great museum's approval on his art works, in order to ensure their future marketability. For its part, the Tate was suspected of yielding to Saatchi's wishes on the dim promise of future donations of otherwise unaffordable or unattainable work. Excluded artists and suspicious critics blew up in a storm of protest, which ended with Saatchi withdrawing from the Patrons of New Art, refusing to become a major sponsor of the Tate and housing his collections in warehouses, offices, or his own gallery from then onwards. (Sandler, I. 1996: 438)

At the same time, Nicholas Serota was establishing his reputation. He had previously been the director of the Whitechapel Gallery, which was famous for its brave exhibitions of modern art. At that point, he and Saatchi were considered firm allies, with Saatchi being one of the Trustees of the Whitechapel Gallery. Both of them, recognising a new vitality in British art, '*...evangelised for contemporary art, in a country notorious for its hostility to modernism.*' (Jones, J. 2001) Serota also mounted a retrospective of Julian Schnabel in 1986, with Saatchi again lending several pieces. (Ibid) When Serota became director of the Tate in 1988 and given his previous experience of exhibiting contemporary art without the responsibilities associated with a permanent collection, his first major project was to re-hang the Tate collection. (Chong, D. 2002: 68) British Petroleum paid for a large part of the million pounds it took for the total and radical new arrangement of the pictures and sculptures, in both the historic British section and the twentieth century section. The new look particularly emphasised the achievement of modern British artists, something Serota thought visitors expected to find. (Chong, D. 2002: 68) Recycling also meant that few pictures would hang for more than three years on the refurbished walls.<sup>90</sup> (Freeland, C. 2003: 71)

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<sup>90</sup> For more information on exhibition policies see: Serota, N. (2000) Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museum of Modern Art, Thames & Hudson Ltd., London

Serota's decision to transform the Turner Prize from '*...a gong for aged pillars of the establishment...*', to a means of encouraging young artists, led to the triumph of Whiteread and Hirst, in 1993 and 1995 respectively. (Jones, J. 2001) The fact that Saatchi had the winning artists' works in his collection led to critics bemoaning his influence on the award of the Turner Prize. For a long time, the assumption of many was, that Saatchi was the powerful collector, whose dominance of the art scene included the ability, to get what he wanted from Serota. (Jones, J. 2001) Truthful or not, one thing seemed certain: Saatchi remained the leading British collector<sup>91</sup> of his time and was becoming more and more synonymous with the sensationalist art and the rise of the YBAs. (Ibid)

Another incident, that played a key role in establishing several YBA artists, was the fact that Karsten Schubert, a young dealer from Germany, opened a little gallery at 85, Charlotte Street WI, in April 1987. He provided Ian Davenport, Michael Landy and Gary Hume with a group show directly after their Goldsmiths MA Degree show and just before the "Freeze" exhibition.<sup>92</sup> (Shone, R. 1997: 20) Later on, as one of the rare dealers, he supported Glenn Brown, Mat Collishaw, Keith Coventry, Abigail Lane and Rachel Whiteread with shows that they so desperately needed as a doorway into the art world. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 8) Schubert, being fairly 'gender-blind' and recognising the quality of work done by women artists regularly included them in his exhibition programme and consequently became also important for young female artists. (Paley, M. 1995: 99) Operating straight opposite the offices of Saatchi & Saatchi, his gallery was important in '*...its role as midwife...*' to the new British art generation. (Shone, R. 1997: 20) It provided various artists with solo shows and managed to retain its buoyant image in a period, that not only saw recession, but also many new dealers fail. Schubert, alongside galleries such as Anthony Reynolds,

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<sup>91</sup> He recycled his collection, often at a profit, in order to add other works of art to it. At the end of 1989, his collection was estimated to have a value of over one hundred million pounds. (Freeland, C. 2003: 71)

<sup>92</sup> For a fairly extensive overview of shows between 1988-94 that were important for contemporary British artists see: Shone, R. (1998) "From 'Freeze' to House: 1988-94", in: Royal Academy Of Arts (1998) Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection, Thames & Hudson, London, pp.12-25

Victoria Miro, Laure Gennillard and Interim Art, managed to build up a high profile for new British art abroad through their international connections. Besides their economic role, these galleries also served as social meeting points, often hosting celebratory openings and parties and mixing up different generations of artists.<sup>93</sup> (Shone, R. 1997: 21)

At around the same time Jay Jopling started to establish himself as one of the key figures on the British, as well as the international, art scene. Having had no money at that time to set up a shop<sup>94</sup>, he tried his hand in the secondary market, while at the same time closely observing the new generation of young artists coming out of Goldsmiths College, who were putting on their shows in alternative spaces. Realising the advantage of those spaces, he decided to work with artists on a project-by-project basis and he made finally his debut as a contemporary dealer in 1988, when he put on a warehouse show of Marc Quinn's bronze sculptures. Although, he was originally best known as the dealer of Damien Hirst, who presented the turning point in Jopling's career<sup>95</sup>, he also promoted the growing careers of Marc Quinn, Tracey Emin, Gavin Turk, Gary Hume and Sam Taylor-Wood, who later became his wife. At the same time, he took on two "older", widely respected artists, Anthony Gormley and Mona Hatoum. Simultaneously, he worked both ends of the art world to his advantage, by using his small West End gallery "White Cube" as a project space for young newcomers and for international art shows, presenting for instance, Richard Prince and Gary Hill. (Buck, L. 2000: 173/174)<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> The invitees included artists such as Richard Hamilton, Ed Ruscha, Alison Wilding, Lisa Milroy and Anthony Gormley. (See: Shone, R. 1997: 21)

<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, Chris Townsend mentioned that Jay Jopling is actually from a very wealthy background and his parents have been involved in the art world as well for a long time which lets one wonder why he had these difficulties. (Townsend, C., personal interview, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2006)

<sup>95</sup> They met at an art opening in 1991 and became inseparable since then.

<sup>96</sup> Jay Jopling is not the only recognised dealer, who has started his career without setting up an outside gallery straight away. For instance, now it might be common place for the latest and most progressive art to be presented in small-scale domestic surroundings, but when Maureen Paley opened "Interim Art" in her home in 1984, she was developing a practice that would provide artists with an alternative to the conventional gallery system and that would play an important part in putting the East End of London on the contemporary art map.

The second key contribution to the rise of the YBAs, was the transformation of the Turner Prize, with the result that the prize money had doubled in 1991 after it had been suspended in 1990 for financial reasons<sup>97</sup> and also the eligibility criteria had been changed to exclude artists over the age of fifty.<sup>98</sup> (MacGregor, E., A. 1997: 42) The Turner Prize was designed to generate publicity, with at least three events per year, for the art correspondents to cover, i.e. the announcement of the shortlist, the opening of the exhibition and finally, the broadcast of the winner. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 175) It was hoped that the Turner Prize might reflect new ideas and in addition, tug at the cult of celebrity enjoyed by artists such as Julian Schnabel abroad or Francis Bacon at home. By making ‘...*British art sexy it was hoped that the Turner might dare to scale the Olympian heights achieved by the then leading arts gong, the mighty Booker.*’ (Millard, R. 2001) To increase the drama of the selection, the shortlist had been reduced from six to four in 1991. Moreover, the new sponsor of the prize, Channel 4, targeted a more youthful audience and made sure that the Turner Prize received considerable television coverage, with live broadcasts from the Tate Gallery for the prize giving event and profiles of the short listed artists. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 175)

With the publicity provided by the sponsorship of Channel 4 television, the award has done much to promote modern art to the general public. However, critics complain that it has made artists too concerned with winning its generous prize money and attracting subsequent sponsorship, commissions and media exposure, than with the traditional concerns of social issues, artistic problems and solidarity among the artistic community. (Christopher, D. 1999: 169) Overall, marketing wise, the coverage of the Turner Prize resulted in increasing visitor numbers at the Tate

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<sup>97</sup> Drexel Burnham Lambert, the American firm that had been sponsoring the award, had just gone bankrupt.

<sup>98</sup> In 1989, the average age of the artists nominated for the prize had been fifty. The average age of the short listed artists in 1991, the first year of the reorganised prize, was thirty. As Stallabrass stressed, there was a problem with mixing diverse age groups of artists. There was a risk of offending “older” artists, if they were nominated but did not win. There was also a danger of predictability, namely that the artist with the most established reputation always won. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 176/ 177)

Gallery, as well as enhanced reputations for the artists concerned. (Fillis, I. 2000: 52)

Because of the younger age range, the time between an artist's first emergence and her or his full institutional endorsement, was reduced and it seemed that the focus shifted from the aesthetic qualities of the work to its suitability for reproduction in the mass media and to the artist's personae. (Ray, G. 2004: 122/123) As Millard concludes: *'Once-upon-a-time the Turner wasn't important enough to turn up for. Now, winning it gives instant stature for the artist, and his/her gallery. Losing it has caused breakdowns. Is this good for art? Not necessarily, but the Turner committee presumably believes the trickle down of column inches, visitor figures and stature for Tate is worth sacrificing a few artists for.'* (Millard, R. 2001)

The third turning point, which had enormous consequences for the acceptance and the rise to prominence of the YBAs, was the fact that Charles Saatchi was in financial difficulties with his advertising company, which in turn led him to dispose of his collection of blue chip British, US and European Art.<sup>99</sup> He responded to this necessary sale, by changing the focus of his collection. Whereas before, he had concentrated on high-priced established foreign artists like Jeff Koons, he started to collect work by young British artists, whose reputations and exchange value had not yet been established. (Ray, G. 2004: 122) By buying in bulk and promoting his purchases with exhibitions at his gallery in St. John's Wood, he could effectively make a market in the work of these artists. (Gaiger, J. 2004: 92) What he purchased, others also purchased and consequently prices rose. The series of exhibitions he put on between 1992 and 1996, "Young British Artists I" through to "Young British Artists VI", effectively launched many artistic careers and destined many works for museums later on. (Ray, G. 2004: 122)

In 1995 and 1996 British group shows proliferated around the world, e.g. in Minneapolis, Venice, Houston, Copenhagen, Rome, Wolfsburg, Baden Baden,

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<sup>99</sup> In 1991, Saatchi's advertising firm lost £64 million, leading him to take a pay cut of fifty per cent. In the same year, these losses were offset by £10 million raised by art sales.

Sydney, Johannesburg, Melbourne, Paris and Tokyo. Many of these group exhibitions such as, "Life/Live" (Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1996), or "Pictura Britannica" (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1997), painted a broad, cross-generational picture of contemporary art emanating from Britain. Richard Flood's "Brilliant!" at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis in 1995, was the most precise summation of what might be dubbed "first" and "second" phase YBA. It included key figures from the original Goldsmiths/"Freeze" contingent, as well as non-Goldsmiths artists who had by 1995 become central to YBA, such as, Tracey Emin and Dinos and Jake Chapman. (Bush, K. 2004: 106)

The influence of private institutions on public ones, caused by the decline of public funding and a growing reliance on corporate sponsorship during the Thatcher years, finally became transparently clear with the 1997 exhibition "Sensation", Young British Art from the collection of Charles Saatchi, at the Royal Academy. (Hauser, K 1998: 154) The opening was accompanied with an unusually high level of media attention that immediately registered outrage over some of the exhibited pieces. For example, sculptor Michael Sandie resigned from the Academy in protest over the decision they made to show Saatchi's collection. (Anderson- Spivy, A. 1998: 88) The show was labelled obscene, offensive and tasteless but '*...the result was a predictably boffo box office*'. (Ibid.) As Alexandra Anderson-Spivy argued, the discomfort might have not only be caused by the works exhibited, but also by '*...the cosy relationship that underlay the whole event.*' (Ibid.)

This was the rapprochement existing between the Royal Academy and Charles Saatchi. In short, Saatchi had managed to virtually buy the store. Items from his collection made up the bulk of the works included in the show. Not only did the legendary advertising mogul lend the art from his own collection and pay for its shipping and the insurance, he also served as the exhibition's co-curator. For Saatchi, this meant a strengthening of his position as England's leading collector and the validation of his taste, by such an establishment as the Royal Academy. (Ibid.) For the Royal Academy it meant that besides the blockbuster effect caused by exhibiting

these works, it also received financial support and services by Saatchi at a period in time, when the museum could not have afforded these expenditures. (McMahon, J. 2000: 69) As a result, during the first month of the show, reports and criticism began to circulate regarding the interests of the museum and the degree of enmeshment between Saatchi, Christie's auction house and gallery owners, representing some of the artists. (Ibid.)

“Sensation” included some 110 works in diverse formats<sup>100</sup>, including multimedia and various types of installations and it was seen by over 650,000 members of the public. The 41 artists exhibited were selected from those already shown in Saatchi’s previous exhibitions, “Young British Artists I–VI”. (Burton, J. 1998b: 80) The exhibits reflected a variety of interests, which included abstraction, popular culture, feminism, racism and identity politics. The topics ranged from the horror of genetic mutations, love and sex, fashion and food, waste and plenty, boredom and excitement, child abuse and violence, disease and medicine, shelter and exposure, science and metamorphosis, to allusions of death and decay, simplicity and complexity. (Rosenthal, N. 1998: 11) For example, Damien Hirst's piece depicted thousands of flies feeding off the rotting head of a cow.<sup>101</sup> The Chapman brothers' sculpture consisted of representations of dismembered limbs hanging from a tree. Finally, Marc Quinn's "Self" was a sculpture of the artist made with nine pints of his own frozen blood. As Sarah Kent pointed out ‘...*the event was a circus.*’ (Kent, S. 1999: 8)

Most controversial of all was a portrait of Myra Hindley, a convicted murderer of

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<sup>100</sup> For a good account of the works included see: McMahon, J. (2000) “The Script of Sensation”, in: New England Review, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 1 July, pp. 67-77 also: Rosenthal, N. (1998) “The Blood Must Continue to Flow”, in: Royal Academy Of Arts (1998) Sensation; Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection, Thames & Hudson, London

<sup>101</sup> It is not the target here to discuss the works of all artists that exhibited at the Sensation, as this would lead too far for the purpose of this paper. The example above should only give an idea of what was shown and which ones, besides others, caused a certain media frenzy. For more extensive information on Hirst’s work see for example: Danto, A., C. (2000) “Death in the Gallery”, in: The Nation, Vol. 271, Issue 16, November 20, p. 38 He discusses here extensively, the topic of death, that Hirst seems to refer to in a lot of his works.

children, by Marcus Harvey. The portrait, fashioned from palm prints of children, attracted such criticism and outrage, that on the opening day it was seriously damaged, by vandals, who hurled eggs and ink at the image.<sup>102</sup> (Millikin, S. 2005: 3)/ (Burton, J. 1997: 70) Saatchi's activities as a commissioning and collecting patron of contemporary art, were given their most notorious display at this show and when shown in New York, "Sensation" was heavily criticised by the New York City Mayor, creating renewed public interest and debate, long after the turbulence in Great Britain had calmed down. (Danto, A., C. 1999: 25)<sup>103</sup>

Saatchi's financial, as well as moral, support was crucial to a generation of London based artists, such as, Damien Hirst, who had begun to promote themselves through artist-run studios and exhibition spaces.<sup>104</sup> As Sarah Kent stressed: *'Given the plethora of artist-run spaces now in existence, it is hard to remember how radical the step was at the time. A section for "alternative venues" had yet to be created in Time Out's art listings, because there were so few alternative spaces.'* (Kent, S. 1999: 8) The opportunity to be included in a major collection alongside artists of international standing generated optimism as well as self-respect. (Kent, S. 2003: 6) It was from the work of these artists, that Saatchi formed his collection, marketed their art works and subsequently challenged established practices, by creating an environment that generated media attention and served to raise the profile of the artists being exhibited. (Fillis, I. 2000: 53) His patronage extended in 1998–9 to the donation of 100 works to the Arts Council and the donation of works for auction to create bursaries for five London art colleges<sup>105</sup>. (Walker, J., A. 2005)

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<sup>102</sup> As a result, it had to be temporarily removed for restoration.

<sup>103</sup> It is important to realise, as Patricia Bickers has pointed out, that British Art at that time was not, as its American counterpart, under restrictions and constraints, imposed by the prevailing culture of political correctness. Therefore, the exhibition was considered as "outrageous" and daring, especially for American viewers. (Bickers, P. 1995: 19)

<sup>104</sup> According to Sandy Nairne, artists during the eighties were unsuccessful in commercial terms and they had to sustain their work through other income, *'...endorsing the uneconomic status of their "vocation".'* (Nairne, S. 1987: 13)

<sup>105</sup> At Christies in London, December 1998. For more information on the donation see: The South Bank Centre (2000) *The Saatchi Gift to the Arts Council Collection*, Hayward Gallery Publishing, London



The British public, known for being notoriously hostile to the very notion of contemporary art<sup>106</sup>, began to accept new art forms and when the national lottery announced in 1997, that it would fund individual contemporary artists, for instance, few attempts were made to rouse indignation or to condemn contemporary art as '*...obscure and ipso elitist.*' (Kino, C. 1998: 125) Damien Hirst and his contemporaries became household names to such an extent, that the out-going Conservative Party pointed to young artists as evidence of what the Thatcherite entrepreneurialism had produced and the new Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, wasted no time in trying to co-opt them.<sup>107</sup> (Monk, C. 2001: 34) New art had by then inspired such curiosity that it was commonly displayed in public places other than galleries and museums. Not just clubs and restaurants but Habitat, the chain of mid-market home-furnishings stores, routinely devoted space to serious art exhibitions and even Selfridges, one of London's major department stores, commissioned artists' installations. (Kino, C. 1998: 125)

The craze that occurred during that period in Great Britain had prompted a reassessment of an art-historical tradition that had never been regarded, as one of Europe's most original or glorious. London, to the surprise of many observers, became a vibrant showcase for contemporary art from the 1990s onwards. (Burton, J. 1998a: 137) Until then, because of its academic traditions, its modest contribution to twentieth-century art<sup>108</sup> and its contemporary galleries decimated, by the international recession in the art market, London '*...was widely regarded as about the dreariest European capital for a young artist.*' (Kino, C. 1998: 125) The question

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<sup>106</sup> The British have always had an uneasy relationship with modern art. It is sometimes said they are by nature more literary than visual and respond more to language than appearances. Certainly, contemporary art has never enjoyed the same esteem as literature, drama or music and public taste has frequently favoured conventional art more than innovative and avant-garde works. There has been little comprehensible discussion of art in the media and new movements are often received with scepticism and controversy. Consequently, it has never been easy for artists to become established in Britain and many have chosen to work abroad, where the public is frequently more appreciative. (Christopher, D. 1999: 157) In 1976, when the Tate spent thousands of pounds of public money on 120 bricks, an ultra-minimalist work by an American artist, Carl Andre, it caused a national scandal. See: (Kino, C. 1998: 125)

<sup>107</sup> In 1997 10 Downing Street was re-hung with new British abstract painting.

<sup>108</sup> By most history books

arose whether London could become the unchallenged centre for the practice and presentation of contemporary art. (Lucie-Smith, E. 2002: 11) In the past, Paris, New York and even Düsseldorf, had been able to claim this role, by virtue of the density of activity in each city over considerable periods of time, with many artists, as well as collectors and galleries, contributing to the debate.<sup>109</sup> If London became able to claim this position, this represented a first and was surely grounds for celebration.<sup>110</sup> (Rosenthal, N. 1998: 9)

### **3.3. Art Practice of the YBAs**

The new wave of young British artists that emerged after the warehouse shows of the late 1980s, proved to be a significant development in the art world of Great Britain. The resemblance to the popular music scene has led to its description as ‘BritArt’, in imitation of ‘BritPop’. (Burton, J. 1998a: 137) The achievement of the young British art has been its radicalism of content and ideas. It played skilfully with conventions of staging and viewing in full comprehension of the traditional tensions between content and form. (Taylor, B. 2005: 181) The YBAs believed in art’s ability to show ideas as physical things and to manifest a set of attitudes, concerned with looking at and experiencing the world. (Maloney, M. 1997: 26)

The need for the YBA’s work to be accessible to its audience, the bridging of “high” and “low” art forms, reinforced a tendency to embed mass content in contemporary, well-crafted, or fabricated forms of academic conceptual art. Repeated acts of provocation and assaults on conventions, combined with means of representation, that were more associated with mass culture than high culture and an atmosphere that was one of ‘...sourness and disillusion...’ (Lucie – Smith, E. 2000: 269), were the

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<sup>109</sup> For more information on the art market in New York and the end of the American dominance of the international art market please see: Nairne, S. (1987) State of the Art; Ideas & Images in the 1980s, A Channel Four Book, Chatto & Windus Ltd, London, p.15/16

<sup>110</sup> For more information on the volume of art trade and the economy of art please see: (Stallabrass, J. 2004: 4-28)

underlying elements of the YBAs. Their work was generally understood '*...as predominantly aggressive and anti-establishment, made by a generation of Bad Girls and Bad Boys.*' (Bickers, P. 1995: 14) However, as Bickers stressed, the whole idea behind the YBAs was much more complex than the simple subordination of all their art under the above description<sup>111</sup>. (Ibid.) Nevertheless, education in art spaces had to become '*...sexy...*' in order to be able to compete with the '*...snappy seductions of popular culture...*' (Mc Mahon, J. 2000: 68) and the most frequent result was the '*...one-liner - a work that could be read quickly and which did not necessarily offer much else by way of aesthetic return*'. (Ray, G. 2004: 122)<sup>112</sup>

Rosenthal, referring to the 'Sensation' exhibition, pointed out that: '*A visitor to this exhibition with an open mind and well-developed antennae for life and art will perceive an uncommonly clear mirror of contemporary problems and obsessions from a perspective of youth. Presented with both seriousness and humour (often black), and in an extraordinary diversity of materials and approaches, both traditional and unexpected, these works serve as memorable metaphors of many aspects of our times.*' (Rosenthal, N. 1998: 10) Nevertheless, the YBAs did not stake any claims, nor had overblown expectations about changing the world. By asking questions and by dealing with issues which were constantly in the media and which touched everyone, such as sex, shocks, social change, social deterioration and social unease, they alerted others to some of the pressing topics of the day. (Collings, M. 2001: 8) '*By demonstrating vigilance and scepticism they offered an example of enquiry and genuine individualism.*' (Kent, S. 2003: 9)

This new generation of artists moved from an appreciation of form towards a redefinition and reclassification of content. They were looking for ways to interpret their world through documentary methods, along with a hint of social realism. In

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<sup>111</sup> Chapter 3.4. will discuss various viewpoints about the complexity or non-complexity of the YBA's art.

<sup>112</sup> According to Kate Bush, nothing has really changed since the legendary "Freeze" exhibition in 1988. Even shows by members of the YBAs today, are characterised by '*...simple themes - sex, death, religion - dispatched in fairground style, and aesthetics ranging from miserablist to spectacular.*' (Bush, K. 2004: 103)

general, a new and rich variety of media was used to take up again minimalist and conceptual ideas, to re-interpret them and to challenge conventional form and taste. (Price, D. 1999: 71) The often-conceptual work tended to ignore the traditional figurative styles found in painting and drawing. The dominating pieces of work were unconventional and provocative, often dealing with life experiences and the human body. (Christopher, D. 1999: 174)

The label ‘YBA’ turned out to be a powerful brand and marketing tool<sup>113</sup>, but it concealed a huge diversity. Even though the subject matter of the YBA artists was varied, showing influences of Marcel Duchamp in the prominence given to conceptual art, found objects and unconventional, even humorous, interpretations of everyday life, as well as influences of Joseph Beuys in the exploration of the positioning of the artists within society, certain broad trends, both formal and thematic, could still be discerned. What the artists did share was the desire to use whatever means were at their disposal: paint, celluloid, ballistics, needlework, or forensic science, to make work that spoke of what it meant to be human and to live in this world<sup>114</sup>. (Buck, L. 2000: 7/8) These varieties of approach, intentions and realisation of their works were paradoxically aspects that bound the YBAs together. They were connected by new, or re-inflected, often radical content, that for most of them had demanded formal and material innovation. (Shone, R. 1998: 12/13)

To recapitulate: the era was marked by a complete openness towards the materials and processes with which art could be made and presented. Albeit there was not a common programme for the YBAs, any manifestos, group statements, or shared styles, there were still some distinguishing characteristics. Firstly, these art works seemed to appeal to an international market. (Cork, R. 2004: 40-42) They were not only ‘...incredibly diverse- from the Goya-inspired broodings of *Jake and Dinos*

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<sup>113</sup> Not only in connection with their work but in the literal sense of advertisement: Tracey Emin advertised for Blue Sapphire Gin, Gary Hume modelled for Hugo Boss and ads for GO Airlines imitated Damien Hirst’s spot painting, to give but a few examples. (Collings, M. 1999: 12)

<sup>114</sup> The point about artistic means is reminiscent of the way feminist artist in the 60s and 70s approached art. Please see chapter 2.3.1. “Feminist Aesthetics and Material Strategies”

*Chapman to Gillian Wearing's hilarious vox pop videos to the unlikely poetic materials of Rachel Whiteread or Cornelia Parker...* (Mercer, K. 1998: 43) but also heavily promoted by more commercially than culturally minded dealers.<sup>115</sup> (Kino, C. 1998: 125) Secondly, these artists had a new distinguished relation to the mass media. They not only used them for their own publicity, but they also frequently incorporated material from mass culture in their works. Thirdly, accomplishing something that the New York equivalent emphatically did not, they presented conceptual work in visually accessible and spectacular forms consequently getting "ordinary" people interested, in what young artists were doing.<sup>116</sup> (Kino, C. 1998: 125)

The YBA artists seem to have added to the diversity of what art is and what art can say. The artists contributed to the contemporary cultural debate, refining, expanding, and developing the issues that new art raised. Their work reflected many of the concerns of British society in that particular period, as well as touching on plenty of raw nerves on the national conscience. They engaged and entertained an audience who found in them a reflection of their own pleasures, anxieties and phobias and they shaped the art that was and is to come. (Maloney, M. 1997: 34)

### **3.4. The YBAs and Cultural Theory**

*'The accessibility of material drawn from mass culture became an important feature of the work; specialist knowledge, not only of cultural theory but also of art history and curating, was to be rejected....The use of mass culture is more than an*

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<sup>115</sup> Patricia Bickers observed already in 1995, that the "Britpack", as she called the British artists of that time, had numerous individual or group exhibitions abroad. These were initiated by the galleries and museums of the *host* countries, rather than by the British Council, once the chief operator for contemporary British art abroad. (Bickers, P. 1995: 5)

<sup>116</sup> In its opening year, Tate Modern, had over five million visitors, more than the annual number of visitors to New York's Museum of Modern Art or the Pompidou Centre in Paris. See: Searle, A. (2002) "A Decade of British Art", in: Maraniello, G. (Ed.) *Art in Europe 1990-2000*, Skira Editore, Milan, Italy, p.41

*enthusiasm for the vulgar; it is an anti elitist strategy that runs alongside showing art outside conventional gallery spaces. The effect of the new art and its form of display was a decided shift of power away from art world professionals in the public sector (institutional curators and academic writers) to the artists themselves, their dealers, freelance curators and the mass media.* ' (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 60)

A common accusation of the YBAs has been that their work was not particularly new, that it constituted '*...an abject recycling of recent, fashionable practice to no particular purpose.*'<sup>117</sup> (Shone, R. 1998: 13) Its critics pointed to influences from Dada and Marcel Duchamp<sup>118</sup> and thefts from Arte Povera, Joseph Beuys and Bruce Nauman, to Minimalist and Conceptualist art and, as Kitty Hauser critiqued, the results were '*...a slightly farcical repetition of history...*' with a visually impressive, but '*...light...*' outcome. (Hauser, K. 1998: 155) Critics in Britain also berated artists for tactically capitulating to the market, or to the '*...chauvinism implicit in the promotion of their work abroad.*' (Hopkins, D. 2000: 239) Nevertheless, art has always been an evolving language and its features have constantly been re-appropriated, tailored, quoted and expanded upon to embody new meaning and feelings. As Richard Shone pointed out: '*Influence is not pastiche. Nauman cast the space beneath a chair, and so has Rachel Whiteread; Koons suspended objects in vitrines, and so has Hirst; but the ends are entirely different.*' (Shone, R. 1998: 13)

In contrast to many among the critical intelligentsia, the critic John Roberts argued,

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<sup>117</sup> In contrast Matthew Collings, condemning the half-intellectual comments made by "older" artists about their concerns, praised the stimulating '*...abject juvenile style...*' of the YBAs, even if that refreshing feeling might not have been long lasting. (Collings, M. 1997: 15) According to Collings, the term "abject" in an art context refers usually to subject matter or materials that people might find disgusting or sickening. Abjection in art, for him, is often a challenge to false pomp. (Collings, M. 2001: 132)

<sup>118</sup> Matthew Collings considered Marcel Duchamp as too '*...refined and intellectual...*' to be cited as a great influence on the YBAs and suggested German Neo-Expressionists like Baselitz, Luepertz and Kiefer instead. He stressed the point that it was not their imagery or their artistic ideas that were influential, but their relationship to success. (Collings, M. 2001: 110) The German art scene which became by the end of the seventies a '*...well-oiled business machine...*' was an example for young British artists how to become part of a '*...big art promo operation with connections to all the international museums.*' (Ibid.)

that the new British art possessed a number of distinctively new attributes. Most significantly, it represented a reaction against the '*...intellectual obscurantism of critical postmodernism, promoting strains of strategic philistinism and proletarian disaffirmation.*' (Hopkins, D. 2000: 239) Eddie Chambers countered, that it would represent a false dignification and merit to young British art, to attempt to turn critical thought to its explanation. (Chambers, E. 1998: 25) Nonetheless, Roberts maintained that a generation seemed to have emerged who, rather than forging worthy links between high and low cultural spheres, like their postmodernist forebears, they unselfconsciously accepted the pleasures of the everyday. (Hopkins, D. 2000: 239)/ (Nairne, S. 1987: 17)

Roberts considered it as shortsighted to talk about the anti-intellectualism of the YBAs, merely because they distanced themselves from any intellectual discourse, by neither referring to critical writings, nor producing any themselves. He considered it as possible, that this behaviour might have been a conscious decision on the side of the artist '*...who sees the rejection of the dominant discourses of art as a matter of ethical positioning*'. (Roberts, J. 1996a: 34) This is not to deny the fact, that anti-intellectualism and the celebration of pointlessness had not found a sympathetic voice in the art culture of the YBAs. However, in the hands of some, behaving badly and exhibiting seemingly senseless art, was intended to unsettle and to distance them from the bureaucratic tendencies of critical postmodernism and its art critique of art itself. (Roberts, J. 1996a: 35/41)

Furthermore, in the rejection of contemporary art theory and philosophy, to which they had been exposed excessively during their time at art schools in the eighties, some of them consciously saw a way to move art forward and '*...to take it beyond the radical expectations and conformities of the critical postmodernisms emanating from New York and cultural studies departments of British universities.*' (Roberts, J. 1996a: 29) Roberts argued, that it would be simple minded to call the art of the YBAs depoliticised, as for some the liberating turn from critical virtue has allowed them to refocus on the theory's underlying social and political realities from a more

formally open position.<sup>119</sup> (Roberts, J. 1996a: 30) Andrew Graham-Dixon broadened this argument by claiming that artists should be free to choose their own languages, '*...in accordance with their own expressive needs, whatever the fashion of the time...*' and that the point of making this kind of art might be simply to address issues, that can not be addressed in any other way. (Graham-Dixon, A. 1991)

The YBAs were influenced and to an extent freed up by the example of art going on elsewhere. American commodity sculpture and appropriationism had shown that the Duchampian ready-made could, in a sense, be re-invented and ideas could be shared, stolen, or hybridised and, as Hauser condemned, sucked '*...dry of political content and aesthetic integrity.*' (Hauser, K. 1998: 155) The vacuum created by this recycling of form was then, according to Hauser, filled with motifs and references drawn from the categories of the everyday. (Hauser, K. 1998: 155/156) Conscious of the media context of their art, in which it had to compete with cinema, advertising and television, the YBAs acknowledged the ways in which their predecessors had dealt with their own context.<sup>120</sup>

The practice of art, as pursued by the YBAs, could be seen not as a special, isolated kind of cultural activity, but as one already intimately related to everything else in the media landscape, which itself provided subjects and a *modus operandi* for art, as well as a context for it. The YBAs were able to make an '*...unapologetically impure art, for an impure situation*'.<sup>121</sup> (Searle, A. 2002a: 42) They were inspired by the commercially successful art produced in the 1980s that were shaped by market forces and by fashion, as well as at least partially, responses to intellectual discourse or art

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<sup>119</sup> Sandy Nairne called this '*...the artists as the natural critic of society.*' (Nairne, S. 1987: 13)

<sup>120</sup> As Collings pointed out, there has been a similar relationship between the pop world and the art world in the 1960s, one that was not as huge as in the following decades, but still noticeable. There was Pop Art, dresses influenced by Op art, Pop art films, like Antonioni's "Blow up" and there were album covers created by artists. (Collings, M. 1999: 13)

<sup>121</sup> Interestingly enough the movement towards entertainment was in fact part of a lengthy process that dates back to the eighteenth century, when professional art critics, such as Diderot, assimilated what they saw in paintings to their experience of the theatre. (Lucie - Smith, E. 2002: 18) For examples of "impure art" please see: chapter 3.2. in particular the examples given, regarding the Sensation exhibition.



theoretical discussions. Questions of identity, originality, authorship and authenticity were deconstructed on a weekly basis in art school lectures and seminars and even if artists adopted a strategically anti-intellectual stance, such ideas most certainly influenced, to some degree, their thinking and the roles they were to take.<sup>122</sup> (Ibid: 43)

The conceptual categories and strategies of critical postmodernism, with its critical act of deconstruction of representation and identity, were perceived to have distanced artists from the pleasures and contradictions of the everyday and made it difficult for them to take the truth of their own experience seriously, for it always appeared to have been invented elsewhere. (Roberts, J. 1996b: 3) As Frederic Jameson stated, referring to the postmodern phenomenon of contemporary theory: *'It would therefore be inconsistent to defend the truth of its theoretical insights in a situation in which the very concept of "truth" itself is part of the metaphysical baggage which poststructuralism seeks to abandon.'* (Jameson, F. 1984/ 2003: 1049) Consequently, by realigning their daily experiences with issues of identity and representation, the YBAs moved the critique of representation out of the domain of academic reference and they overlapped and infused the culture of art with the forms and values of popular culture as a shared culture in new and extended ways. (Roberts, J. 1996a: 30)

Victor Burgin, influenced by feminist psychoanalytical theory and referring to advertisement, had already spoken in 1976 about the necessity for artists to engage with popular culture, as *'...advertising constitutes one of the most massive ideological interventions in our cultural life'*.<sup>123</sup> (Burgin, V. 2003: 941)/(Edwards, S. 2004: 155) He considered a critique of the image, in theory and practice, as necessary, as he believed the media to be mainly responsible for how people interacted with their world. Reality and the mass media's ability to articulate and

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<sup>122</sup> In the later 1980s, Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra", was the book that presented the most tantalising discussion of what happened to art and culture, in the modern world.

<sup>123</sup> See also: Bickers, P. (2002) "Oh Politics Schmolitics! Art in the Postmodern Age", in *Third Text*, Vol. 16, Issue 4, pp.335-343

secure as true a series of ideological values, became less and less distinguishable and therefore, he saw the need to challenge the power of the mass media by interrogating the ideology of documentary and its claim to display social truths. This led him, similar to feminist artists, to construct images that addressed the construction of gendered identity and the unconscious. (Edwards, S. 2004: 155)

With the YBAs, the critique of modernism via identification with popular culture had lost its critical tension. They did not appropriate the forms and themes of popular culture and the pleasures of the everyday, in order to intellectualise them. They did not feel the need to justify the incorporation of everyday cultural observation into their art, as they did not feel embarrassed or theoretically self-conscious about it. Since the waning of the institutional and intellectual force of modernism, which in the seventies and eighties defined what art of the everyday should distinguish itself from and since the transformation of popular culture itself, as a space of radically expanded subjectivities, pleasures and alternative forms - art and the everyday became '*...two mutually defining components of something bigger - the ordinariness of culture*'. (Roberts, J. 1996a: 35)

The "new art" became a way of life within the culture. Furthermore, professional critique of representation, pursued by the likes of, for example, Mary Kelly in the 1970s and 1980s, began to appear too censorious and restricting for this generation of artists. (Roberts, J. 1996a: 30) Stallabrass called this process a '*...turning away from the inward-looking concerns of the art world to new subjects...*' especially to those that prompted interest from the media. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 5)

In the case of the YBAs, art took on an accessible and '*...up front and in-yer-face...*' appearance that was comprehensible for people without specialist theoretical art knowledge. (Bickers, P. 1999/2000: 3) Stallabrass added that those people *with* specialist knowledge generally might *not* comprehend the work of the YBAs, '*...having been too busy with their art-historical monographs and too snobbish to*

*have allowed themselves an interest in pop music or soap opera.* ' <sup>124</sup> (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 9) Understandably, this kind of work enraged conservative art critics as it attracted the interest of the media, generating the publicity on which it was relying. <sup>125</sup> (Ibid.) Nevertheless, as Patrica Bickers identified '*...elitism should no longer be allowed to function as a shibboleth used by conservative thinkers...to beat art into submission...*' and she concluded that it is the responsibility of artists, art critics, curators and other interested parties to strengthen the bridge that has been built up between artists and their new audiences, as they do understand what they see in galleries to be art. <sup>126</sup> (Bickers, P. 2002: 343)

The result was in Frederic Jameson's terms, the erosion by postmodernism of the critical space, that once separated culture from the wider social realm and the expression of late capitalism, in that it completely suspends culture. (Bickers, P. 2002: 342) Postmodernism in his sense has to be imagined firstly, in terms of a reaction against the established forms of high modernism and its forms and secondly, in terms of the effacement of the older distinctions between high and mass culture. (Jameson, F. 1983: 111/112) Jameson feared, that the consequences of this development might be the '*...absorption of culture into - and by - the social realm...*' and the replacement of categories and technical discourses, previously separated into different genres, by one contemporary theory, that will render any kind of philosophical dialogue obsolete. (Jameson, F. 1983: 112)

The YBAs permitted themselves to worry less about theory, the mixing of culture

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<sup>124</sup> Sandy Nairne made the interesting point that '*...looking at and discussing art does not usually require intellectual justification.*' (Nairne, S. 1987: 13) He concluded that the magnitude of art is dependent on the individual and can not be generalised. (Ibid. 14)

<sup>125</sup> What Stallabrass is referring to, is the fact that some of the art works as for instance Rachel Whiteread's "House" (1993) received so much press attention that it even caused questions to be asked in the House of Commons. Ultimately, the work received a resonance that went far beyond the usual readings of her work, forming a mismatch between the logic of her art practice and the unforeseen consequences of its expansion. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 10)

<sup>126</sup> Bickers airs her frustration in another article about the observation that art only occupies a marginal position in our society as a whole and that even the most critical art processes are commodified these days. Please see: Bickers, P. (2000) "1968 and all that", in: *Art Monthly*, No.233, February, p.8

with media and consumption and the impossibility of being original. They were more concerned with presentation, a new look and a new kind of drama. Stylistic challenges had lost their impact and it was generally accepted by the YBAs, that anything could be art and that contemporary art existed in what was called a post-media situation, where neither style nor medium was the message and predominantly content counted. The YBAs were not about to contest art's supposed autonomy, but rather to revel in its impurities and its tainted-ness by the culture around it and in which it was created. '*Naturally, this has led to an increasingly agitated search for ways of disturbing an audience that takes such attempts at disturbance in its stride.*' (Lucie - Smith, E. 2002: 17) They understood that flair and energy mattered more than subservience to history. The looks and the meanings of art played a role to a great degree. However, who saw it counted almost as much and efforts were made to ensure that the "right" curators, critics, gallery owners and collectors attended the shows. (Searle, A. 2002a: 44)

This had an impact on the way art was displayed<sup>127</sup>: the gallery became a kind of informal play area in which the work formed part of a spectacular installation that disturbed any private moment of encounter with a discrete, individual artwork and that promised maximum entertainment value. (Roberts, J. 1996a: 31) Nevertheless, as Hauser argued, the entertainment value of this new art stuck in the traditional exhibition spaces, for instance, the Royal Academy, could not be compared to '*...popular forms on the territory of sheer delight.*' (Hauser, K. 1998: 157) And referring to Sarah Lucas's "Au Naturel" she concluded that pleasure in making the art works did not automatically result in the same pleasure in receiving, once the art work was exhibited in '*...grandiose galleries.*' (Hauser, K. 1998: 157)

Overall, the YBAs did not set out to denounce art in the name of the ordinary and everyday, but to reflect upon and participate in the incorporation of art's production

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<sup>127</sup> In the 1970s, the dominant form of art's presentation was the traditional display of art in galleries (i.e. Hans Haacke or Mary Kelly), while in the 1980s it was the shopping mall or the bank foyer (i.e. Jeff Koons).

and its forms of attention into a culture of art, that was not immediately governed by professional academic criteria of success. The making of a show or event was part of an informal social network of artists, who saw the social relations involved in attending to art as important as its making. Even though art making was fed by a financial necessity, for Roberts, the art of the YBAs proposed a response to circumstances and not to any idealised or pre-ordered sense of career or abstract sense of struggle. The informal character of the art production and distribution could be seen as reactions against '*...the traditional artistic identity of self-sacrifice and oppositional exclusion...*' with the further effect of demolishing the idea of the Great Artist through '*...a culture of committed but occasional artists.*'<sup>128</sup> (Roberts, J. 1996a: 42)

### **3.5. The YBAs and Female Artists**

The new candidness surrounding the representation of the quotidian that came with the rise of the YBAs was particularly visible in the work of some female artists. Talking dirty and showing your bottom for the sheer delight of it has become a '*...proletarian-philistine reflex against '80s feminist propriety about the body*'. (Roberts, J. 1996a: 38) Reinstating the word "cunt" as a mark of linguistic pride and embracing the overtly pornographic and confessional, became '*...a means of releasing women's sexuality from the comforts of a 'progressive eroticism' into an angry voluptuousness.*' (Roberts, J. 1996a: 38) The breakdown of bodily taboos became increasingly apparent, as younger artists felt no intellectual insecurity about addressing the spectator as embodied.<sup>129</sup> (Ibid.)

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<sup>128</sup> Not every artist was able to follow in the financially successful footsteps of Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst.

<sup>129</sup> Marcia Tanner noticed that although the work of some women artists in the United States during the 1990s was still concerned with sex and gender representations, the work was very different in its spirit from similar work of previous generations of feminist artists. She described it as '*...irreverent, anti-ideological, non-doctrinaire, non-didactic, unpolemical and thoroughly unladylike.*' Tanner, M. (1994) "Preface and Acknowledgments", in: The New Museum Of Contemporary Art (Ed.) Bad Girls, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York Catalogue

In their practice, many female artists turned back to the 1960s, to look for new points of departure, to i.e. Minimalist and Conceptual art, performance and video art, installation and site-specific work. Some still considered the female body as a battleground and continued to '*...destabilise the idealised female form and represent the lived, experiencing body with all of its abject mess...*' (Foster, A. 2004: 172) The most provocative of these reconnections were made by young women in Britain, such as Tracey Emin, whose blanket piece "Pysco Slut" (1999), was appliquéd with the words "Yea I know nothing stays in my body" and Jenny Saville, who painted huge women's bodies in order to invert ideas of female beauty. Other women artists such as Rachel Whiteread, who produced negative casts of domestic spaces, Mona Hatoum, who disrupted with her metal cot and her collection of domestic clutter the idea of matrimonial femininity and Abigail Lane, who regularly transformed domestic intimacy, into the unsettling and strange, all these artists dealt with the familial sphere in a menacing and haunting way and questioned the status quo. Others, such as Sarah Lucas, Sam Taylor- Wood and Gillian Wearing were influenced by psychoanalytic theory in their exploration of gender, identity and human desires. Finally, building on earlier feminists' use of role-reversal, parody and irony, some women artists explored images and ideas of masculinities. (Foster, A. 2004: 172/173)

In questions surrounding issues of identity, an important concern of previous generations of feminist artists, female artists during this period seemed to be more interested in the shifting processes of distinctiveness than in fixed notions of characteristics. New debates surrounded and are still surrounding, the nature of embodiment and the body that is reconfigured through technology. (Reckitt, H. /Phelan, P. (Eds.) 2001: 257) There was a '*...renewed interest in the gendered body as an artistic source - no longer as the fetishized object of the male gaze but as something to be explored in all of its diversity.*' (Reckitt, H. /Phelan, P. (Eds.) 2001: 156) The motives of these returns were various, including a discontent with the sensationalist art world that, by the late 80s, seemed to be dominated by marketing strategies and exaggerated scandals. In addition, movements like Minimalism and

Conceptualism that were pushed prematurely into the past during the eighties became new archives of forms and devices for different kinds of appropriation.<sup>130</sup> (Foster, H. / Krauss, R. / Bois, Y.-A. / Buchloh, B., H., D. 2004: 635)

In terms of material strategies, female artists within this period continued to blur conventional divisions between fine art and what has been defined as feminine crafts and decorative arts, linking the methods used by women artists from the beginning of the twentieth century through to contemporary practices. Tracey Emin, for instance, has used sewing extensively in her work and Rosemary Trockel transformed knitting into art.<sup>131</sup> Video, '*...unburdened by centuries of patriarchal precedents...*' and a means to deliver an immediate message to an audience, also became a key strategy in the production of art for women as it undermined the idea of fine art and offered, a '*...relatively virgin territory for the exploration of the feminine.*'<sup>132</sup> (Elwes, C. 2005: 41)

Once condemned as primitive or objectifying, under the impact of psychoanalytical and semiotic critiques of representation during the eighties, the photographic document, as well, became an instrument for opening up the categories of the everyday. As a narrative resource for their own bodily and emotional experiences, similar to the work of Nan Golding and Jo Spence in the 80s, female artists employed the lens-based medium to occupy a similar story telling space, with the difference that they embraced the document itself as part of a common culture of domestic representation. Photography became a means of documenting and defining an emergent culture. In this, the image allowed the artists to re-establish her place in

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<sup>130</sup> See the following paragraphs for examples. Rachel Whiteread and Mona Hatoum would be examples for YBA artists who reworked Minimalism and its language of simple forms and serial orderings. (Foster, H. / Krauss, R. / Bois, Y.-A. / Buchloh, B., H., D. 2004: 635) For conceptualism look for instance at Sarah Lucas', Tracey Emin's and Gillian Wearing's work. (Ibid.)

<sup>131</sup> For more information on textiles in art and the work of Rosemary Trockel see: Jefferies, J. (1995) "Text and textiles: weaving across the borderlines", in: Deepwell, K. (Ed.) New feminist art criticism; Critical strategies, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, pp.164-173

<sup>132</sup> See Elwes, C. (2005) Video Art, A Guided Tour, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, London, New York, particularly chapter 3 for an account on feminist artists' use of video.

the spaces of the everyday. (Roberts, J. 1996a: 39)

Staged photography in particular, proved to be very productive, especially for female artists, allowing issues of identity to be explored within a confined and controlled space.<sup>133</sup> This practice allowed women and others, to represent issues that seemed beyond the reach of the simple document. The mass media used images to construct distortions of the reality of women's lives, for instance, depicting women as sexually available, hiding domestic labour behind a cover of glamour and romance and encouraging the idea of fulfilment through marriage and children. (Edwards, S. 2004: 154) Reworking mass-media imagery, as Barbara Kruger suggested, allowed artists to '*...question ideas of competence, originality, authorship and property.*' (Krueger, B. 1982: 1042) According to Nell Tenhaaf, this also gave women artists new freedom from the sexist historical art and critical practices attached to the more established media, as the use of electronic production tools belied any gender barriers. (Tenhaaf, N. 1992: 377)

Many female artists contemplated and documented life experience, bodily rhythms, or flesh and their work was often composed of a variety of different art forms. Ignoring the traditional figurative style and challenging conceptions of life and the human body, something that became a characteristic of the YBAs. Helen Chadwick (1953-96), for instance, who worked parallel to the YBAs, pioneered the use of body parts and organic material. Her provocative conceptual works had titles such as "Meat Lamps", which featured photos of raw steak on light bulbs, while "Piss Flowers" consisted of plaster casts of urine in the snow and "Bad Blooms" were photographs of flowers suspended in household fluids. (Christopher, D. 1999: 174) Feminist painters such as Eileen Cooper (short listed together with Gillian Wearing for the Turner Prize in 1997), Amanda Faulkner and Gwen Hardie, none of whom were members of the YBA generation, also took the rhythms and life of their bodies

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<sup>133</sup> A very good example for these staged and performative projects was Cindy Sherman's body of work produced between 1977 and 1980, known as "Untitled Film Stills". By staging a range of powerful and prevalent images of femininity, she tried to reveal some of its ideological effects. (Edwards, S. 2004: 156/157)



as their subjects, at the same time as female artists of the YBAs did. (Christopher, D. 1999: 174)

To give a few examples: the work of Sarah Lucas concentrated on people's basic habits and desires, often in a playful, imaginative way in works with titles such as "Sex Machine" (1996) and "Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab" (1992). With the lack of material transformation and the apparently effortless means of making, which expressed a tough street attitude and challenged the well-made art, forcing it into a more direct confrontation with social difference and working-class culture, Lucas challenged the idea of how sculpture in Britain should be done. Drawing on the sparse use of material of Arte Povera and the wit of Surrealism, she turned the hard-hitting and un-poetic content of daily life into sculptures. By adopting and appropriating working-class male's interest in violence, sex and alcohol, she exposed it as well as heralded '*...not just a new sensibility for the 1990s, but a raw aspect of British culture, angry in spirit, grungy in look, cobbled together from a few bits and pieces.*' (Maloney, M. 1997: 31) By rejecting the mechanically made and employing the bare necessities to make a sculpture that amplified a clear and angry voice, she managed to insert herself into the distinguished avant-garde trajectory of Marcel Duchamp and his descendants, by responding to his famous joke, the ready-made fountain/urinal of 1917, with a series of works incorporating unisex toilets. (Foster, A. 2004: 173/ Burton, J. 1999: 154) Some critics of Sarah Lucas denounced her work and argued, that as with punk music, these and other works sometimes displayed more energy and attitude than content or technique. (Burton, J. 1999: 154)

In contrast, the work of Rachel Whiteread was often concerned with nostalgic and sentimental issues, such as experiences of exposure, displacement and homelessness.<sup>134</sup> Her early works were plaster casts of bodies and personal mementoes including childhood blankets. She made casts of objects, which allowed

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<sup>134</sup> For an account of Rachel Whiteread's work please see also: Perry, G. (2004) "Dream houses: installations and the home", in: Perry, G./ Wood, P. (Eds.) *Themes in Contemporary Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London in association with The Open University, pp. 256-262

them to be seen in different ways. She often made sculptures from the domestic sphere, where she conjured up the essence of ordinary lives by using the particularity of things, e.g. a bath, a mattress and tables, as vehicles for collective memory. Abstract yet figurative, her works embodied actual areas from real places and, imbued with all the domestic drama of the home, they suggested loss, decay and change. (Maloney, M. 1997: 30) More ambitious still, these literal traces brought to mind symbolic traces as well, especially memories of childhood and family. (Foster, H. / Krauss, R. / Bois, Y.-A. / Buchloh, B., H., D. 2004: 637) In 1988, her first exhibition included several personal pieces such as “Shallow Breath”, a cast of the space under a single bed and her best-known early work “Closet”, a cast of an ordinary wardrobe covered in black felt. Later she developed an interest in architecture. (Burton, J. 1999: 154) “Ghost” (1991) for instance, was a cast of the inside of a room and “House” (1993), a cast of the interior of a terraced house, later won her the Turner Prize and turned her into one of the most famous and best paid artist of her generation in Great Britain.<sup>135</sup> (Searle, A. 1994: 26)

Jenny Saville transformed the ordinary through paint, embracing traditional conventions in works that are monumental in size and scale and that play on the idea of space, amongst other things. Griselda Pollock, by analysing Henry Matisse’s painting “The Painter and his Model” of 1917, identified three orders of space that define modern western art-making: the social space, which reflects the social and economic relation between artist and model. The symbolic space, which represents the basic components of art making and its transactions within. Finally, the space of representation, which is the canvas with its fictive representation of the model, invented by a combination of the painter’s look and gesture. (Pollock, G. 2001b: 229) Saville, in her work, collapses all three of these spaces. Firstly, by working on her own body, the one-way transaction between artist and model is renegotiated in social and economical relation, as well as in the symbolic order between painter and

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<sup>135</sup> The controversies surrounded the question whether or not the artwork, which was situated in an impoverished area of London, should be demolished and whether the cost involved in it would not have been spend more wisely for other housing projects. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 10)

model. Secondly, the female body instead of being a female *object* body becomes an *active*, creative female body. Her suggestions of cosmetic surgery, which are apparent in many of her images, update the art-historical discussion about the idealised nude seen from a feminist viewpoint.<sup>136</sup> (Maloney, M. 1997: 33) The physical size of not only the female bodies depicted but also the canvasses themselves, question the discrepancies between a female body of a particular appearance and the cultural sign of the desirable, feminine body as constructed, through media images. (Rowley, A. 1996: 394/395)<sup>137</sup>

The renewed interest in contemporary British art also witnessed the promotion and success of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing as part of the YBAs who, even if still lacking equal representation and financial recompense compared to their male counterparts, became increasingly visible.<sup>138</sup> (Mancio, M.-A. 1996) This was not necessarily the norm for female artists that were associated with the YBAs. As Alicia Foster argued, women in Britain today still face discrimination and the marginalisation of women artists can no longer be attributed to a lack of training, but to an aesthetics in society that still remains almost exclusively controlled by male gatekeepers. (Foster, A. 2004: 171) Thus Maureen Paley, the founder of “Interim Art”, spoke of ‘...*the first stage of tokenism...*’ when she addressed the issue of success of women artists of the 1970s and early 1980s. (Paley, M. 1995: 99) Consequently, the most prestigious awards are still given predominantly to men. Women, in spite of all the efforts of feminist artists, nonetheless still face an absence of female role models, as the majority of tutors in the art sector are male.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> For more information on her work see: Gagosian Gallery (Ed.) (2005) *Jenny Saville*, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc, New York

<sup>137</sup> Interestingly enough her work seems to offer the probability of making a feminist analysis, yet she denies any intention of such a reading. According to herself and Chris Townsend, she is actually not interested in feminist issues at all, but much more in questions surrounding the medium of painting and how for instance layers and tones of flesh could be replicated within painting. BP Artist Talk: Jenny Saville Tate Britain, 2.11.2005, 18:30-20:00/ Townsend, C., personal interview, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2006

<sup>138</sup> According to the Arts Council, the number of women artists has increased by 70 per cent since 2001. (Thoburn, R. 2004: 41)

<sup>139</sup> It is also interesting to note here that the pay gap, for instance, between male and female academics has widened over the last five years. (Foster, A. 2004: 171)

Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing are very different in terms of their media personas and their approaches towards their audiences. (Hopkins, D. 2003: 346) On one side of the spectrum is Tracey Emin with her confessional behaviourism, letting the public participate in all aspects of her life and art and making herself vulnerable to criticism. It is important to note here that media attention is not equivalent to a serious critical consideration of somebody's work. In Emin's case, as Foster argued, the media have certainly helped her rise to prominence, including supporting her with a lucrative career, but at the same time her tabloid image as "art's bad girl"<sup>140</sup> meant that her work tended to be read in '*...tabloid terms as titillating confession, its art historical and political significance overlooked.*' (Foster, A. 2004: 172)

Gillian Wearing, however, positions herself on the opposite end of the spectrum, with her introvert mannerisms. Sam Taylor-Wood is situated somewhere in between the other two with her calculated and controlled approach towards the media and the audience. (Collings, M. 2001: 189) What unites all three is the fact, that they all became successful contemporary British artists and all have been nominated for the Turner Prize at some point in their careers. Although, Tracey Emin was only partially involved in the founding of the Young British Artists, she has exceeded the movement's expectations of promotional success, while at the same time developing and challenging the complex form of repetition, i.e. '*...the re-presentation of representation, non-representation and conceptualism...*' that characterised so much of the YBA's movement. (Merck, M. / Townsend, C. (Eds.) 2002: 8) Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing are not opposed to being identified with the YBAs, or the new generation of 'bad girls', but consciously distance themselves

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<sup>140</sup> "Bad girl" is an old expression connoting traditionally the subordinated and objectified status of women. (Tucker, M. 2006: 121) For more information on the idea that every country needs one "bad girl" in the art sector and any significant gallery has to have one '*...bad cunt to be part of the game...*' Please see: Battista, K. (2003) "Domestic Crisis: Women Artists and Derelict Houses in South London, 1974-1998", in: Ehrlich, K./ Labelle, B. (Eds.) *Surface Tension; Problematics of Site*, Errant Bodies Press, p.107-116. In particular see the comments made by Carolee Schneemann about the art scene of the 1990s and Battista's conclusion that Schneemann's proposed ideas have particular relevance when seen in the light of Tracey Emin. (Battista, K. 2003: 116)

from a feminist position.<sup>141</sup> Considering their aims, i.e. gaining access to the male dominated art market, speaking out and being listened to, voicing a feminist objective may not be liberating or even useful. In terms of visibility, they have more to gain from being associated with ‘BritArt’ than feminism: the former is fashionable, the latter is not.

### **3.6. Summary**

Artists associated with the YBAs did not generally share a particular artistic viewpoint, but were unified in their ambitions to make the transition from art college to recognised artists as swiftly as possible. They seemed to have fully understood the mechanisms of the British art world, its reliance on a very small number of British collectors and the fact, that artists could usually not live from their art, but had to rely on alternative sources of income. With their daring approach to art, they had nothing to lose and everything to gain. (Searle, A. 2002a: 42) In contrast to previous generations of British artists, the YBAs were the first group of artists, which, in their majority, recognised the importance of self-marketing and understood the power and role of the media for the promotion of individual artists as well as the whole YBA group and they were successful in using both to their advantage.

The YBAs were aware of the media context of their art. The art, which emerged in Britain in the early 1990s, might very well have been the product of opportunity, a response to a kind of need, partly economic, for new products and more extreme novelties. Young gallery owners were looking for artists untainted by prior success and British critics and journalists needed something in their own country to write

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<sup>141</sup> To give just one example- others follow in the relevant chapters: Sometime in 2001/2002 Jenni Sorkin, a Research and Project coordinator for “Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution” at “The Museum of Contemporary Art”, Los Angeles was approached to write an essay about Tracey Emin and her relation to feminism. This piece was rejected by Emin on the grounds, that she was *not* a feminist and did not wish to be identified with feminism. (Sorkin, J. 2007: 35) The writer of this thesis also had to deal with Emin’s refusal to be interviewed for a feminist contextualisation of her work, as stated before.

about. Rather than trying to get into the art world, the YBAs created their own, circumventing the power structures, setting up their own exhibitions, working with curators and critics of their own generation. This do-it-yourself approach can be seen as one of the major elements of the changing art world in Britain over the last few decades.

Art collectors, such as Charles Saatchi, played an important role in contributing to the success of the YBAs and in marketing their art works. Art works in general were seen more as commodities than collectibles and the turnover of them grew rapidly, not only on the art market, but also in galleries and museums. This was helped by the spectacular work produced by the YBAs, who drew on whatever styles and sources seemed to be at hand. Generally speaking, the YBAs not only ignored traditional rules in the art world, but they also disregarded any theoretical contextualisation of their works. Content and outrageous ideas became more important than following patterns and rules, which were in turn bent, adapted, or broken and brought together in a new kind of pastiched patchwork.

In terms of raising public awareness of art, the new enthusiasm for contemporary art was two folded. The YBAs attracted wider public interest, in terms of collectors, visitors at galleries and museums and they made regularly the headlines of magazines, but this did not necessarily imply critical understanding and involvement by these viewers. Even critics seemed to have divergent opinions about theorising the work of the YBAs. While one part saw their work as not worthy of any theoretical consideration, others spoke of a new freedom from modernist and postmodernist regimentations and even of a new democratisation of art and art production. Nevertheless, the rise of the artist as celebrity and the strong link between the entertainment industry and the work of the YBAs could be considered as an advantage in the light of bringing art more into what might be seen as mainstream.

Within the YBAs, quite a few female artists rose to public attention and some, consciously or unconsciously, followed or developed further the ideas and concepts

of previous generations of female artists. For instance, the work of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing, could be read within the contemporary culture of the YBAs, as just another piece of ‘funky’ art, that tries to communicate the squalor of bohemian lifestyles, or it could be contextualised within a feminist framework and read as expressing contemporary female experiences.

As Alicia Foster argued, moving beyond the polarities of a rigidly defined “feminist art” versus a refusal of any reading of art in feminist terms, it should now be possible to discuss ‘...*the potential feminist resonance of an art work...()*... *and its relationship to the history of women’s practice, without confining the work solely within those interpretations.*’ (Foster, A. 2004: 172)

## **4. Confessional Intimacy and Feminism in Tracey Emin's Work**

*'It's about very, very simple things that can be really hard. People do get really frightened, people do fall in love, people do die, people do fuck. These things happen and everyone knows it but not much of it is expressed. Everything is covered with some sort of politeness, continually and especially in art because art is often meant for privileged classes.'* (Tracey Emin quoted in Morgan, S. 1997: 60)

*'So much of people's life isn't there in what they do, they have a veneer over their work and no association to it apart from the fact that they do it. I'm different. The climate has changed more towards my way of thinking... everything is more personal...things have caught up with me.'* (Tracey Emin quoted in Aidan, E. 2001: 4)

### **4.1. Motherland, Fatherland and Traceyland**

Tracey Emin, one of the most prolific figureheads of the YBAs, is widely considered as a "confessional" artist<sup>142</sup>, with her works reflecting her very own personal experiences. Facts such as her difficult childhood<sup>143</sup>, her rape<sup>144</sup> at the age of thirteen, her experiences at school and her abortions play a vital role in the

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<sup>142</sup> Tracey Emin is Professor of Confessional art at "The European Graduate School", where she conducts summer workshops. Please see: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/emin.html>, accessed 18.6.2007

<sup>143</sup> Emin was born in London in 1963 as the child of an English mother and a Turkish Cypriot father. They were both married, but not to each other and her father spent half of the week with each of the two families he was part of. (Emin, T. 2005a: 4) She and her twin brother Paul (her older brother Alan is hardly ever mentioned in her works) grew up in Margate, an English seaside town, first in the grand surroundings of her father's "Hotel International" and then, when she was seven, following his bankruptcy, in escalating poverty. Subsequently, her parents split up and she and her brother were brought up by their mother, Pam, who from then on struggled to provide the means for their household. (Crisell, L. 2005: 84) They moved out of the hotel into a small cottage, which was originally the staff house of the hotel. Her mother worked for some time as a chambermaid (Emin, T. 2005a: 11/17) and as a waitress at the "Gay Nights", a nightclub, where she sometimes took her children with her while she was working. (Emin, T. 2005a: 18)

<sup>144</sup> After she was raped, she first avoided boys for six months and then, for a period, became promiscuous. She entered as she describes, a period of '*...sexual exploration...*' during which she thought that '*...sex was great.*' (Interview: Morgan, S. 1997: 60)



production and understanding of her works. So for instance in “Why I Never Became a Dancer” (1995), a super-8 footage of the seaside resort of Margate, Emin, in a narrative voice-over, recounts frankly some of her teenage experiences. The video narrates how she turned from sex to dancing as some sort of escape and how, when participating in the local dancing finals, a gang of boys, most of whom she had slept with, started to shout “slag, slag, slag” so loudly, that they drove her off the dance floor. The film ends with Emin stating how this event determined her to leave Margate and dancing to the camera whilst naming all the boys that had taunted her, she finishes with how she thought that she was better than all of those boys. (Durden, M. 2002: 21/22)

Emin left school with no O-levels. Not really having participated in school life since she was thirteen, she explained, that she had ‘...*discovered men, sex and nightclubs*’ instead. (Emin, T. 2005a: 48) Finally, she decided to go back at fifteen to sit a few CSEs, gaining an award in drama. (Emin, T. 2005a: 48) After her exams she quit school altogether and moved to London where she took on various different jobs that enabled her to support herself.<sup>145</sup> (Interview: Vendrame, S. 2000) Eventually, she enrolled at the Sir John Cass School of Art in the East End, from which she won a place at Maidstone College of Art, in 1983. (Stuart, J. 2004) ‘*After doing all sorts of things, meeting all kinds of people...*’ as Tracey Emin explained, ‘...*I finally went to art school, to Maidstone College of Art, in 1983. I was twenty by then and to me it seemed a long way from school*’ (Interview: Vendrame S. 2000) She began studying for a fashion degree at Maidstone, something she considered herself to be ‘...*crap at...*’, but concluded ‘...*I did learn to sew...*’, before she finally switched to fine art. (Mistry, M. 2004) Considering those years as some of the best experiences in her life, she graduated with a 1st in printmaking, in 1986. (Field, M. 2002) In 1987, Tracey Emin moved to London to study at the Royal College of Art, where she,

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<sup>145</sup> She worked mainly in retail, selling clothes or shoes. Please see interview with Simona Vendrame in July 2000: Vendrame, S. (2000) “Tracey Emin”, Interview in: *Tema Celeste*, July, see: <http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/traceyemin>, accessed 5.3.2006

describing this time as a very negative experience, obtained an MA in painting, in 1989.

When she left, she had a relationship that resulted in two abortions.<sup>146</sup> The first, in 1990, was particularly traumatic as, returning to the hospital because of feeling ill, a foetus slithered down her thigh as she got out of the cab. It was a twin that had been missed by the doctors and the incident resulted in Emin destroying all her paintings and giving up making art all together. (Stuart, J. 2004) In 1992, instead of following her artistic career, Emin took a job as a tutor of young adults with Southwark Council (Vara, R. 2002b), during which time she also studied philosophy at Birbeck College for two years. (Interview: Bowie, D. 2001)

She was eventually steered back to art when she met Sarah Lucas, with whom she became close friends. The pair took over a shop in Bethnal Green in 1993, where they made and sold T-shirts and where she eventually met the art dealer Jay Jopling. (Stuart, J. 2004) Being very short of money Emin decided the same year to invite people to invest in her creative potential. For £10 they would receive four letters—three official ones and one personal. (Bagley, C. 2001) Forty people subscribed and one of them, the art dealer Jay Jopling, was so moved by an eighteen-page epistle he had received, telling him all about her abortion, that in 1993 he offered her a show at his gallery in St. James. (Cox, R. 2005) She called her show “My Major Retrospective”, thinking that it would be her first and last show ever, but it turned out to be a new beginning. She was seen by admirers and some critics as somehow fresh and original in her approach to exhibiting her autobiographical writings and mementoes. For instance, she included in the show a crumpled packet of cigarettes, supposedly removed from the hand of her Uncle Colin, after he was killed in a car crash. (Field, M. 2004)

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<sup>146</sup> Emin thought she could not get pregnant as she had had very bad gonorrhea as a teenager and the doctor had told her that she was sterile. See: (Barber, L. 2001)

However, it was not until the legendary moment when she appeared utterly drunk on Channel 4's live Turner Prize television debate "Is Painting Dead" in 1997 and after having insulted various prestigious male guests, announced that she would rather be in the pub with friends, that Tracey Emin's reputation spread. (Boulton, D. 2003) The subsequent exhibition of her tent "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-95", at the Royal Academy's exhibition "Sensation" in 1997, helped to finally establish her name and culminated in her being nominated for the prestigious Turner prize in 1999. From then onwards she gained a firm national and international reputation as an artist. (Field, M. 2004)

### Strangeland

Tracey Emin's book "Strangeland" (2005)<sup>147</sup>, a searing, disjointed combination of memoirs and confessions of her life rather than a timeline-based biography, is divided into three sections: Motherland, Fatherland and Traceyland. In the first, Emin describes her childhood growing up in Margate. In the second, she writes about her visits to her father's homeland, Turkey and in the third, she covers her life as an artist living in London. (Cox, R. 2005) Much of the book makes for uncomfortable reading. Emin talks with fierce frankness about being raped, about being sexually abused as a child and about the trauma of her abortion. Though it can not be known to what extent the written material reflects truthfully Emin's past and there are quite a few inconsistencies<sup>148</sup>, nonetheless, it can be argued that the book echoes the strong emotional bonds that have always existed between Emin, her mother Pam, father Enver, twin brother Paul and her Nan. The journeys she took as

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<sup>147</sup> Nicholas Blincoe, a novelist, describes how it took Emin six years, before she finally submitted, not the novel as previously agreed upon, but '*...a pile of papers and journals that amounted to everything she had ever written over 20 years....*' wanting to know, '*...was there a book in there?*' leaving it up to him to sort it out. (Blincoe, N. 2005: 23)

<sup>148</sup> Her former boyfriend Billy Childish for instance, referring to paragraphs written about the relationship between him and Tracey Emin explains her "errors of memory" with '*...her need to take over the identity of anyone she perceives as a victim and appropriate their feelings as her own. This brings her the sympathy and attention she has always craved and would not receive if her own complicity and aggression were known. This insight explains much of the strange land Tracey inhabits.*' (Childish, B. 2005)

a young woman with her father, which form the centre of the book, document the deepening relationship between the two, which is strongly reflected in many of the incidents that, as Nicholas Blincoe points out, '*...emerge raw from dream-like memory: which is what makes the book so funny and so shocking.*' (Blincoe, N. 2005: 23) The rawness of her book is what it distinguishes it from conventional, autobiographical writing. As Alev Adil criticises, her '*...grammar and sentence construction are shoddy; she works with a limited palette in terms of vocabulary and technique, and is self-obsessed and unperceptive. Fascinating stories are briefly glimpsed...but Tracey has little to tell us about anyone but herself.*' (Adil, A. 2005)

Though it can not be known for sure if readability and complexity were Emin's goals, it could indeed be argued that Emin's writing favours authenticity over craft, by perhaps deliberately choosing an inept and sensationalist exploration of her very personal victim hood in order to suggest unmediated immediacy - something we are all too familiar with from looking at her other art works.<sup>149</sup> Authenticity, in Emin's case, does not necessarily correlate with truthfulness, rather more with the feeling of immediacy, with an uncontrolled outpouring of feelings, dreams and moments in time that she tries to hold onto in her work. (Townsend 2005)

Therefore, Alev Adil's arguments about the alienation and ignorance in Tracey Emin's exploration of her Turkish Cypriot heritage, with her father's misinterpretation of history and her false translation of so called Turkish foul words, that turn out to be non-existent, might not be relevant in the interpretation of her book. (Adil, A. 2005) Furthermore, it could be argued, that these "little fine tunings" of reality versus fantasy are, for her, insignificant, considering that she is much more concerned with conveying the instantaneous feelings of a particular moment in time, or as Rachel Cusk concludes, it is '*...like all her work, frank, squalid and romantic.*' (Cusk, R. 2005)

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<sup>149</sup> This seems to be plausible considering the fact that her work was edited by Nicholas Blincoe, a competent novelist and editor of "The Times" who could have easily advised her otherwise.

The way she jumps between first person narration and third person recitation in “Strangeland”, could be read as a play between intimacy and distance similar to her video “The Interview” (1999). Here two child-size chairs with slippers beside them are arranged in front of two old-fashioned televisions, which show a video where the artist, in different guises, confronts herself in a spiral of self-loathing.<sup>150</sup> The self loathing also becomes apparent in her writing “This is Another Place” (2003)<sup>151</sup>, where she alternates between accusing herself ‘...*I can not believe how much I have fucked up in love physically...*’ and ‘...*Ugly Bitch...*’ (Emin, T. 2003: not paginated), feeling sorry for herself ‘...*I know know know know – how much these fucking things hurt...*’ (Emin, T. 2003: not paginated) and condemning somebody else, either a specific person from her past or even the reader/ viewer, by shouting out, admittedly in written form, ‘...*People like you need to fuck people like me*’; ‘...*Fucking Cunt Pervert...*’ (Emin, T. 2003: not paginated) and so it goes on. Switching from first person narrative, to third person narration, the dialoguing “she” and “I” seem to renegotiate the border between prose and poetry, fiction and reality. Speaking to herself, or about herself to herself, or about herself to others, or directly addressing somebody that played a role in her life at some point in time, or even addressing a third person in her written art works, such as the reader or viewer, it is not necessarily clear at all times who the addressee might be.

Authenticity in the sense of truthfulness generally ought not to be examined too intensely in Emin’s work. Although it cannot be known to what extent her reminiscences are based on real events, in these two written testimonies of her past in particular, it seems feasible that elements of autobiography in her work merge

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<sup>150</sup> On each screen was a video of the artist sitting on opposite ends of the same couch. In one, she is shown, as sexy and stylish, while in the other she is dressed more practically, as if ready for a hard day in the studio. The two sides of her personality bicker about how she deals with the world, whether she overplays her sexuality and how screwed up she really is. (Arning, B. 1999) For the whole conversation of “The Interview” see: Schumacher, R./ Winzen, M. (Eds.) (2003) Just Love Me; Post/ Feminist Positions of the 1990s from the Goetz Collection, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter Koenig, Koeln, pp.56-62

<sup>151</sup> This booklet, in an edition of 3000, formed the catalogue for her exhibition “This is Another Place” at “Modern Art Oxford” (November 10<sup>th</sup> until January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2003). See: Emin, T. (2003) This is Another Place, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford

quite regularly into fantasies and polemic.<sup>152</sup> However, in order to describe her style of writing, one argument seems to appear conceivable: Emin does not construct texts of significant complexity. Her written work probably falls into the category of theoretical fictions, where traditional distinctions between theory and fiction are either deliberately ignored, or to a certain extent deliberately transgressed. (Macey, D. 2000: 106)

It appears that Emin quite often uses language as if spoken amongst women themselves, when there is no one, in particular no male listener around, to overhear the conversation. “The Proper Steps for Dealing with an Unwanted Pregnancy”, a four page chapter of her book “Strangeland”, for instance, is straightforwardly speaking to women, advising them what to do in case of a suspected pregnancy. (Emin, T. 2005a: 147-150) The difference between an official pamphlet about the termination procedure of an unwanted pregnancy and her four pages appears to be that Emin speaks directly from her own experiences. Even ignoring for a moment that the reader might already know about the fact that Emin herself has had two abortions, the writing is nevertheless, presented as if composed by someone who has had intimate experience with the termination of a pregnancy. Sentences such as, *‘You may feel terribly broody and want to steal babies. ...Try not get too out-of-your-head as some weird, deep-seated emotions might fly to the surface when you least expect them...’* (Emin, T. 2005a: 150) are spoken from a knowingly subjective position.<sup>153</sup> These are utterances that are most likely to be found in intimate and personal situations between women themselves, where one advises another and probably not in an official counselling context.

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<sup>152</sup> The reader just needs to be reminded of Billy Childish’s counter position to “Strangeland”, see footnote 148.

<sup>153</sup> At this point, it should be said that the reliability of lived experience as a guide to reality has been under attack by theorists since the 1960s. This structuralist view naturally had consequences on questions such as authenticity of experiences, as those narratives were seen as *‘...embedded in a fixed structure of signification based on difference...’* such as male vs. female and determined by power relations in societies. (Elwes, C. 2005: 78) For the purpose of this thesis, a longer discussion is not viable.

*'Write yourself. Your body must be heard...'* (Cixous, H. 1980: 50) seems to be the slogan Emin is following when she moves away from the traditional analysis and representation of female bodies<sup>154</sup> and when she writes as a woman about the female body and its tenderness *'...from a position of lived experience with one's own body...'* in order, to communicate her pain, whether physical or emotional, to others, who might likewise have suffered. (Cubbison, L. 1997: 38) Turning away, consciously or unconsciously, from traditional analysis and representation of the female subject position for her means turning inwards, exploring her own self. In the process, possibly trying to get people, whether male or female, to understand, or at least be touched by her emotional outpourings, she combines body and mind and writes from lived experiences, without fear of the exposure and the consequent vulnerability that might ensue by opening up her inner self. Ultimately, as Laurie Cubbison argues, this offers the possibility to write oneself into existence. (Cubbison, L. 1997: 31-33)

If one agrees that Emin's writings in "Strangeland" and also in "This is Another Place", do not follow traditional<sup>155</sup> semiotic structures of writing. If one concurs that her emotional literary outpourings are referring to her own intimate experiences and are written from a female subjective position as from one woman to another, then it does not seem too far fetched to link her work to the idea of 'l'Ecriture feminine'<sup>156</sup>, as mainly proposed by feminist writers Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.

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<sup>154</sup> Female bodies in this case refer to both, the literal depiction of women in art, as well as the subjectivity of female experience.

<sup>155</sup> Will be explained below

<sup>156</sup> As Elizabeth Lee explained, there is no exact definition of what l'Ecriture feminine includes, as *'...any definition would then categorize it and safely subsume it as a genre under the linear patriarchal structure.'* It would lead too far, for the purpose of this paper, to discuss in any length the problems that occurred with the development of the idea of l'Ecriture feminine. The concept of l'Ecriture feminine had to face accusations, such as sexist essentialism caused by stressing the biological form of female experience, marginalisation and ghettoisation of both women's literature and theory through determination that only women were able to read those texts successfully (though men were considered as equally capable of producing them) and finally, being predominantly a white woman's literary tradition, accusations of racism, as it rarely referred to racial or class differences between women. For the objective of this text, it should be sufficient to determine a relationship between Tracey Emin's writings and some ideas of l'Ecriture feminine. (Lee, E. 1997)

*'L'écriture féminine is writing grounded in women's experience of the body and sexuality, an experience which is not mediated by men and by patriarchy.'* and *'...not compromised and contained by patriarchal discourses.'* (Wolff, J. 2003: 420) What Janet Wolff refers to as 'patriarchal discourses' might be better explained by Helen Cixous as the *'...libidinal and cultural - hence political, typically masculine economy...'* of writing. (Cixous, H. 1980: 249) Cixous speaks of a traditional male writing, a writing where *'...the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak.'* (Cixous, H. 1980: 249) Cixous saw specifically in writing, the chance for subversive thought, *'...the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.'* (Cixous, H. 1980: 249)

The reasons for the traditional male writing can be seen as two fold. Firstly, as Julia Kristeva explained, the child is born into the language of the Symbolic, which follows the law of the father. Language is therefore male dominated. At the same time with birth, the child experiences the semiotic, which is the pre-linguistic stage. These are for instance, the bodily drives, rhythms, etc... that the child experiences in the infantile fusion with the mother. These pleasures and feelings are repressed once the child enters the Symbolic stage, but stay somewhere in the unconscious and can therefore, emerge at a later stage. The semiotic can be articulated and the feminine nature of writing, has its origins in the pre-Symbolic, the pre-patriarchal stage of the child-mother relationship. We could therefore, refer to this as writing from the unconscious. However, as Kristeva points out, in praxis the semiotic exists within the structures of language, or in other words, the Symbolic and it can only be articulated if the writer breaks with the rules of the Symbolic. (Wolff, J. 2003: 420) Secondly, as Cixous stated, *'...the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory*



*phallocentrism.* ' (Cixous, H. 1980: 249) And as has been shown in chapter 2.2.1: reasoning is something that is profoundly linked to the male sex.

Consequently, for women to break through the patriarchal structure of language, to feminise the authoritarianism of conventional historical language and make themselves heard and finally, to put "woman"<sup>157</sup> into discourse, they have to break down fixed meaning, they have to rupture the coherence, the seamlessness, the stability, of the masculine structured text. This rupture of meaning in written work reflects in a similar sense what has been discussed in chapter 2.2.2., namely the idea and the goal of feminist artists to counteract the patriarchal narrative of art and culture. by transgressing the traditional boundaries of the body and by following the idea of abjection. This implicates creating a gap by destabilising the system of representation and drawing the viewer to a place where traditional meaning collapses.

In terms of Tracey Emin, it could be argued that this is exactly what she is doing. She breaks the traditional rules of masculine writing, by writing about her own sexuality and creating a new signifying system with more play and fluidity than the existing rigid, phallogentric, symbolic order. Words and sentences such as '*Size-well, it does matter, Tits, bum, crack, arse, mouth, dick: we all need a good fit.*' (Emin, T. 2005a: 139) or '*No. No means no, no. And "please" does not necessarily mean "Please, fuck me". It can mean "Please stop", but there is no breath left to finish the sentence. I remember when I was fourteen, crying on some sofa. I had just been fucked by an almost stranger. I mean, I knew his surname...*' might give an indication of how Emin articulates her desires, how she describes in detail her experiences and how she chooses her wording to describe particular body parts in a way, that most certainly transgresses the traditional boundaries of description. Often her sentence structure is erratic and her descriptions do not make sense in our

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<sup>157</sup> "Woman" is meant here in the Lacanian sense as a subject position within the Symbolic, defined by/as other, as lack, as absence. See for instance Klages, M. (2001) "Poststructuralist Feminist Theory", see: <http://www.colorado.edu/English/engl2010mk/cixous.lec.html>, accessed 11.3.2006

traditional understanding, for e.g. *'Another traumatic day. But the bright sun still shone. The nights were drawing out. As I left the building people said, "Hey Tracey, why the umbrella?" Sulkily, I said, "It stops me feeling alone."'* (Emin, T. 2005a: 145)

One could finish this section by saying Emin's work is solely about Emin and to some extent this is certainly justified. Nevertheless, this might miss the point, as Jeanette Winterson so rightly points out, *'Yes, the personal life is in there, but even with something as intimate as Tracey Emin's STRANGELAND, it would be a mistake not to recognise the bigger, bolder enterprise of finding a voice for others, and offering a way of seeing that is both absolutely your own, and somehow for everyone.'* (Winterson, J. 2006)

#### **4.2. Making a Show of Herself: Tracey Emin and Confessional Art**

*'I've got to be an artist, it's all I've got. I need God like I need art; I need art like I need God.'* (Interview: Wright, K. 2005a: 34)

*'People think my work is about sex, but actually a lot of it is about faith, and there are moments of a touching nature in my work, moments when I realize it isn't all about me. I think "God" is quite a good word to describe that feeling. I'm really not talking about religion at all; it is something bigger than that.'* (Interview: Wright, K. 2005a: 36)

*'I'm very genuine, with me, what you see is what you get.'* (Interview: Walsh, J. 2002)

Depending on whether one believes in the veracity of her genuineness, her work becomes either a very courageous, direct, passionate, unremittingly autobiographical and confessional display of female, as well as more generally human desires,

emotions and weaknesses. In short it, seen from that point of view, her work becomes a ceremony of explosive expressions of her pain that carry the marks of authenticity. Alternatively, if suspected otherwise, Tracey Emin's work may well be the output of a very clever coordinated marketing strategy, in which Emin invents a traumatic past and creates a persona whose predilections, particularly her obsession with sex, play well in the media and out of which she is able to generate a large amount of saleable work.

Whatever one might think about her work, Emin could be seen to present the world in a way that one has perhaps not seen it before, or as Melanie McGrath puts it *'...Emin's art presents the world in ways you have always known about but never admitted, or you've never wanted to admit, or never perhaps until that moment articulated. If it's any good, art does this....'* (McGrath, M. 2002) Emin acts as the mediator between her most personal experiences and their expression and just because her art appears to be literal, does not mean it has to be taken literally. Indeed, though it can not be known how much of her work, as she herself admits, is edited, considered and in its final production, very much calculated, it could nevertheless be argued that because her work is based on her shifting impressions, her memory and the exigencies of narrative, that the stories she tells, whether authentic or not, seem to be moving.

As Tracey Emin argues, *'...I believe that, as an artist, I have a responsibility toward others and a destiny that prevents me from living a "normal" life;...I feel like a witness who, through my work, is compelled to transform feelings and concepts belonging to individuals in every place and every time, into something objective and universal.'* (Interview: Vendrame S. 2000) It could be said about her work, that although she deals relentlessly with the minutiae of her own life, she touches largely on issues that are common to many. Sexuality, mortality, the creation of meaning in life and what it means to be a female artist are just some of the topics that she shares with feminist artists of the past.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> The last statement will be taken up at a later stage in this paper.

#### **4.2.1. Tracey Emin and “Femin”- Experience**

Rosemary Betterton rightly claims that Tracey Emin’s work and her aesthetic strategies explicitly draw on gendered identities offered within mass culture, but implicitly on a reworking of sexual politics in art from the 1970s onwards and that her work is more indebted to earlier histories than her many advocates and critics have suggested. (Betterton, R. 2000: 14) She further proposes that Emin ‘...*is consciously engaged in sexual politics, albeit of an individualized kind, and that her kind of gender-identity-based work would be impossible without an awareness of feminist “fore-mothers”...*’ (Ibid.)

This seems to be a plausible argument, as without doubt Emin was confronted with ideas of feminist art during her time at Maidstone College of Art and at the Royal College of Art. (Betterton, R. 2002: 35/36) Roszika Parker’s influential book, “The Subversive Stitch”, in which she explores the role of embroidery in the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s, for instance, was published in 1984, just a year into Emin’s fashion studies at Maidstone. Parker cites the work of artists such as Kate Walker, Margaret Harrison, Catherine Riley, Monica Ross and Phil Goodall as having made a crucial contribution to feminist understanding of the uses of embroidery and textiles in socially and gender-specific ways, something that could not have been missed by a fashion student of that time. (Betterton, R. 2002: 35/36) Furthermore, Emin’s years of studying saw a widespread accumulation of feminist publications and exhibitions that were widely reviewed and discussed in the mainstream and art press. (Parker, R. / Pollock, G. (Eds.) 1987: 185-259)

Janis Jeffries, a feminist practitioner and theorist who taught at Maidstone College of Art<sup>159</sup> during Emin’s attendance states clearly: ‘*Emin was on the Painting course at Maidstone and came across all of us through tutorial and seminars so she would have been aware of the experiences and debates that we raised and our activities*

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<sup>159</sup> Janis Jeffries went on from Maidstone to run the MA textile course at Goldsmiths College, London. (Betterton, R. 2000: 28)

*outside the institution.* ' (Jeffries, J., interview via email, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2007)

Furthermore, although Emin is not referring to specific theoretical discourses that might have influenced her work, a statement such as '*...And we all learned a lot of disciplines at art school. We weren't just put in a room and told to do whatever we like. You don't get a degree in art by doing that. You have to do a thesis, which people forget. You have to study art history, which people forget.*' (Interview: Sweet, M. 2002) serves as a testimony to her involvement in an intellectual and theoretical analysis of debates that took place during her study years.

Consequently, arguments, such as those formulated by John Roberts, that Emin's work is a '*...proletarian-philistine reflex against '80s feminist propriety about the body...*' and further that '*...embracing the overtly pornographic and confessional, have become a means of releasing women's sexuality from the comforts of a "progressive eroticism" into an angry voluptuousness...*' (Roberts, J. 1996: 38) tend to not only conflate the different genres of pornography and confession, but by reducing her work to a "reflex" against the negative stereotypes of feminist views of the 1980s, they also to resist a more complex reading of Emin's work within the context of previous women's art practices,.

It is certainly true that, while Mary Kelly, whose work during the 1980s engaged in a critical practice of representation, sought consciously to separate the viewer from identification with the autobiographical substance of her work, Emin unrelentingly adopts a confessional mode in which she herself is the main character of her own account. (Chapter 2.3.2.) But only because the sexual politics of the 1990s, allowed not only men but also women to behave badly and talk dirty, to decipher Emin's work simply as "angry voluptuousness" would not take into account the deliberately highly mediated procedures involved in Emin's recreation of her own life narratives, something that is often not recognised by her critics.

Interestingly enough it appears to be mainly male critics who have difficulties addressing her work, which may well be caused by, as Melanie McGrath puts it,

Emin's '*...virulent working-classness*', which tends to confuse some in the British art world. (McGrath, M. 2002) It is certainly true that Emin does not express herself in a way that would be expected of a middle-class person or someone with an university education. Nevertheless, as McGrath rightly points out, she is perfectly articulate when she wants to be and the reason that Emin infuriates some of the British art critics is because '*...she plays up to it while at the same time disregarding it.*' (McGrath, M. 2002) Emin does not portray the image of an artist in the way the British art world might have been used to. She is not the only one of the YBAs who relishes her commercial success with all the enthusiasm of the once impoverished, and who does not necessarily see a link between being rich and well behaved.

Not being a respecter of polite, bourgeois sensibilities, she has appeared in adverts for Bombay Gin and Becks beer and she would openly tell you that she had not worked on her overdue book for so many years, as she could make more money from her blankets with much less work. (McGrath, M. 2002) In Emin's defence, Andrew Nairne describes how the extreme irony and distance noted in women's art from the 1980s has vanished and the direct and personal nature of Emin's work is the very element that appeals to her followers, but also the element which is difficult for the '*...anti Emin brigade...*' to accept. (Field, M. 2002)

Nevertheless, whatever the critics might think about Emin and her work, as Joanna Burton verbalises, '*...the question of whether Emin's work embodies a breed of balls-out feminism or simply buoys up pre-existing notions of female hyperbole or hysteria has been posed with regularity since she came on the scene. Yet imagining that the success of contemporary feminism can be gauged by whether a woman can talk trash at the volume of her male counterpart would be decidedly simplistic.*' (Burton, J. 2006: 269) With Emin's recurrent and in-your-face supplications for love, for pregnancy and for attention, it is easy to forget, in a society with still surprisingly resilient assumptions about gender, that her desires might be quite conventional and that the accumulation of the often-misinterpreted banalities of her intimate memories, actually reflect a larger social context.

Tracey Emin frequently uses images, objects and materials from her own life to engage in taboo subjects, such as rape and abortion. Her art consciously reworks her life-story as a set of narratives and fantasies. It might be significant, also for “Strangeland”, that most of her material is derived from the period before she became an artist, predominantly from her childhood-, adolescence- and early adult sexual experiences. As Rosemary Betterton proposes, the highly verbal and vocal characteristics of her work suggest a loss, a gap that is repeatedly filled with words as a means of resistance against her former silencing, as an opportunity to answer back and to finally talk about the things that were unspeakable throughout her childhood. (Betterton, R. 2000: 20) This is evident for example, in her video pieces, where her voice insistently retells stories of growing up as a sexually active and abused child in Margate. However, to view her narratives and the open vocalisation of her most intimate emotions as only some kind of exhibitionism would possibly be too limited an interpretation. Her self-revelations could just as well be understood as a counter aesthetic and a conscious reclaiming of female identity and sexuality in a way similar to feminist art from the 1960s and 1970s. (Chapter 2.2.2.)

To recap: feminist artists from the 1960s and 1970s emphasised and enacted personal experiences and broke taboos. Their art was often characterised by a self-conscious appropriation of the conditions of one's own existence and identity, characteristics that can be found widely in Emin's work, even though the context of her work might be different to that of previous generations of feminist artists. Her work is produced within an increasingly confessional media culture in which participants, often women in particular, are incited to reveal their intimate selves to the public. Television shows, such as: *Kilroy*, *Vanessa*, or *Oprah Winfrey*, affirm such public revelations and therefore, Emin's often criticised transgression of the traditional boundaries of what is considered “fine art”, may well become less contravening.

To give but one example: in accordance with these television chat / therapy shows, Tracey Emin put on a performance together with Billy Childish at the South London

Gallery<sup>160</sup> in 1997, years after the former couple had split up. The performance was a kind of public shock therapy event, with both of them going over what had gone wrong between them. It was shocking to see two people publicly discussing topics such as violence, betrayal, anal sex, abortions, diarrhoea and ‘the clap’ right in front of the viewer. At the same time it was harrowing, embarrassing and amusing, experiences a viewer could very likely expect from similar theatrical shows on television. (Collings, M. 2001 67/68) Nevertheless, while such television shows are in fact complexly crafted to convey artless, spontaneous self-exposure, Emin’s artfulness lies in the way her practices draw on various different feminine confessional modes while assuming the status of uniquely authored artworks and in a similar manner to television, presenting themselves so, as to convey unmediated intimacy.

The use of a domestic aesthetic, her personal life story and craft techniques, put Emin in the direct lineage of an earlier generation of feminist artists working in Britain and the United States, from the late 1960s onwards. She consistently uses genres and techniques, which are historically gendered, albeit not exclusively as feminine, such as embroidery and patchwork, hand-written diaries, self-portraiture and autobiography. Like the British feminist postal art project “Feministo”<sup>161</sup>, started in 1975, for instance, where women exchanged domestic art objects through the post, Emin’s work establishes a visual dialogue which derives from specifically gendered experiences and which is rendered through an unrefined aesthetic. Even though her work typically explores sexual rather than domestic oppression, the emphasis on the representation of female subjectivity and the first-person mode of address seem to have been adopted from her feminist antecedents. (Betterton, R. 2000: 22)<sup>162</sup>

Emin’s use of domestic objects is particular. She chooses objects for their personal resonance such as, her grandmother’s chair, which she partly embroidered and then

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<sup>160</sup> In connection with a show of Emin’s work that was on there at the time.

<sup>161</sup> See chapter 2.4.

<sup>162</sup> The differences will be discussed at a later stage.



used, for touring through the United States, whilst giving readings from her book “Exploration of the Soul” (1994), which is her life story from conception to the loss of her virginity.



“There’s A Lot of Money in Chairs” (1994)

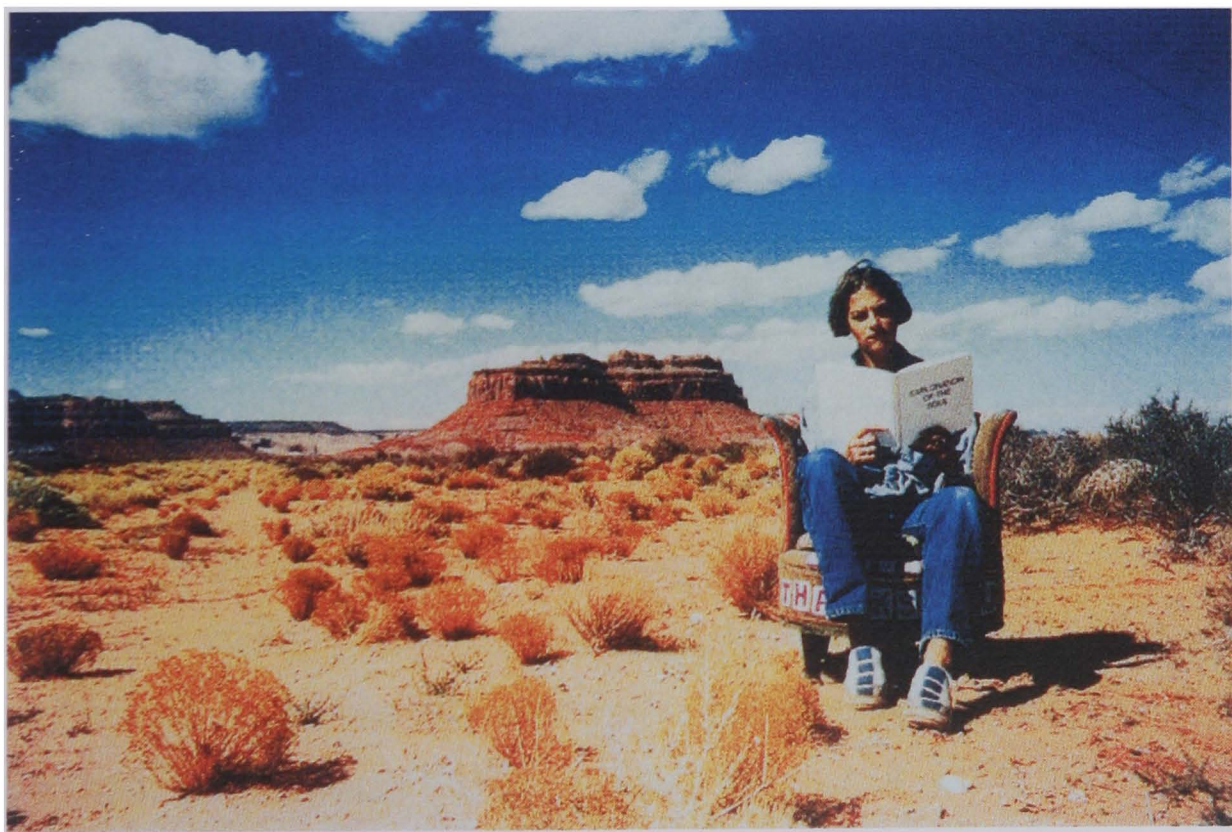
“There’s A Lot of Money in Chairs” (1994)<sup>163</sup> is a representation of Emin’s bond with her family across generations. (Smithard, P. 1997: 28/29) Significant words and sections of text are appliquéd onto the chair. They include her and her twin brother’s names, the year of her grandmother’s birth (1901) and the year of her own birth (1963) on either side of the words ‘another world’, and they refer to the passing of time and a specifically female genealogy. An exchange between the artist and her grandmother using the nicknames they had for each other: ‘Ok Puddin, Thanks Plum’, covers the bottom front of the chair and a saying of Emin’s

<sup>163</sup> The idea of using chairs to convey message is not new. Feminist artist Kim MacDonnell already deployed in the mid 70s materials and techniques, fabric and sewing, that western culture has traditionally classified as domestic and female, challenging hierarchies of gender that governed the definition and production of art in western culture. Look for example at “Wing Back Chair” (1972). (Broude, N. 1996: 212-214)



grandmother, 'There's a lot of money in chairs', is appliquéd in pink along the top and the inside of its back. On the back of the chair, the first page of "Exploration of the Soul" (1994), handwritten onto fabric, is appliquéd together with other dictums, such as, 'It's not what you inherit. It's what you do with your inheritance.' As she crossed the United States, with her then boyfriend, the writer, curator and gallery owner Carl Freedman, Emin sewed the names of the places she visited – San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Las Vegas, Monument Valley, Detroit, Pittsburgh and New York - onto the front of the chair.

The readings she gave on her trip through the USA were accompanied by tape recordings and live commentaries. The photo work "Outside Myself (Monument Valley)" (1994), which depicts Emin sitting in her grandmother's chair, reading from her book "Exploration of the Soul" (1994), somewhere in the middle of the Arizona Desert, illustrates the way the various corresponding levels in her work enter the type of dialogue she might intend to initiate in the viewers mind. (Stange, R. 2001b: 125)



"Outside Myself (Monument Valley)" (1994)

The interesting fact about the photograph "Outside Myself (Monument Valley)" (1994) is, that as a self-portrait it is loaded with different layers of representations of

herself. First, the photograph is an artwork by itself, depicting the artist who either stares at the viewer or reads the top of the page of her book, it is not entirely clear which. Then there is her self-published book, her written art, "Exploration of the Soul" (1994), from which she reads passages of her life to an invisible audience. Finally, there is her artwork, the chair "There's A lot of Money in Chairs" (1994), depicted within the photograph. It could be argued that Emin's recurrent representations of herself throughout her existence as an artist and throughout all of her works, is condensed within this one photograph. There is Emin the person and artist. There is Emin who vocally utters her experiences from her past. There is Emin the writer who compiles her memories within her book. Finally, there is Emin the artist who not only produces the chair she is sitting on, but also Emin who performs and ultimately directs the staging of her recital. It seems as if the photograph somehow tries to summarise what Emin usually diversifies over a whole range of different practices, i.e. to imply a more contradictory and ambiguous sense of herself through repetition, fragmentation and layering of images and words.

As discussed in chapter 2.3.2. feminist artists from the 1960s onwards were very much concerned with the problem of objectification that predominantly then occurs when women are represented by male artists. Investigations were made in to how women could construct images that subvert the idea of voyeurism and the male gaze and how women could try to reclaim female subjectivity and female agency by embracing their own bodies and their very subjective experiences in their art works. Autobiography, by writing from the position of marginality, by turning the private into the political and by finding a voice that could eventually be heard, presented a means for female artists to constitute new social subjects within the autobiographical tradition. Representing marginalised people in ways that explored their multifaceted experience was crucial in revising existing stereotypes and placing alternative viewpoints on the agenda. (Ferguson, R. 1990: 9)

Tracey Emin, when she voices her intimate experiences about Margate, the place where she was brought up as a child and young adolescent, does exactly what

feminist artists tried to achieve. She writes and in her photograph “Outside Myself (Monument Valley)” (1994) reads not only about Margate, but also, by extension, about ‘...*a particular form of subordinated femininity at a precise social moment... In doing this, Emin exposed the inadequacy of the classless, value-free nature of much contemporary art by giving space to the marginalised experiences of working-class femininity.*’ (Betterton, R. 2002: 30) Emin therefore, with her apparently working class roughness, touches on two subjects that were of the highest priority to feminist artists: elitism in art and giving women a voice. In her case, she gives “working class” women a voice, which interestingly enough is in itself something early feminist artists were accused of neglecting when talking about a unified female experience, i.e. the distinctions between class, race and sexual orientation.<sup>164</sup>

To discuss working-class femininity is not new. Jo Spence, for example, found that the autobiographical provided a means of interrogating the construction of her working-class femininity and the relations of her family life that informed her childhood. It also provides a means to face up to the uncomfortable issue of illness and the ensuing loss of conformity to certain social beauty ideals for women. It is a way for her to deal for instance, with her mastectomy, in a similar way as Matuschka has done. (Spence, J. 1986)/ (Ewing, W., A. 1994/ 2000: 326/ 332/ 350) But the problem with Spence’s and Emin’s work, is the common practice of collapsing the identity of the artist and her work. One way Emin, in “Outside Myself (Monument Valley)” (1994), can assert her agency as a woman and as an artist, for example, is by putting herself into her work and through this live presence she can confront the relationship between the two.

The representation of Emin as an artist at work in “Outside Myself (Monument Valley)” (1994), could be seen as presenting a challenge to common assumptions about the sex of cultural producers, as well as asserting her professionalism in juxtaposition with expectations about feminine domesticity and crossing traditional

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<sup>164</sup> For more information see: chapter 2.4

boundaries between the public and the private spheres, something that feminist artists very much tried to incorporate in their work. (Chapter 2.2.1.)

#### **4.2.2. Tracey Emin and the Representation of the Female Body**

The idea of the female artist as the creative and maternal subject is a common issue in traditional art criticism and a topic that has been extensively dealt with in Tracey Emin's work. She seems to be preoccupied with the maternal body in relation to termination and loss and as she said on Channel 4<sup>165</sup>, '*...women without children experience a different kind of loss..., a loss of not knowing how it feels to have children.*' (Emin, T. 2006a) In various interviews, as well as in her documentary on Channel 4. Emin seems to try to justify her decision not to have children. Going even further, in a kind of self-dialogue, she appears to persuade herself of the rightness of her life choices, even though, according to "Strangeland", these choices were partially made for her, as the conception of a child would have been very unlikely in her case.<sup>166</sup> (Emin, T. 2005a: 153/154, 159/159) Sentences such as '*I have never wanted children. Well, that's a lie*' give testimony of her struggle to accept that she will probably never have any children. (Emin, T. 2005a: 162)

Tracey Emin frequently uses images, objects and materials from her life to address such "dangerous subjects"<sup>167</sup> for women, as female desire, sexual acts and abortion, consciously mobilising her life story as a set of narratives and performances.

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<sup>165</sup> Art Review published in 2005 a list of the 100 most powerful people in the art world. In the top 30, there was only one woman and she was not an artist, but a collector. The reason for this and why female artists are still paid less than their male counterparts was one of the questions Tracey Emin investigated in her show "Art Shock: What Price Art?" (2006) on Channel 4. The documentary went further with Emin looking into the lives and work of some of the world's most famous female artists, from the present and the recent past and what sacrifices and life choices they might have made for their success. Do their relationships suffer? Do they have to choose between family and art? Are these the choices that all successful women have to make, not simply artists? Finally, Tracey reflected on her own life to this point and the extent to which, in early middle age, she has made sacrifices for her art.

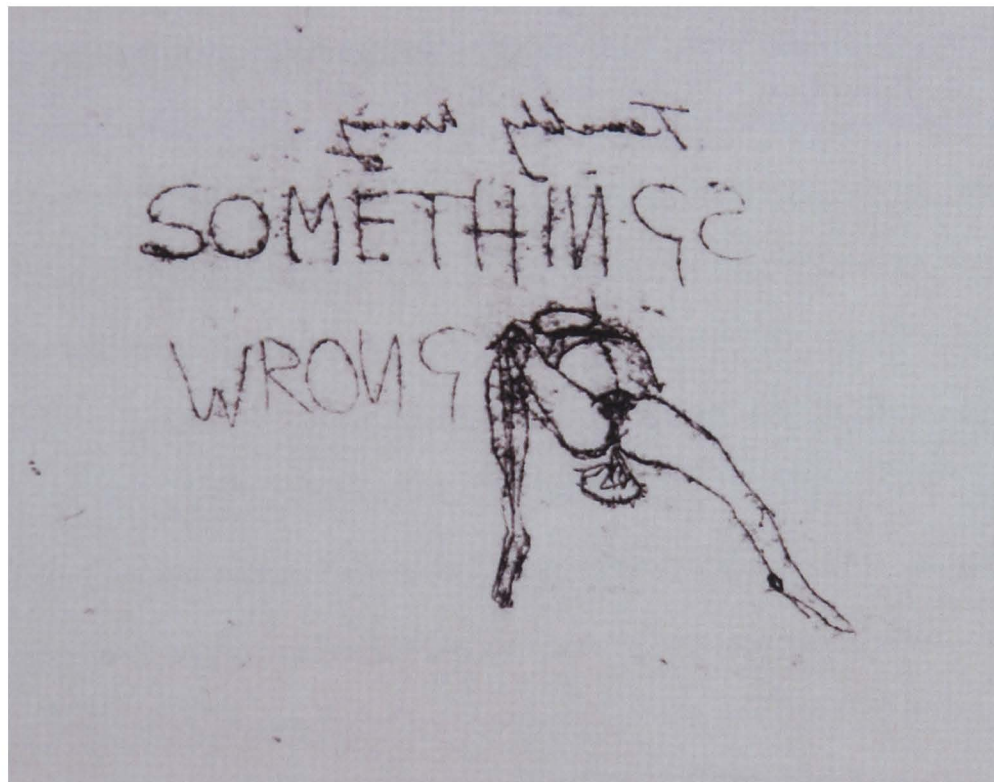
<sup>166</sup> Due to a serious illness when she was nineteen and due to her two abortions. (Emin, T. 2005a:153/154, 159/159)

<sup>167</sup> This will be dealt with at a later stage.



Through her art works, she repeatedly refers to her own pregnancies and terminations.<sup>168</sup> By the strategic employment of her own body, she works with the differences and connections between the ideal and the real, between the ugly and the beautiful. This can be particularly seen in her '*...bad sex aesthetic...*' where she explores experiences that can be elating, pleasurable, or even abject. (Doyle, J. 2002: 102)

For example, the monoprint "Terreibly Wrong" (1999) shows the artist's nude body with an arched back and legs apart, expelling '*...an abortive squiggly pile of blood, shit or semen...*' (Doyle, J. 2002: 114)



"Terreibly Wrong" (1999)

Here, Emin renders the female body with crude forceful strokes. The frontal perspective, emphasising the woman's vulnerability, is reminiscent of the female body giving birth. Its isolated placing under the script "Terreibly Wrong" (in reverse) and "SOMETHING'S WRONG", could have the effect of both touching and

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<sup>168</sup> In her 2002 show at Modern Art Oxford, "This is another place", one of the rooms contained pieces concerned with abortions, pregnancy and her childlessness.

distancing the viewer. The technique of monoprint, drawing an image directly onto the plate, which is then reversed in the printing process, conveys both the immediacy of the direct trace of Emin's hand and articulates a sense of otherness, of that, which is familiar, becoming strange. Or as Jennifer Doyle suggests, both '*...a story that is completely scripted and absolutely personal*' (Doyle, J. 2002: 109)

Whether or not it is a literal representation of a termination, it might be reminiscent of Frida Kahlo's<sup>169</sup> "Birth" (1932), in which she depicts her own birth, but also points to the miscarriages she had shortly before she did the painting. Encouraged by her husband Diego Riviera, Kahlo, a forerunner for feminist artists and adopted by them as such, documented the major events of her life, including ideas about motherhood and miscarriages, in a series of paintings, similar to Emin. (Kettenmann, A. 2003)/ (Fusco, C. 2001: 287)



Frida Kahlo "My Birth" or "Bed" (1932)

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<sup>169</sup> Emin's work, as she herself wrote, was influenced by Frieda Kahlo ever since she had been to The Royal College of Art. (Emin, T. 2005b: 64)

Aspects of Emin's experience of pregnancy and abortion feature repeatedly in her work. For instance, the sculptural and video installations "The first time I was pregnant I started to crochet the baby a shawl" (1990-2000), "Homage of Edvard Munch and all my Dead Children" (1998) and two films, "How It Feels" (1996) and "I Don't Think So" (2000), all deal with her gendered feelings of loss and mourning due to the trauma of termination. But Emin provides her mourning-self the opportunity to speak out, to make her voice heard. She uses her art as a means of resistance against the silencing and thus as a voice in relation to an unspeakable experience, something that was of the highest priority for feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>170</sup>

Emin's enactment of shame and mourning in her work resonates with contemporary debates about abortion. For feminists, visual images of conception and pregnancy have become a crucial site of struggle in abortion politics and a counter weight to representations of foetal imaging and foetal personhood, that seem to ignore the woman as maternal subject. (Betterton, R. 2006) As Peggy Phelan argues, anti-abortion campaigns tend to ignore the experiences of pregnant women in their representations of the foetus, thus stressing, '*...the illegibility of the materiality of a pregnant body within a visual economy that everywhere marks the boundary between self and other. Embodied in and by what is and is not one body, the visibly pregnant women makes the possibility of a continuous subject/ivity real.*' (Phelan, P. 1993: 171) Phelan suggest, there is a fundamental contradiction in the representation of the maternal subject as both the embodiment of lawful desire for reproduction within a patriarchal economy and as '*...the spectre of the monstrous, forever murdering/castrating, mother.*' (Phelan, P. 1993: 171)

In "Terribly Wrong" (1999), one could argue that Emin presents the viewer with exactly such a monstrous spectacle of an abject maternal body, but in a way that makes sure that the viewer is aware of the embodied pain of the maternal subject who has suffered loss through termination. Emin refuses to accept the invisibility

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<sup>170</sup> See chapter 2.2.2. "...the personal is the political..."



assigned to abortion, or the boundary between self and other that such an abortion constitutes. Emin's repeated representations of loss emphasise both, the continuity of the physical and emotional pain and the continuity of a relationship with those, for whom she mourns, as well as the need to give women a voice and to render women as subjects and agents in the process of termination and not as passive objects upon which society can act. As Betterton notes, the sexual politics of Emin's work involves an '*...uninterrupted ambivalence between excess and absence in the over-presence of the artist in the work...*' and in her refusal to leave the scene. Her work does not offer consolation for loss, but insists on its continuous material presence '*...traced through images and mementoes of her (un) maternal body.*' (Betterton, R. 2006)

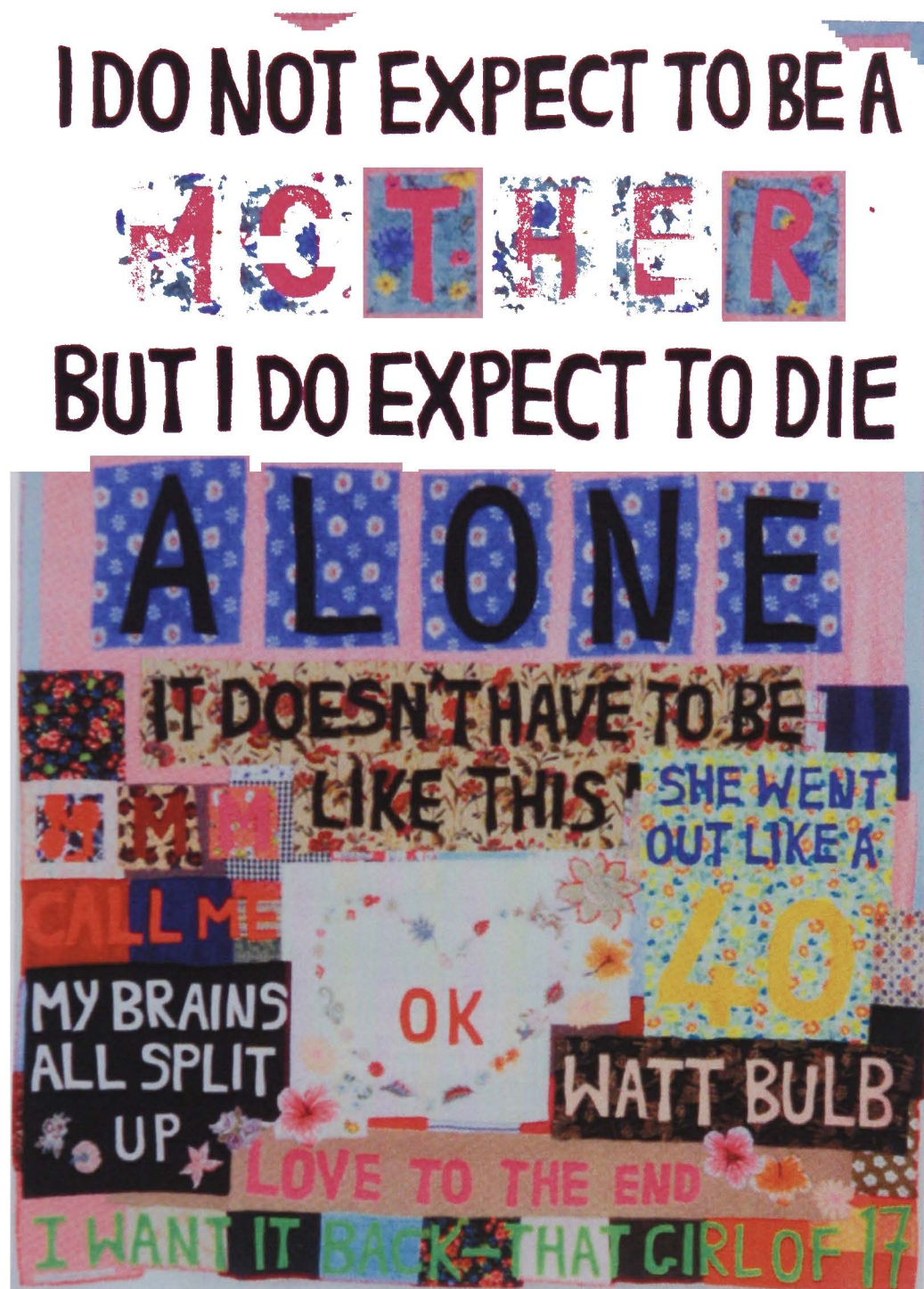
Tracey Emin's use of appliquéd blankets or quilts is a particularly appropriate medium with which to communicate her views on her childless state and her ambiguous feelings in relation to pregnancy, abortion and childbirth. The proclamation "I do not expect to be a mother, but I do expect to die alone" (2002), inscribed in one of her appliquéd blankets, is intensified in its statement of the solitary self, by her use of textiles and sewing. Yet her combination of working with textiles and the inscriptions presented are totally at odds with the domestic, self-sacrificing connotations of women's "homemaking" crafts. (Doy, G. 2005: 74)

The creation of appliquéd blankets or quilts, one even made out of her friends' clothes<sup>171</sup>, could be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the large scale of her blankets contrast with the small-scale blankets usually associated with comforting babies or little children, which are usually used as transitional objects in the absence of the mother. For the psychoanalyst and object relations theorist D.W. Winnicott, the transitional object bridges the gap between the infant self and the surrounding world during the process of his/her separation from the mother and the formation of independent selfhood. In other words, the blanket, which might be seen as standing

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<sup>171</sup> Emin was borrowing her friends' clothes, did some self-portraits wearing them and finally, cut them up to use in her blankets without her friends knowing it. (Interview: Wright, K. 2005b)

in for the breast of the mother, is thus linked to the process of subject development and the crucial nature of the mother-child relationship in this process. (Cameron, K. 1996: 42)



"I do not expect to be a mother, but I do expect to die alone" (2002)

The concept of subject development is in itself strongly linked to the idea of how a female consciousness and the idea of female experience, is developed. It gives possible answers to questions surrounding female identity and gender development in the society and it was and is used by feminists to explore issues such as, the representation of women in art and the "making of women" in our culture. (Chapter 2.2.2.)

The second interpretation of the quilts, as Jan Avgikos puts it, as ‘...*one of the most treasured feminist-art icons...*’ (Avgikos, J. 1999: 139) could be formulated by looking at the way in which they have been produced. Emin’s sewing in a circle of women<sup>172</sup>, (the idea of collaborative work springs to mind, as done by quite a few feminist artists<sup>173</sup>), evokes impressions of traditional female domestic craft. Quilts were made, sometimes in groups, usually to mark life events. Sewing also came to have a strong political and artistic dimension during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Banners adorned with appliqué and embroidery played a key role in political activism. Paraded by the Trade Union movement, they were also produced by campaigners for women’s suffrage. Later, during the second wave of feminism, artists, such as, Miriam Schapiro and Faith Ringgold, used appliqué and patchwork quilting in their artworks, consciously using a medium usually associated with decorative and domestic crafts and therefore, questioning what can be and can not be considered as art.<sup>174</sup> (Foster, A. 2004: 198/199)

The mother-child relationship that might be implicated in her use of blankets is regularly taken up by Emin in works, such as her video “Conversation with my Mum” (2001). Here she speaks with her mother, who once considered abortion when pregnant with Emin and her brother. She deems Tracey to be better off without children, remarking that children would destroy her life and that Emin is too unstable to deal with the responsibilities involved. (Barber, L. 2001b) Emin also seems to have a more traditional view about pregnancy and child rearing, comparing it to a creative act on a par with the act of making art. She questions the economy of maternal energy when confronted with bringing up children and trying to establish a successful career in art at the same time. (Emin, T. 2006a) In an interview with Simona Vendrame she states: ‘*It’s true that a lot of contemporary artists are also mothers, but I must say the ones I know are always feeling guilty-...In my case, if I*

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<sup>172</sup> As Emin had pointed out, even her stepmother Rose helps her regularly sewing the blankets, as it would take her up to half a year to produce them by herself. Emin does the design though and most of the letter cutting. (Barber, L. 2001)

<sup>173</sup> A good example for this is probably Judy Chicagos’ “The Dinner Party” (1974-79) which was a collaborative work involving over four hundred people. It was later criticised that this collaboration was not stressed enough and that Chicago took all the praise for it. (Stein, J., E. 1996: 226-230)

<sup>174</sup> See chapter 2.2.1.

*had a child I'd never be able to work the way I'm working now and the way I hope to work in the future....From the moment my mother had me and my brother, she stopped thinking about her own career and completely took on her parental role. She had wanted to be a dancer but she had to give up her dream. I'm not giving up my dream.* ' (Interview: Vendrame S. 2000)

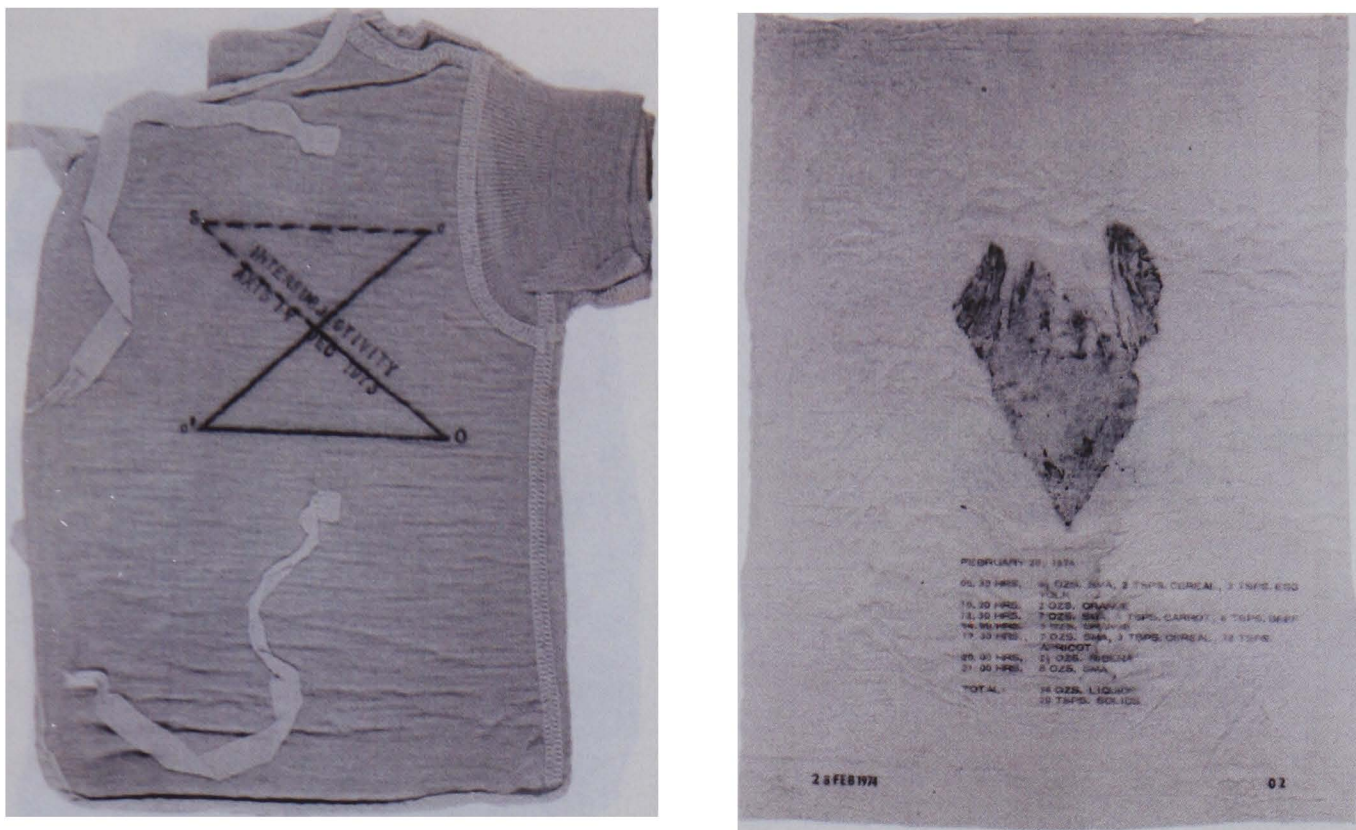
Tracey Emin's works dealing with maternal subjectivity, are obviously very different to those of Mary Kelly<sup>175</sup> and her "Post-Partum Document" (begun 1973), for instance, despite both artists making extensive use of writing and mark making. While Kelly emphasises the role of language and its acquisition in the construction of a social, gendered self, Emin's works are more comfortable with the idea of language being used, by the artist as an agent. For her words and language are a set of tools, amongst others, with which to convey her ideas. Hence, Emin's work is more easily decipherable and more visually accessible than the sombre text-centred "Post-Partum Document". It might perhaps be more readily associated with Susan Hiller's "Ten Months (1977- 79)"<sup>176</sup>, for instance, which recorded the changing topography of her abdomen in a series of ten sets of photographs, focusing on her own consciousness during pregnancy, something that had hardly been represented before and if so, then by men. (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 143)

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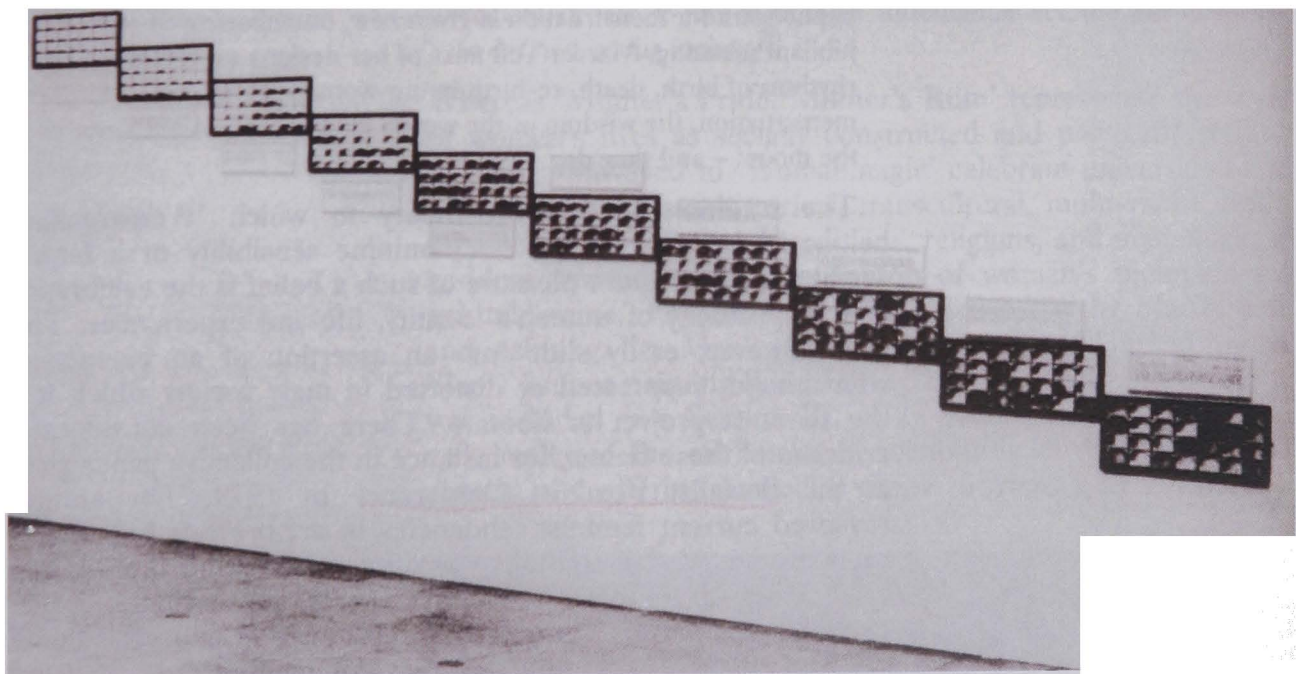
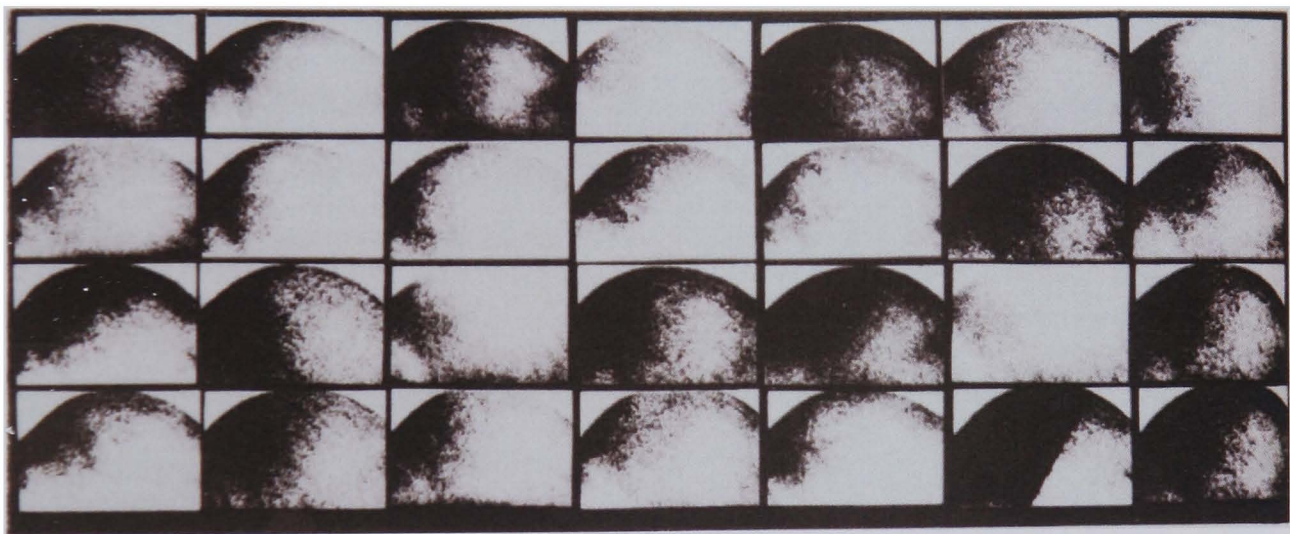
<sup>175</sup> Kelly is a highly influential American feminist artist and writer who has been active from the 1970s onwards and who did a lot of work in England. See: chapter 2.2.2

<sup>176</sup> Susan Hiller has taken here photographs of her own body during pregnancy, which documented the gradual swelling of her stomach with her growing child inside. The photographs were arranged in sequences of twenty-eight, one sequence for each of the ten lunar months of pregnancy and these images were juxtaposed to a written discourse drawn from a diary covering the same span of time. (Parker, R. / Pollock, G. (Eds.) 1987: 29/30)





Mary Kelly “Post-Partum Document” (begun 1973)



Susan Hiller “Ten Months (1977- 79)”

Pregnant subjectivity is not abstract, but situated and contextualised within specific historic and social contexts. Agency hereby, plays a crucial role. Writers like Julia Kristeva, in the 1970s and 1980s, had already explored the often-ambiguous relationship between mother and child and the extent to which social expectations regarding that relationship have been shaped and conditioned by Christianity. She wrote in the seventies, '*We live in a civilization where the consecrated representation of femininity is absorbed in maternity.*' (Kristeva, J. 1986: 160)

However, as Julia Kristeva argues in, 'Motherhood According to Bellini', the maternal function cannot only be reduced to mother, feminine, or woman. By identifying the mother's relationship to the infant as a function, Kristeva separates the duty of meeting the child's needs, from both love and desire. As a woman and as a mother, a woman both loves and desires and as such, she is primarily a social and speaking being. As a woman and as a mother, she is always sexed, but insofar as she fulfils the maternal function, she is not sexed. Kristeva's analysis suggests, that to some extent anyone can fulfil the maternal function, men or women. By insisting that the maternal body operates in between nature and culture, she tries to counter-act stereotypes, that reduce maternity to nature. Even if the mother is not the subject or agent of her pregnancy and birth, she never ceases to be primarily a social and speaking being. (Kristeva, J. 1980: 238-241) Some feminist artists from that period began, by representing women and their experiences from a woman's point of view, to stress the fact that women are social and speaking beings, something that Emin's work is clearly reminiscent of. (Chapter 2.2.2.)

Intentional pregnancies obviously differ from unintentional ones and the mother's decision about this indicates conscious selfhood and agency, albeit within a certain legal framework. Emin, whatever one might think about her work, with her in-your-face approach, clearly shows traces of an active agent / subject versus the historical idea of women being the passive object. This is certainly something that was and is high on the agenda of feminist artists, i.e. to rescue women from being passive and acted upon, to women who speak out about their desires and actively take control of

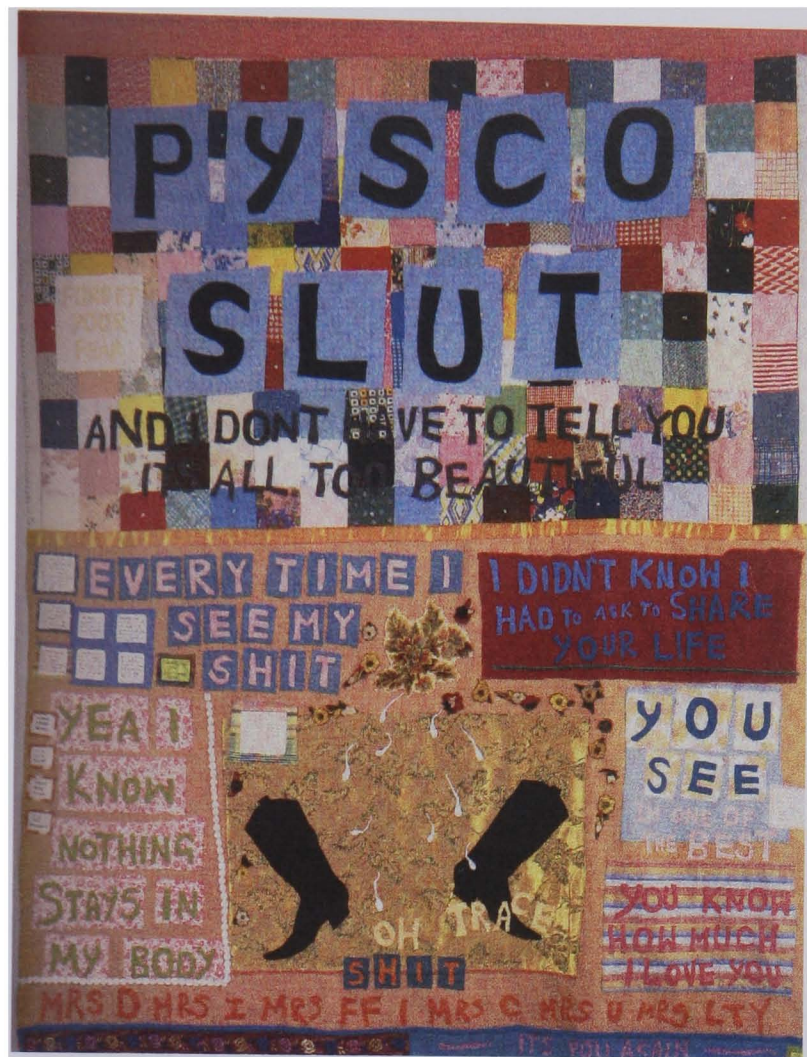
their own fate. (Doy, G. 2005: 75) And here it is perhaps important to note, that it is not only essential to be in control as an active subject, but also to demonstrate that women are very well capable of doing so, something Emin makes very clear. In all her interviews and in “Strangeland”, Emin never refers to anybody, female or male, who had ever contributed to her process of decision-making. Much more, it appears that in her “do-it-yourself” approach to life and her constant re-iterations of her success story as an artist, she tries to communicate that, “you as a woman can do it”, without having the pressure to make every aspect of a woman’s life an automatic success story. Mistakes, in her opinion are allowed. Men were always allowed to make them without being rendered incompetent and as Emin seems to exemplify, mistakes are not only part of her life, but also part of her work and both did not stop her from having a successful career.

Mistakes, in a literal sense, i.e. spelling mistakes, are one of Emin’s trademarks, something she seems not to be afraid of doing or ashamed of showing. This in a sense could be read as a confirmation in itself. Even by making errors and not producing art in a way that might be expected in our society, Emin as a woman made it to the top. Instead of correcting the spelling mistakes in her blankets, neon signs, monoprints, or just written words on sheets of paper, she deliberately makes them part of her work, arguing that her former boyfriend considers them as ‘...*an endearing thing to me- and it looks like I don’t give a fuck...*’. (Cork, R. 2002: 61) Her spelling faults and crossed out words, for example, in “Pysco Slut” (1999), give the impression of an unmediated outpour by the artist herself, further emphasised by the use of her own handwriting, rather than typescript, which could have easily been done in her neon pieces, for instance. The closeness of the writing and the self in Emin’s work is again reminiscent of l’*Écriture féminine*’<sup>177</sup>, with its underlying ‘...*assumption that the text and the psyche are isomorphic.*’ (Guild, E. 1992: 75)

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<sup>177</sup> As already discussed in the section about “Strangeland”





“Pysco Slut” (1999)

In a less literal sense, Tracey Emin has no quandary with admitting slip-ups, lapses, or misconducts, she may have made during her life. “My Bed” (1998/1999)<sup>178</sup>, the site of a three day mental and physical breakdown and a study of depression, sickness and self-destruction, demonstrates the physical and psychological abuse Emin regularly exposes herself to. (Interview: Sumpter, H. 2001: 10) It can be seen as a symptom of, rather than a critique on, modern life (Hubbard, S. 2005). *‘The bed came from my head. I woke up after four days of complete abuse and total despair. I got up to get some water and came back and just looked at this room and thought,*

<sup>178</sup> “My Bed” (1998/1999) has been exhibited in Japan and New York, before it was shown in London. The reception of it differed very much between those three countries. For more information on the reception and how Emin changed the display see: Wright, K. (2005b) and Cherry, D. (2002) It might be also interesting to note here, that Emin exhibited another version of her bed “To Meet my Past” (2002) at her exhibition “I think it’s all in my head”, at Lehmann Maupin from 21<sup>st</sup> September until 19<sup>th</sup> October 2002. Here, the artist displayed a four-poster bed bedecked with flower-printed curtains. Sewn words and drawings covered every available surface, exploring ‘...painful areas of feeling...’ (Interview: Cork, R. 2002: 60). Appliquéd on the quilt in large block letters were the words “I AM NOT AFRAID” at the top and “TO MEET MY PAST”, at the bottom. Between the posts at the head of the bed hung salmon-coloured fabric, with a girl in a cemetery sitting on a gravestone, embroidered in black thread. To view the installation photograph, please see: (Lebowitz, C. 2003: 138), also [http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/past/?object\\_id=54](http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/past/?object_id=54), accessed 23.3.2006



*U'gh, fuck! I closed my eyes and thought, I could have died in there and people would have just found my body. But I didn't, so this room actually saved me. There was something beautiful about it, something enchanting, something charming, like a damsel in distress saying "help me".*' (Interview: Wright, K. 2005b)

"My Bed" (1998/1999), as exhibited for the Turner prize exhibition in 1999, consists of a base supporting a mattress, on top of which are soiled sheets, pillows, a panty-hose and a towel. Jumbled alongside are empty vodka bottles, slippers, bloody underwear and tampons, cigarette packs, used condoms, discarded tissues, fag ends, contraceptives, Polaroid self-portraits and a white fluffy toy. As some of her critics mentioned, the bed stood in for Emin's sluttish life style and was an example of excess. (Cherry, D. 2002) Others defending it, Richard Cork for instance, remarked that, *'...nobody inside the show was fulminating about her unwashed knickers, or doubling up in satirical mirth at the revelations about her unbridled teenage libido and its disastrous consequences. Rather they were attending, quietly and seriously to a young woman's frankness about the calamity and mess of her life so far.'* (Cork, R. 1999a: 42)

As Mandy Merck elaborates, the bed is standing in for both the loneliness in the world's wealthier countries, as we lie alone for most of the time *'...from crib to coffin...'* and for what might seem to be the opposite of solitude, i.e. sex and intimacy. (Merck, M. 2000: 128) The interesting fact is that in Emin's situation there seems to be no disparity between sex and singularity. Her bed is a double bed, *'...the bed for the couple and coupling, but that only makes it a more potent figure of longing and abandonment.'* (Ibid.) The blood and the other stains on her bed only intensify this feeling of, as Merck calls it, a *'...battlefield....'* (Ibid.) Ultimately this might be associated with loss of virginity, with the danger sex might present in times of Aids, with rape and other violence women so often have to suffer under and with the disgust women might feel after having had sex.



“My Bed” (1998/1999)

The equation of sex with violence is a continuing theme in Emin’s work and a familiar topic in many feminist critiques of heterosexuality.<sup>179</sup> (Gamble, S. (Ed.) 2001: 297) Emin continuously refers to sexual violence that she endured during her life. This does not only include her being raped, but also relationships she had with men who repeatedly abused her sexually. (Emin, T. 2005a: 30/137) *‘I was in a relationship once...when for three years I was never kissed, never held. Not only was I mentally abused, but almost every night I was subjected to anal sex. This was the closest I got to any kind of physical affection.’* (Emin, T. 2005a: 138)

<sup>179</sup> Feminists have been fighting over the subject of pornography and generally, over all forms of sexually explicit material. There are various opinions over whether this material is always defamatory to women or whether there are circumstances, where it could be used to formulate a discourse of female desire. (Gamble, S. (Ed.) 2001: 297)

When Emin exhibited “My Bed” at the Tate in 1999, it was a first for her, but not the first time an artist had moved her domestic environment into the Tate. In 1985, Hannah O’Shea created “Hannah’s At Home”, an installation and series of performances where she moved her entire domestic surroundings into the gallery. Her bed was juxtaposed with clothing lines and O’Shea, by drawing on the aspects of feminine experience that were considered offensive to the general public, in much the same way as Emin has done with “My Bed”, (Emin actually shows blood-stained knickers as part of her installation) conducted performances in which she wore tampons for earrings.<sup>180</sup> (Lacey, C./ Francis, R./ Lewison, J./ Jones, A. 1985: 19) The resurgence of domestic subject matter into a public gallery space is testament to the notion that some aspects of a woman’s experience, sex and alcohol in the case of Emin’s bed, are still considered unacceptable to some of the art viewing public. It is also testament to the concerns raised by feminist artists as forerunners, that would continue to be debated by contemporary artists.

It is not new to use the antagonism between the bed as the place of intimacy and cosiness as well as the location of violence, illness, birth and death. It has been tackled by many artists before. Whether it is Robert Rauschenberg’s “Bed” (1955), its linen soiled with graphite scrawls and thick drops of paint, or Frida Kahlo’s work, where the bed plays a dominant role, not only in her art, but also in her life - Tracey Emin is certainly not the first to employ this prop.<sup>181</sup> (Hopkins, D. 2000: 45)/ (Kettenmann, A. 2003: 93)

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<sup>180</sup> “Hannah’s At Home” event took place on September 30, 1985. This was a work about the interaction of working and living spaces that highlighted ‘...the complementary, contradictory and conflict-making elements of working within the confined space of the home.’ (Lacey, C./ Francis, R./ Lewison, J./ Jones, A. 1985: 19)

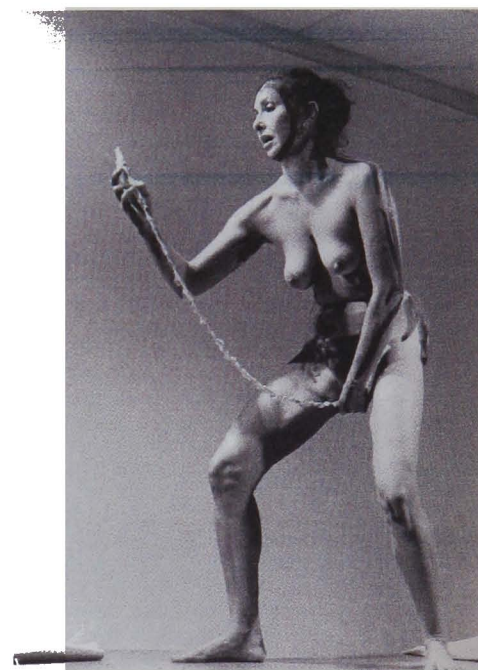
<sup>181</sup> Frida Kahlo, due to poor health regularly had to give interviews from her bed site or had to open private views while lying in her bed, that has been put up at the gallery. Interestingly, there exists a photograph of Tracey Emin together with Jay Jopling, where Emin lies in bed and Jopling sits beside her, which is very reminiscent of some of Kahlo’s photographs. The interesting fact here is, that Emin for a long time denied any influence by Kahlo and only lately admitted it. Emin’s picture can be found under acknowledgements in her exhibition catalogue “Tracey Emin” for her exhibition “I Need Art Like I Need God”, South London Gallery, 16 April – 18 May 1997 (Jopling, J. 1998)



Yet Emin's confessional art, as documented here again in "My Bed" (1998/1999), with its intimacies and possible connotations of rape, abuse and the destructiveness of guilt, has much in common with feminist consciousness-raising of an earlier generation. She speaks the unspoken about domestic violence and sexual abuse which could lead to a sharing of experiences and a recognition of the structures in which they took place. (Cherry, D. 2002) In the detritus beside the bed are reminders of earlier feminist interventions. The bloody tampon echoes Judy Chicago's "Red Flag" (1971), in which she photographed herself removing a tampon and Carolee Schneeman's "Interior Scroll" (1975), a performance in which she withdrew a tightly rolled script from her vagina. (Reckitt, H. / Phelan, P. (Eds.) 2001: 97/ 82)



Judy Chicago "Red Flag" (1971)



Carolee Schneeman "Interior Scroll" (1975)

Similar to Chicago and Schneeman,<sup>182</sup> Emin seems to work with an aesthetic of dirt and disgust by including things such as heavily soiled knickers, used condoms and bloody tampons, to give but a few examples. "My Bed" (1998/1999) appears to have raised similar reactions from the press as Mary Kelly's work once did, when she exhibited dirty nappy liners in her "Post-Partum Document" (begun 1973) exhibition. (Burn, G. 1999: 2/3) These responses place her work, according to Deborah Cherry, '*...in a supplementary economy of excess, that of dirt which,*

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<sup>182</sup> There are obviously many more examples as for instance the work of Cindy Sherman, Marina Abramovitch, Ana Mendieta, Gina Pane and to a certain extent Hannah Wilke to name but a few.



*adding to and abutting discourses on femininity, heightened sensations of transgression swirling around Emin and her art.* ' (Cherry, D. 2002) Moreover, the idea of abjection and transgression to change conventional images of women was a tool used by some feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, to raise awareness by breaking open traditional patriarchal structures of representation. (Chapter 2.2.2.)

Connotations such as sex, rape, violence, excess and so forth, are not necessarily the topic of all of Emin's work, even though she seems to be quite willing to create her work in such an ambivalent way as to enable the viewer to come to the wrong conclusion. A good example for this is "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995" (1995)<sup>183</sup>, which was meant to be about the intimacy of sleep, but was quite often deliberately misread as an assertion of forthright female sexuality.



"Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995" (1995)

<sup>183</sup> "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995" (1995) was considered, by many as her breakthrough work and was first exhibited in 1995 at the South London Gallery in "Minky Manky". (Vara, R. 2002a: 184) She was invited to participate in "Minky Manky" by the art curator Carl Freedman, her former boyfriend of three years, who was considered as her next biggest influence to Sarah Lucas, in persuading Emin to take up art again. (Interview: Barber, L. 2001)

Here, Emin meticulously inscribed the 103 names of all her sleeping partners on the inside of a tent, in an appliquéd litany of lovers, friends and family members, including her fraternal twin, her grandmother and her aborted fetuses. The work can only be seen in its full magnitude, by literally crawling into the womblike structure and lying on the message inscribed on the blanket covering the floor: “With myself, always myself, never forgetting”. *‘Welcomed into a capsule that is, metaphorically, her bed, her womb and her brain, for an intense while you become her confidant. Yet like sex with a stranger, intimacy end with separation and departure.’* (Kent, S. 1998: 36) The work, as Kent argues, implies that sharing is inevitably short-lived, only sustained by memory. (Kent, S. 1998: 36) This sharing with Emin’s memories and the closeness one feels when inside the tent, might be either sensed as intimate or voyeuristic. This obviously depends on the viewer and the tent *‘...plays into a culture of public confession and voyeurism...’* (Vara, R. 2002a: 184)

The slow and considered process of embroidering all the names on the inside of the tent, reflects on the labour involved, not only in the sewing and embroidering, but also in the making of relationships, as Rosemary Betterton suggests, traditionally a feminine task. (Betterton, R. 2002: 34) As Betterton concludes, *‘...the use of a domestic aesthetic, a personal life story and craft techniques in “Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995” (1995) clearly connects Emin to earlier practices of feminist artists working in Britain and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s,...’* (Betterton, R. 2002: 34)

The tent, which Emin describes as, *‘...a cosy igloo thing, very feminine...’* and crawling into it, *‘...like a sperm going into the ovum...’* (Walker Arts Center 1995) might bring to mind the idea of female architecture that was evoked by artists such as, Faith Wilding. Her installation “Crocheted Environment” (1972) for the ‘Womanhouse’ project in Los Angeles in 1972, was consciously based on the ancient female art of architecture and reminiscent of *‘...a modern weaver’s version of African tribal menstruation huts.’* (Raven, A. 1996: 51)





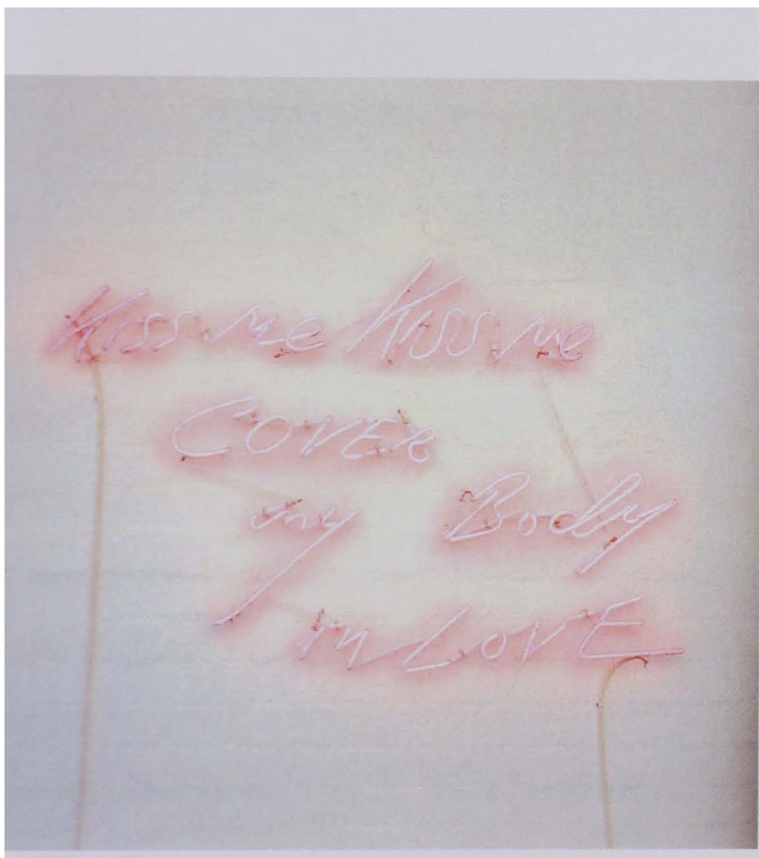
Faith Wilding: "Crocheted Environment" (1972)

In this work, Wilding referred to the fact, that all women, independent of their age, need emotional nourishment and when grown up, this might be reflected in the metaphorical womb of the home, that women might consciously or unconsciously want to create for themselves as a kind of nest. Wilding, as a feminist artist with "Crocheted Environment" (1972), provided an investigation into the all-encompassing needs of people to be mothered. (Raven, A. 1996: 55) The birthing and nurturing nest that she created was a representation of not only a site, but also a biological passage, something that could be read into Emin's inclusion of the names of her grandmother, mother, brother and unborn children in her tent.

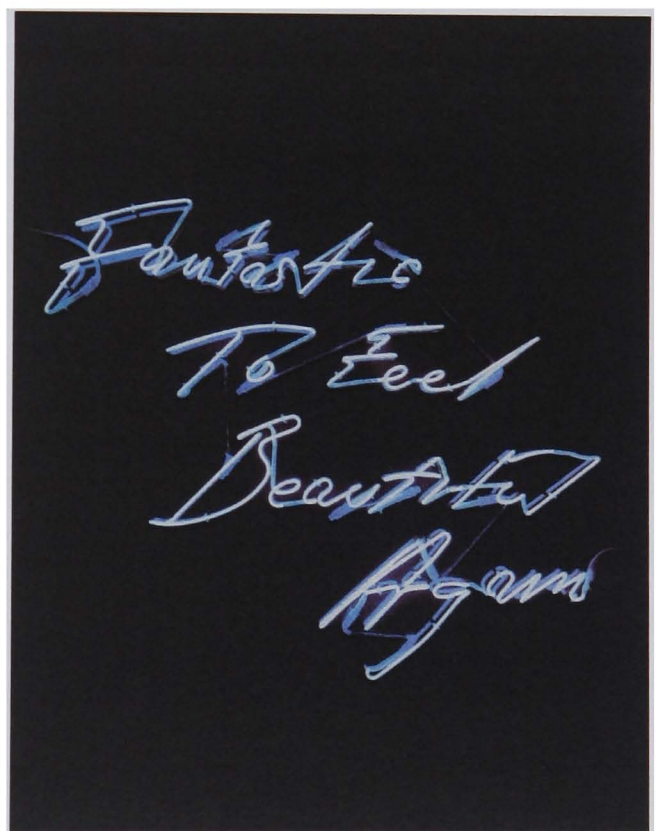
While "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995" (1995), might be considered as a quieter, more subdued work about her longings, Tracey Emin is certainly not reluctant to express her feelings, experiences and hopes in a less repressed form. Reminiscent of Jenny Holzer's work, Emin also renders her private emotions in



neon, a medium that is generally not associated with privacy and intimacy. Much more, it again shows that Emin thrives on using opposites, a private, handwritten message is beamed across a public space and her need to communicate is accompanied by a desire for intimacy. Jenny Holzer<sup>184</sup>, a feminist artist from the 1980s who employs the medium of the word, might be seen as one of Emin's forerunners in dealing with taboo subjects such as, mother-and-child relationships, sex, violence, love, war and death. But, while Holzer leans towards more generalised messages, not necessarily speaking about her own very personal experiences, Emin tends to draw her material from her private insight, with which some of her viewers might be able to identify. (Lehmann, U. 2001a: 234/239)



"Kiss me, Kiss me, cover my body in love" (1996)

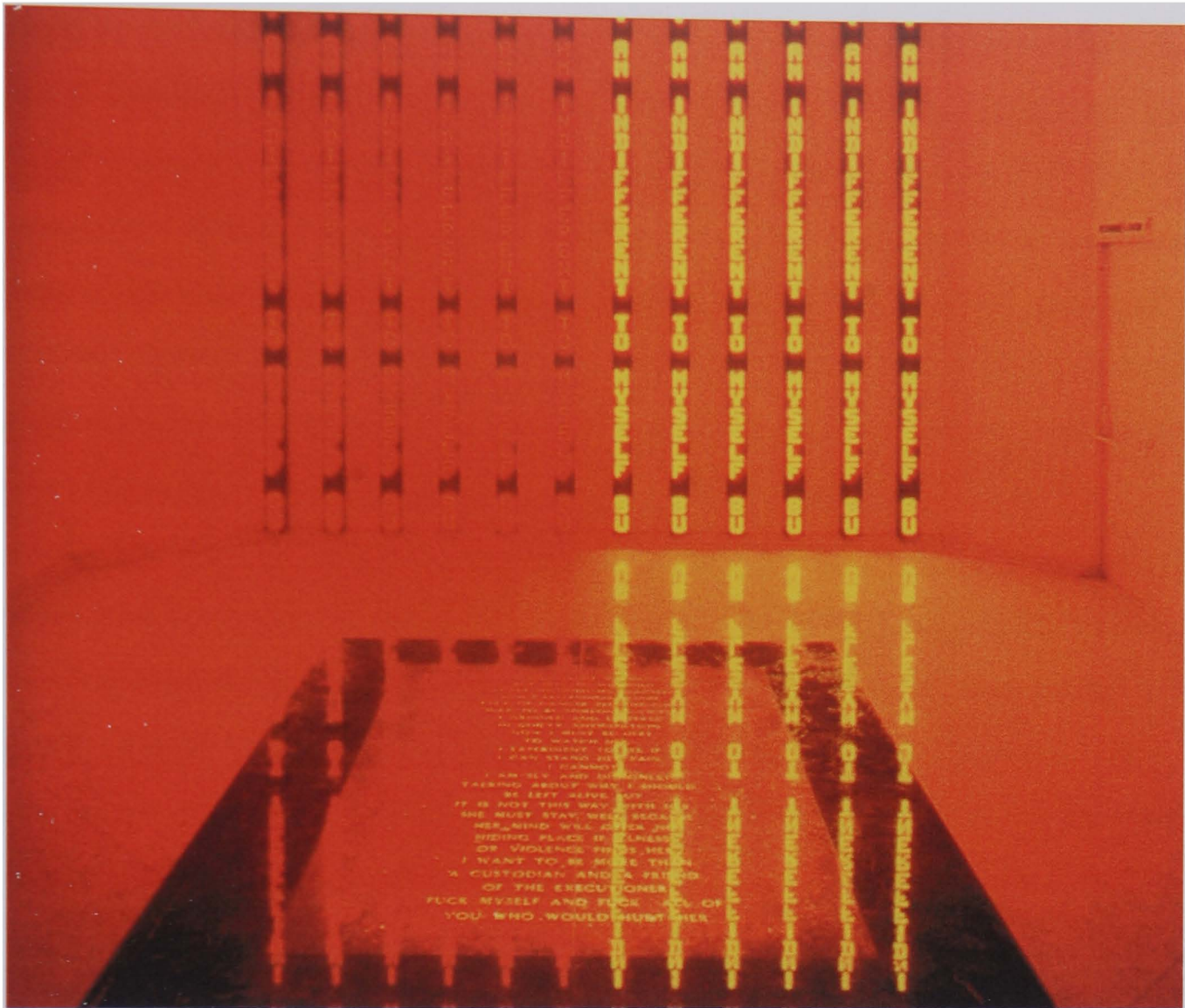


"Fantastic to Feel Beautiful Again" (1997)

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<sup>184</sup> Holzer was in the 1980s exploiting advertising methods in the urban environment, in a variety of places, such as football stadiums, banks and the forest of signs in Las Vegas, searching the close proximity of ordinary advertisement and neon signs to exploit the contrast with them, to put across her own messages. In 1990, she hit the headlines at the Venice Biennale, when as a new mother and as the USA's sole female artist, showing a work about the mother-child relationship, her pavilion received the award of best national display. (Lehmann, U. 2001: 234/239)





Jenny Holzer: Various Texts "Mother and Child" (1990)

Tracey Emin's work is regularly misread and already very early on in her career, the rawness of her art lead to criticism by women's groups. For instance her work had to be removed from her degree show at Maidstone College of Art, by instigation of a local women's group who thought her work as anti-feminist, '*...because it was drawings of me with my legs wide open, pouring cups of tea and stuff like that. They were saying to me: "You know men were doing this from time immemorial, using women as muses in vulnerable positions- and now you are doing it to yourself and we're not having it."*' (Interview: Wright, K. 2005b) Nevertheless, her work quite often stands up for issues that concern other women as well as herself and Emin knowingly or unknowingly produces art that could be interpreted as social change art, something that was of the highest agenda for feminist artists from the 1960s onwards. (Chapter 2)

It might be difficult to believe that Emin has no feminist concerns whatsoever. Work such as “Top Spot” (2004)<sup>185</sup>, which was a clear message to young adolescent girls not to give up hope and to take their fate into their own hands and exhibitions such as “Imagine a World”, which she held together with the ‘Guerrilla Girls’ and others, as part of Amnesty International’s “Stop Violence against Women” campaign, at the Bargehouse gallery, are very much reminiscent of some of the activities previously organised by feminist artists.<sup>186</sup> Whatever her intentions are, it is undeniable that she touches on subjects of the highest priority to feminist artists from the 1960s onwards. Through her very own experiences, she gives a voice to women who might identify with the issues expressed in her art. Ultimately, the viewer might learn something from her/his confrontation with an intimate facet of another person’s life, in this particular case, a woman’s life. Emin has always stressed the wish, ‘...to communicate with her audience, using her life experiences as a means of touching the lives of others.’ (Smithard, P. 1997: 29)

#### **4.3. Tracey Emin from Do-It-Yourself to the Tate**

Some feminist artists in the 1960s and 1970s, questioning the existing structures for making, showing and viewing of art, moved away from trying to get access to gallery and museum based exhibition spaces and developed strategies, which involved the creation of autonomous spaces and organisations. (Chapter 2.4.) This meant freedom to produce whatever was on their agenda and to show their work, in whatever way they found suitable.<sup>187</sup> The weakness of this strategy however, was the problem of ghettoisation. (Chapter 2.4.) As Kathy Battista explains, women’s centres that were created for the sole purpose of showing women’s art, ‘...solved the

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<sup>185</sup> Drawing on Emin’s experiences growing up in Margate, the film features six teenage girls – Frances, Helen, Katie, Kieri, Laura and Lizzie – who tell their individual stories in a series of interviews, from having first sexual experiences, from being raped, from having miscarriages, to finally a suicide attempt. Unfortunately, for Emin the film was rated eighteen, thus barring the precise age group for which she had intended the film. (Stuart, J. 2004)

<sup>186</sup> By the Oxo tower in London, from 25 November - 11 December 2005.

<sup>187</sup> Often those spaces were in opposition to the commercial system and some women showed in public spaces, in alternative galleries or used domestic spaces. (Chapter 2.4.)

*dilemma of going public: women could mobilize their work and present it to sympathetic audiences. However the question of the ability to transcend the ghetto they themselves created remains.* ' (Battista, K. 2003: 109)<sup>188</sup> Obviously, the isolation from the mainstream gallery system and it has to be said here that in the 1960s and 1970s the entrée for women artists to the conventional exhibition facilities was far from straightforward, meant that women could not receive the same recognition as their predominantly male counterparts, who were part of the "official" system.

Tracey Emin could be considered as the prime example of a female artist who initially worked outside the gallery system, but managed to transcend the restrictions and ultimately succeeded, in becoming one of the most commercially successful contemporary female artist, Britain has seen to date.

#### **4.3.1. Shopping and Culture at Tracey Emin's**

As shown before, with the commercialisation of her private letters, Tracy Emin demonstrated a sense of business early on in her career, when she funded her work, by the "friends of Tracey" contributions, which took the form of "Tracey Emin bonds" that allowed the buyer to swap them at any time for works of art.<sup>189</sup> (Bernard, K. 1996: 28) After several years of disillusionment with making art, Emin re-emerged on the London scene in January 1993, when she opened "The Shop" in Bethnal Green Road, East London, with her friend Sarah Lucas, whom she met in

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<sup>188</sup> Battista gives here a very good example: "The Women's Free Art Alliance in London" allowed men to visit only at certain times, for example during private views. This necessarily excluded a large percentage of the art-going public. (Battista, K. 2003: 109)

<sup>189</sup> You could buy either "Emin mini bonds" for £50, or "Emin major bonds" for £500. As Neal Brown argues, with these Emin bonds, '*...Emin has democratically widened the artist/dealer/patron relationship into a new more co-operative economic order; one which is just as ludicrous, or sane, as the real one.*' (Brown, N. 1998: 5)



1992, at the latter's show at "City Racing", an artist-run gallery in South London. (Gott, R. 1997: 29)<sup>190</sup>



Tracey Emin/ Sarah Lucas "The Shop" (1993)

For six months, calling themselves "the Birds", both artists sold homemade artifacts, including T-shirts, badges, prints, drawings, sculptures and other artistic souvenirs, (including ashtrays imprinted with Damien Hirst's face), to willing buyers. Soon, the shop became a meeting place for all sorts of people, including some of the most successful art world players such as, Hirst and his dealer Jay Jopling, who would eventually become Emin's dealer at the White Cube Gallery. (Kent, S. 1998: 33)

*'What was brilliant about the shop,...' Tracey Emin recalls, '...was it gave me a platform to find what I was good at - and what I was good at was ideas, and being un-precious about them and having an audience.'* (Interview: Barber, L. 2001b)

And Sarah Lucas adds, *'A lot of the merchandise was crap, but the seeds of subsequent ideas were sewn - both in my work and in Tracey's.'* (Gott, R. 1997: 30)

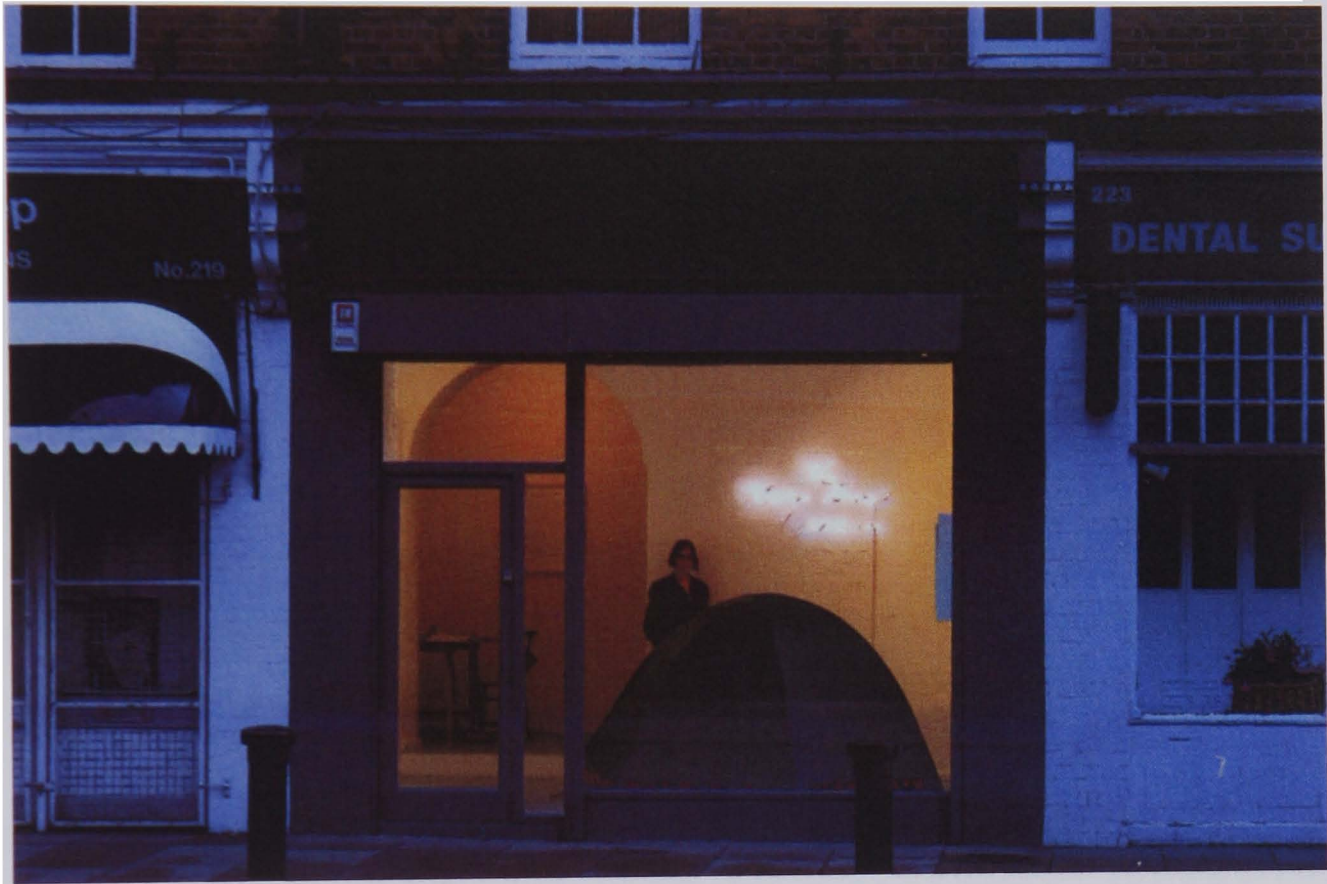
Emin's next step was to open, rather immodestly, "The Tracey Emin Museum" (1995), in a tiny former cab office near London's Waterloo Station, which Emin took over and where she created a studio, exhibition space and shop, in which to produce and show her work. *'I'll present myself and my work. ... every moment of*

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<sup>190</sup> Sarah Lucas originally wanted to share a studio with Emin, but Emin at that point in time was not interested in making art. (Interview: Barber, L. 2001)



*creativity can be shared, everything I think or make will be on view.*<sup>191</sup> (Interview: Kent, S. 2005: 16) The Museum was located in a run-down area of London, squeezed between a hairdresser and a dentist and inside the window was a pink neon sign, announcing “The Tracey Emin Museum”. (Ronson, J. 1996: 8)



“The Tracey Emin Museum” London (1995)

One of her video pieces was running in the background most of the time. “Why I Never Became a Dancer” (1995) introduced visitors to Emin’s teenage years in Margate, or “How it Feels” (1996), a documentary style video, recounted Emin’s experiences with miscarriage and abortion. (Hall, J. 1996) In addition, on top of these filmic introductions to Emin’s life, Emin herself spent hours every day discussing her life and work with whoever happened to drop by. (Bagley, C. 2001) Esther Pierini, having endured “How it Feels” (1996), writes about her experiences at “The Tracey Emin Museum”: *‘While the details are harrowing, Emin manages to relate her rage and anguish in a candid manner which falls between sordid public confession and art-styled ironical autobiography... The performance begins as soon*

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<sup>191</sup> The Museum, which was located at 221 Waterloo Road in South East London, was open to the public only on Thursday and Friday afternoons, or by appointment. (Hall, J. 1996)

*as you arrive at the “museum”, and the overwhelming sensation for an audience member is that no matter how much Emin exposes of herself, her process of creativity and dissection is incessant; audience response in the Emin Museum is taken for cataloguing and filing for future reference like any other subject under the microscope.*’ (Pierini, E. 1997: 102)

Pierini’s account of her visit raises two issues. Firstly, the idea of confessional art, as previously discussed and secondly, the different experiences of audience members. Tracey Emin’s Museum cannot be separated from the entire body of her work. As Kathy Battista argues, like her other work, ‘*...the museum is a hyperbolic form of self-confession and self-obsession, as well as a coping mechanism.*’

(Battista, K. 2003: 114) And confirming Battista’s statement, Adrian Searle spoke of Emin’s ‘*...solipsism...*’ (Searle, A. 1997: 13), while Richard Dormont observed, ‘*In a performance of monstrous audacity, she expects her audience to be interested in virtually everything that has ever happened to her.*’ (Dormont, R. 1997:1)

The Museum, one could argue, played on certain contexts: the ethos of finding and transforming used spaces into galleries, as regularly done by feminist artists and other YBA members, and similarly, the unrefined aesthetic of her work that exploited this do-it-yourself ethic. (Chapter 3) The smaller space had a domestic feel and intimacy to it, which was added to by the presence of the actual artist in the Museum. As Paula Smithard states, ‘*...in her Museum she contextualised banal narratives which have rarely found their way into an official Museum.*’ (Smithard, P. 1997: 29) As Emin says, the ‘*...museum was about communicating.*’<sup>192</sup> (Interview: Kent, S. 2005: 16)

At the same time, James Hall argues, “The Tracey Emin Museum” (1995) is reminiscent, of Gustave Courbet’s “The Painter’s Studio” (1855), his monumental autobiographical allegory, that puts the artist right at the centre of the universe and

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<sup>192</sup> Tracey Emin explained, that from the point of view of communicating the museum worked very well, but in the end too many people came and Emin had no time to pursue her work as she spent all day talking about ‘*...thinking, breathing, seeing, feeling, making art - and I came home exhausted. There was no fun in my life.*’ (Interview: Kent, S. 2005: 16)



*'...sanctions the most extravagant kind of self-mythologisation.'* (Hall, J. 1996) Also, David Barrett makes an interesting link between Tracey Emin and Andy Warhol, in the sense that, Warhol had his Factory, while Emin had her Museum. Warhol made business art and Emin sold Emin Bonds. Warhol was *'...an emotional blackhole whereas Tracey is a supernova, Andy never recovered from his wounds while Tracey gets stronger. But both are inseparable from their art.'* (Barrett, D. 1997: 37)



Gustave Courbet: "The Painter's Studio" (1855)

What is noteworthy about the above remarks is the fact, that both critics compare her to male artists. Emin obviously manages to confuse the roles of artist and model, by transforming the seductive object into an active subject and by seizing the initiative, she issues a challenge as well as a promise. She still opens herself to our gaze, only in her case she is the agent. It is Emin, who offers us her sexuality and not us, who can just take and consume it. She challenges the patriarchal structures in the art world, by appropriating the same means, that male artists have done over so many epochs. The issue is one of propriety, a word that refers to both ownership as well as decency. Seemly behaviour is a sign of subservience, an indication that a woman's sexuality is not hers to explore as she pleases, but is subject to rules, as discussed in chapter 2. Women who do not obey these rules run the risk of being

labelled a slut. They are considered a threat, as they assert the right to employ their sexuality as they choose.

Furthermore, with “Exorcism of The Last Painting I Ever Made” (1996)<sup>193</sup>, which according to Neal Brown has a complimentary function to “The Tracey Emin Museum” (1995). Emin let the viewer participate in her struggle to come to terms with her grief over her abortion and to dispel the painting block, that it had produced. (Brown, N. 1998: 5) The viewer could watch Emin, nude<sup>194</sup>, in an installed enclosure, as Neal Brown describes it, in ‘...a cage apparatus seemingly designed for psychological experimentation and behavioural observation of an art-making mammal. Here the raw evidences and struggles of an unashamedly natural art about the world and its depiction can be seen, along with the waste detritus and psycho-droppings of such creativity.’<sup>195</sup> (Ibid.)

The interesting fact about this work, or perhaps more accurately performance, was that here yet again, Emin became both artist and model, on view, while making the work to be viewed, similar to “Outside Myself (Monument Valley)” (1994), for instance. Not only did she perform in her installation at the Galleri Andreas Braendstroem, but she also exhibited her performance as a separate artwork “The Swedish Room” (1997), in her exhibition “I Need Art Like I Need God”, at the South London Gallery in 1997. Here, Emin again created different layers within her work. Emin the performing artist within the work. Emin’s art works about Emin, as

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<sup>193</sup> “Exorcism of The Last Painting I Ever Made” (1996) took place in Galleri Andreas Braendstroem, in Stockholm, in February 1996. Emin spent two weeks incarcerated in a room built within the gallery where she would eat, sleep and make the exhibition. Sixteen fish-eye lenses set into the wall enabled the public to watch her at work. It turned out to be an immense struggle and she spent the first three days on the phone talking to her friends. Carl Freedman’s advice to paint something she herself would like to own finally broke the six-year block she had about painting and her first painting turned out to be homage to Edvard Munch’s “The Scream”. (Kent, S. 1998: 31)

<sup>194</sup> As Emin, claims this had the cathartic effect of making her feel more confident about her body. (Smithard, P. 1997: 28)

<sup>195</sup> Some of the art works the three artists produce seem to be re-worked copies of pieces that have been produced by a previous generation of feminist artists, but without acknowledging this fact. So for instance “Exorcism of The Last Painting I Ever Made” (1996) is very similar to “Menstruation” (1979) produced by Catherine Elwes, but the influence or even the knowledge of Elwes’ work –or indeed any other feminist artists’ work has never been accredited by Emin. (Even though lately there seems to be a shift in her negative attitude towards any theorisation of her work, which will also be taken up in Chapter 7)



the products of her performance within the performance. Finally, Emin the artist who creates an art work out of her performance, which included images of her original performance. She once more contravenes the boundaries of the usual association of female as passive and male as active, woman as muse and man as active creator - transgressions that were of the highest priority for previous generations of feminist artists. (Chapter 2.2.1.)



“Exorcism of The Last Painting I Ever Made” (1996)

By setting up her own museum and exhibiting her explicit art and with “Exorcism of The Last Painting I Ever Made” (1996), one could contend that she poses questions about propriety. Why do images that are on display in museums and galleries, which are considered an important part of art history, become offensive when represented by a woman artist?<sup>196</sup> Emin obviously, having had experiences with modelling herself, is likely to identify with the role of a model as well as with the role of an artist. (Kent, S. 1998: 31) By portraying female nudes, she instigates a dialogue between the artist, subject and viewer that disrupts the familiar configuration of male artist and female model. When a male artist exhibits a female nude, he invites the viewer to share his intimacy with her. When Emin displays her nude body, she displays ownership. Rather than viewing the female body as a beautiful shell, Emin describes the experience from within, as Sarah Kent puts it ‘...as an inhabitant of female flesh.’ (Kent, S. 1998: 32) On top of transgressing the traditional boundaries of how to produce and exhibit art, Emin circumvents display restrictions, by exhibiting and displaying her work in her own gallery, called “Museum”.<sup>197</sup> By doing so, she is again transgressing the expectations usually associated with modest female behaviourism and with what one traditionally expects to find in a museum, which is the work by “geniuses”, or in other words, by male artists.

In September 2004, Tracey Emin seemed to have reached a zenith in her career when the Tate, the ‘...official steward of the national collection of modern British art...’ (Leitch, L. 2004) bought eight of her works in a rare bulk deal and she became one of only eight other artists including, John Constable, Joseph Mallord, William Turner, William Blake and Francis Bacon, to have her work on display in a room of their own, at the Tate Britain.<sup>198</sup> An entire room devoted to new

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<sup>196</sup> This is reminiscent of her exhibition at Maidstone College of Art where she was forced to remove her art on the grounds of obscenity. See: chapter 4.2.2.

<sup>197</sup> Museum was once associated with the idea of genius as discussed in chapter 2 and only those artists who were considered as such were allowed to exhibit on these terrains. Women usually associated with the idea of the muse had to be “naked”, as The Guerrilla Girls so rightly stated, to be able to be exhibited within the divine walls of a museum. (Chapter 2.2.1.)

<sup>198</sup> Gathered into one generously proportioned Tate Britain room was a collection of Emin’s work that spanned her entire career. It featured items from her first solo exhibition, some appliqués, a sculpture, some neon light displays from 1998 and items from her 1994 tour of America, where she read from her book “Exploration of the Soul”. For a full account of Tracey Emin’s work at the Tate

acquisitions of her drawings, embroidered blankets, neon sculpture and much more, for Emin meant, that the Tate formally acknowledged her success as an artist and effectively put her and her brand of confessional, personal work, into the canon of British art. (Stuart, J. 2004) *'I had to pinch myself because I am still alive. I am here to celebrate it....'* she confessed on signing the deal after direct negotiations with the Tate.<sup>199</sup> (Emin quoted in Reynolds, N. 2004)

For the Tate, which, according to Nicholas Serota, has always been struggling for money with which to add art to its collection, the decision to acquire so much of Emin's work, for an undisclosed sum, shows just how highly the Tate regards it.<sup>200</sup> (Leitch, L. 2004) The curator of the display, Gregor Muir, may have once written that *'...for the most part, I've never liked her work...'* (Gregor Muir quoted in Field, M. 2004), but he knew at the same time, that *'...there is no denying Emin's importance within the history of recent British art...'* (Gregor Muir quoted in Leitch, L. 2004) and further that *'...it would be difficult to discuss the British art of the last 10 or 15 years without mention of artists such as Tracey Emin. Furthermore, there's clearly a generation of young British artists who came to the fore through the 1990s who I would suggest are landmark figures in the history of British art in general.'* (Gregor Muir quoted in Jury, L. 2004a) It appears to be unquestionable that Muir was aware of the fact that Emin is a crowd puller. (Field, M. 2004) As it turned out, the Tracey Emin room became the most sought after room at the Tate and, according to the attendants, people either take one look at the work and walk straight out, or stay for hours, poring over each individual piece. (Dougary, G. 2004)

Undoubtedly, it appears that Tracey Emin has achieved what the "Guerrilla Girls" and many other feminist artists, were fighting for when they protested against the

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see: <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ArtistWorks?cgroupid=999999961&artistid=2590&page=1>, accessed 12.4.2006 For an online interactive tour of Tracey Emin's work at Tate Britain see: [http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/nwh\\_gfx\\_en/ART28174.html](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/nwh_gfx_en/ART28174.html), accessed 12.4.2006

<sup>199</sup> It apparently took the Tate several years to get the approval of the committee, to acquire Emin's works. The Tate, as a publicly funded institution, has to get such an authorisation and it takes normally over three years, to achieve an agreement. (Dougary, G. 2004)

<sup>200</sup> To that date, the Tate only owned two major Emin video works and eleven works on paper, none very significant. (Leitch, L. 2004)

sexism in the art world during the 1980s. She was accepted, by one of the most important art establishments of her native country and lifted up to the ranks of the highly regarded and predominantly male “geniuses” in the art world. (Chapter 2.2.1.)

This found its ultimate triumph in Emin being chosen to represent Great Britain in the 2007 Venice Biennale, in receiving an Honorary Doctorate of the Royal College of Art (London) and an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters (University of Kent) at the beginning of 2007 and in being finally, accepted as a Royal Academician in March 2007, as one of only nineteen female artists out of eighty in total<sup>201</sup> and this without having ‘...to grow a beard or anything!’ (Emin, T. 2007: 7) This is particularly interesting as Emin, as already mentioned, made a film in 2006 about institutional sexism in the art world, in particular focusing on the Royal Academy.<sup>202</sup> (Emin, T. 2006a) It seems that her approach worked, as the members, who govern the Academy, obviously feel now that she has proved to have the depth to join their ranks. Her voice, in particular that of her female experiences with all her ups and downs, is now disseminated through the channels of museums, whose obligations are not only to preserve and collect art works, but also to educate the public, which, as discussed before, was something of great importance to a previous generation of feminist artists. (Chapter 2)

Similar to the spatial shifts of a previous generation of feminist artists, Tracey Emin’s museum represented a move away from the mainstream art world to more marginal sites. As with her predecessors, instead of relying on a gallery for support, Emin used “The Shop” and “The Tracey Emin Museum” to form her own social network. This provided the necessary backup, enabling her to retain a sense of self-determination and to produce the kind of work she was interested in, free from

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<sup>201</sup> For more information on Royal Academicians please see the excellent website <http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/academicians/>, accessed 31.3.2007. For her doctorates please see: British Council (2007) *Borrowed Light Tracey Emin*, exhibition leaflet for the British Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2007, unpaginated

<sup>202</sup> For her documentary, she visited Norman Rosenthal, the RA’s exhibitions secretary, to ask if she was likely to become an Academician and accusing him of not considering enough women for these highly respected positions. (Emin, T. 2006a)

commercial or other external forces. Certainly the kind of economical developments that occurred within the art world from the early 1970s to the mid 1990s, have to be taken into account and one has to look at how an individual artist was enabled, or not, to navigate her/his way through these structures. Consequently, the changing role of the artist has to be considered, as well as the role of the spaces that artists occupy.

Considering Tracey Emin's progression from exhibiting "My Bed" at the Turner Prize show in 1999, to her work being displayed in its own room at the Tate Britain, it does not seem too far-fetched to argue that what was once a radical statement in the 1970s now appears to be wholly integrated into the commercial and public art world. What could be questioned, however, is whether these developments were helped by previous generations of feminist artists, who by opening up their domestic spaces in spatial and sexual terms, paved the way for artists like Tracey Emin. Or whether projects such as, "The Shop" and "The Tracey Emin Museum", alongside Emin's acceptance and recognition by the Tate, are products of the art world's own success in capitalising on practices that once were considered to be marginal.

#### **4.3.2. Tracey Emin the Icon**

Unlike pop or film stars, art world celebrity never used to extend outside their own vicinity. (Sumpter, H. 2001: 10) Tracey Emin, as a "typical" YBA, similar to Damien Hirst, outperforms her contemporaries in generating equal amounts of interest across the press spectrum. She is glamorous enough to grace the pages of "Vogue", culturally significant enough to be discussed in broadsheet features and outrageous enough to upset the '*...Middle England sensibilities of the tabloids.*' (Interview: Sumpter, H. 2001: 10) She has done a spot of modelling for Vivienne Westwood, appeared in ads for Becks Beer and Bombay Sapphire Gin, wrote a

column in GQ magazine called “Tracey Emin Beds”<sup>203</sup> and now regularly writes her own column for The Independent. She gets ‘...a stack of requests each month for TV magazines and vox pops...’ most of which she turns down. (Interview: Sumpter, H. 2001: 10)

As her international reputation continues to build and she continues to exhibit her work worldwide including, Turkey, Italy, Australia, Holland, United States, South America and England, her level of activity far exceeds the domain of art making. Besides ventures into feature films (Top Spot 2004) and fashion lines, such as, handbags for Longchamps, Emin even seemed to be in negotiations with London’s mayor, Ken Livingstone, about the creation of half-a-dozen lidos along the banks of the Thames. (Dougary, G. 2004) Emin has consistently put herself in the line of fire whilst defending, discussing, or promoting her work and since so much of it seems to be autobiographical, ‘...the convergence of biography and creativity has, in an age of ubiquitous celebrity, configured her as Britart’s very own.’ (Merck, M. / Townsend, C. 2002: 10)

Unlike other art celebrities such as Warhol, Dali, Koons and Gilbert and George for instance, who distance themselves by some sort of “coolness”, Emin, in contrast, is “hot”. This can be seen not only in her current status as media property, but also in the temper of her work, with its dependence on what are apparently spontaneous outbreaks and articulations of anger, rather than rational responses. The greater her success as an artist and as a media celebrity, the louder the mainly male chorus of disapproval becomes, something that Emin, with her approach to the public persona of the artist, takes very personally.

Her absence of school qualifications, her working-class accent, her lack of polish, her obvious enjoyment of her newfound wealth and lastly, but importantly, the content of her art works, namely her autobiographical past and frequent mishaps,

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<sup>203</sup> In it, she reviewed hotel bedrooms when she was away, and shared views from her own bed when she was not. (Interview: Sumpter, H. 2001: 10)



make her an easy target. Furthermore and interestingly enough, it appears that it is not only Emin's art that is autobiographical, but her life itself, which, as Ginny Dougary argues, *'...is led with a constant eye on its documentation; each step that she takes is instantly observed and analysed while she is taking it, and placed in a wider perspective of her known history.'* (Dougary, G. 2004) In addition, finding little depth in Emin's work, Julian Stallabrass concludes, that every verbal communication Emin makes and every act she performs ultimately becomes art. (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 48) She lets the public participate in her growing up and in how she learns from her mistakes, at every stage in her life. Drink excesses are paired with her detestation of her own behaviour and self-promises to change for the better. Critics relish these kinds of revelations and regularly use them to attack her.

*'I'm a woman, I like my life, I'm lucky in what I do, and I'm very wealthy doing what I do. And no one gave me anything. I made this for me and that puts you in a far different situation. I'm independent, and I've got really lovely friends, I really love my home, I love my lifestyle, I travel around the world doing what I do, and I'm in a privileged, fantastic position which I got myself into. So I think it's resentment,'* Emin explains the offences against her. (Tracey Emin quoted in: Dougary, G. 2004)

Of all the YBAs, who made an impact in the Nineties, it seems to be Emin who has endured thus far as the real inducement. This might be partly, because in our celebrity driven, confessional culture, Emin appears to satisfy on both counts and therefore, she is far more often featured in a fashionable magazine, or newspaper than in a serious art journal, something that Peter Osborne calls the *'...inverse proportion...'* of "young" British art's public success to its critical reputation.<sup>204</sup> (Osborne, P. 2002b: 40) For him this level of public recognition could be seen as the main reason for resentment and a negative critical evaluation of the YBAs' art. (Ibid.)

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<sup>204</sup> Please see for instance "Diary of the Week" in *Hello Magazine*, Number 913, 11 April 2006, p.96/96 where Emin is featured in connection with a charity fundraising activity. She was one of the originators to raise money for NSPCC, a charity Emin is a longtime supporter of.

The failure to separate life and art is a central attribute of what Stallabrass calls “high art lite”, ‘...*an art that looks like but is not quite art, that acts as a substitute for art.*’ (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 2) Furthermore, he argues that Tracey Emin occupies ‘...*a discrete, logically necessary place on the high art lite scene...*’ (Ibid.: 43), within this scene as ‘...*the art world’s very own postmodern primitive...*’ moving seamlessly between the worlds of art, fashion and celebrity. (Ibid.: 39) Consequently, her work could be seen as epitomising everything that is loud and in your face, as well as marketable.

Tracey Emin’s print, “I’ve got it all” (2000) seems to refer to the commercial and public success she achieved in recent years. The title, as Peter Osborne argues, indicates that the ‘...*work is self-consciously ironic (‘Is this all there is?’)*’, constructing an ambivalent relationship to the multiple and contradictory discourses on consumerism and female sexuality that it evokes. (Osborne, P. 2002b: 45) Similar to Hannah Wilke’s “What Does This Represent? What Do You Represent?” (Reinhardt) (1979-84), her pose in this photograph is not euphoric but rather inward drawn, evoking some similarities to Wilke’s feminist art, as if she is retreating into the self as a defence against the voyeurism provoked by the camera and the spotlights.

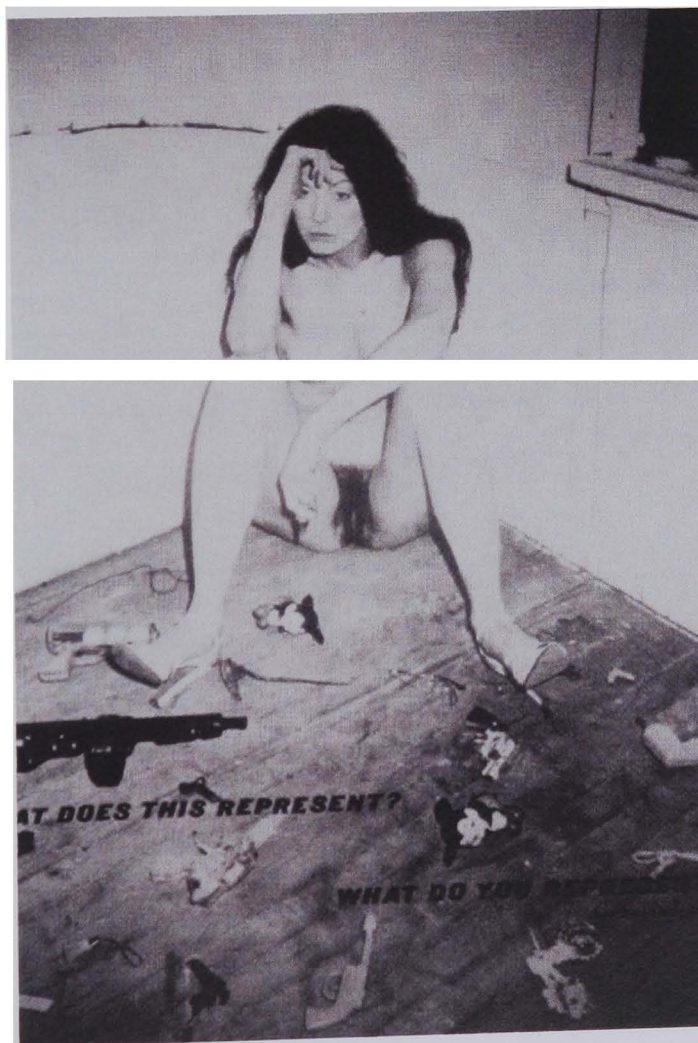
It could be argued that in “I’ve got it all” (2000), similar to Wilke and many other feminist artists, Emin once again questions the representational means and symbolic forms available to women artists for self-representation, the constraints that those forms impose, the possibilities they exemplify and the challenges they entail. (Chapter 2.2.2.) As we have seen, feminist artists tried to counteract the possibility of objectification of the female form which led some female artists to avoid the representation of the female body altogether.<sup>205</sup> Others tried to subvert the idea of the male gaze by transgressing the traditional boundaries of the body and by actively destroying the pleasures usually associated with female imagery. (Chapter 2.3.1.)

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<sup>205</sup> Mary Kelly is a good example of this.



“I’ve got it all” (2000)



Hannah Wilke: “What Does This Represent? What Do You Represent?” (Reinhardt) (1979-84)

It could be claimed that in “I’ve got it all” (2000) Emin, with her legs spread apart and her breasts barely covered, shows us her body in a provocative pose. By representing her body in this manner, she might be playing with the same kind of ambivalence as with her tent, which was often misread as being about sexual intercourse. However, by covering up her genital area with paper money, the image does not even come close to the explicit kind of imagery one is used to in connection with the mass media. Connotations such as, sex for money, could be made if seen in conjunction with the tabloid press, but it might also be said that Emin is making a statement here about a female artist who has, against all the odds, made it to the top in the art world, similar to her image “Outside Myself (Monument Valley)” (1994).

Furthermore, the photograph, reminiscent of the tabloid press, could be read as being about Emin’s public persona, but might also be an allegory of contemporary art itself, which is a keen consumer of mass media forms. (Chapter 3) It might be interpreted as a statement about the commercialisation of the art world and the discrepancies that still exist between male and female artists, something that seems to be of interest to Emin, as documented in her show for Channel 4, “Art Shock: What Price Art?”.

Peter Osborne points out that the pleasures of sexual representation and of commodity ‘...have become inextricably intertwined and increasingly central to our sense of ourselves.’ (Osborne, P. 2002b: 50) In that sense one could interpret “I’ve got it all” (2000) as a simultaneously economic and sexual claim, as an identification of economic and sexual freedoms, something women were denied throughout patriarchal history. (Chapter 2) Here the money is not only representing capital, but is also taking the place of a sexual subject. (Osborne, P. 2002b: 51) The way Emin’s right hand is forcing the paper money in towards her vagina while her left hand holds it over her stomach, let’s Osborne read it as a substitute for a dildo, ‘...money fucks; money fucks you; money fucks with you; money fucks you over.’ (Osborne, P. 2002b: 51) Money as the penis-substitute, as power in the male sense,

or money as the medium to satisfy desire in the female sense, similar to the role identifications, which, for centuries, were preached within patriarchal societies.<sup>206</sup> Money means power and women, usually without money, were powerless. So in this sense, Emin “fucking” herself with the money could be seen as a reappropriation of subjectivity and of the roles usually associated with the handling of money. Money as a universal exchange equivalent and the intermediate between production and consumption, could be seen as standing in for social relations as a whole, in an alienated form. Emin’s photograph therefore, could be understood as some kind of criticism in relation to our commercially orientated society where money plays a crucial role in determining social relationships.

The title “I’ve got it all”, lets one wonder what she means by “it all”? Usually, “I’ve got it all” might be connected to the fact that a woman is able to combine motherhood with pursuing a career, something that seems to have always intrigued Emin. (Emin, T. 2006a) The way she holds the money over her stomach looks similar to a woman holding her tummy when she is pregnant. Perhaps, Emin is once again referring to the loss childless women may feel and the substituting role that career, fame and money can play to detract any doubts, from the conscious or unconscious, that may arise concerning the facts of their life.

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<sup>206</sup> Money usually changed hands between men. Women might have had their allowances to deal with domestic issues, but overall they were excluded from worldly things and kept as angels of the houses. (Chapter 2)

#### 4.4. Summary

Art as confession has its origin in the nineteenth century romantic cult of individual genius and Tracey Emin follows in the footsteps of a long tradition of art that tries to authentically represent suffering. (Gawronski, A. 2004: 41) Despite the idea of the so-called “death of the author”, the YBAs have been associated with autobiographical self-promotion and their work makes visible ‘...*a cult of subjectivity, the cultivation of the self and its public identities, which has much in common with contemporary advertising and media strategies for representations of masculinities and femininities.*’ (Beckett, J. 1997: 136) One critic, Jonathan Jones, called on British artists to shun the ‘...*glamorous narrative of the naughty self...*’ and to ‘...*take the ego out of art...*’ with a view, to emulating the ‘...*self-effacing seriousness...*’ of European modern artists. (Jones, J. 2002b) Tracey Emin is probably the most famous example of a contemporary artist whose work and persona seem to be in total contradiction to the supposed demise of subjectivity in contemporary culture.

One could argue that Emin’s work clearly relates to authorial identity and related social and cultural issues and while some critics dismiss her work as simply the unmediated outpourings of someone seeking publicity at any cost, others admire her honesty and recognise the existing gap between the author of the artwork and the self of Tracey Emin. Emin herself seems to have a somewhat contradictory attitude towards the relationship between her own subjectivity and her art. She insists, that her artwork is constructed and at the same time, she herself is her artwork. This might be read as Emin seeing herself as constituting a living part of her work, the part that speaks about her work and compliments it, which represents her art in the sphere of broadcast culture. (Doy, G. 2005: 71/72) Thus, her work can be seen as very different to, for instance, Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party” (1979), where we might think the isolated work is a great piece of art, but is still independent from its producer.



Nevertheless, despite trying to get her work to coalesce with herself, she seems to realise that the self-confessional aspect of her work has its limits. Statements such as *'...I don't really want anyone to come in here - to come inside of me - to be inside my mind...'* (Kent, S. 1998: 32) and *'...you have to draw a line between what works as a metaphor and what doesn't, what is actually real and what isn't...'* (Interview: Wainwright, J. 2002: 205), give testimony to those limitations. Even so, there seems to be no doubt that with her biographical work, Emin touches on other people's experiences, if one believes the statements from fans, who say that they have been through the same kind of experiences and that Emin's example has helped them to reconcile events in their own lives. (Healy, L. 2002: 155)

Emin's work can be linked to *Écriture féminine*, albeit she still uses phallogentric terms, for example, in a written piece about masculinity where she decides that to have a "spunk" and "balls" (as she does), you don't need to be a man. (Emin, T. 2005a: 137) Arguments, by critic Adrian Searle for instance, that she is uneducated and that her writings are pure accidents, merely the outpourings of a self out of control, which can not be considered as texts, do not hold, especially considering that Emin managed to get a first from the Royal College of Art, that she studied philosophy at Birbeck and that she seems to be more than knowledgeable and articulate when she wants to be. Whether or not one agrees with the link between some of Emin's work to *Écriture féminine*, it is interesting that critics speak about her writing as if it were indeed a woman's writing. A form of expression that bursts almost incoherently through the constrictions of patriarchal language and the symbolic order of subjectivity it constructs, *'To say that these wall-hangings and half-begun paintings and drawings and confessional writings are just so much awful logorrhoea, as indulgent and incoherent as they are heartfelt and soul-bearing, is to state the obvious. There doesn't seem to be any quality control here at all...'* (Searle, A. 2002b: 12)

"The Tracey Emin Museum" (1995) could be seen as a tool for directly communicating with the viewer. Interestingly enough, Emin took up the idea of

immediate response once again, when she did a performance by way of opening up her hotel room to the male and female audience, during the 1997 Istanbul Biennale.<sup>207</sup> At one point, she had eighty people crammed into her room, listening to the stories of her life, looking at the photographs she had spread out and touching the bedspread appliquéd with the words “International Woman”. (Dougary, G. 2004) The repetition of inviting people into her room for one more exploration of her soul, as before into her museum, again reveals Emin’s desire to communicate her emotions and her need for an immediate response from the viewer.

For the YBAs and especially for Tracey Emin, the notion of the artist as the media darling was never a problematic one. Art and artists, reinstated as commodities, by using mass-media images and strategies could not only assume higher profiles, but their art works also became more relevant to the audiences of mass-culture. The engagement with public curiosity that arose from well-publicised art works and carefully promoted artists, led to renewed interest in new art and art also permeated fashion magazines, with Tracey Emin achieving perhaps ‘...*the highest profile of art world “fashionistas”*’. (Townsend, C. 2002: 135) Her public profile and international fame, that arose out of installations such as “My Bed” and which may have looked more like the attainment of notoriety to some critics, was nevertheless, interesting for advertisers and marketing agencies and consequently, Emin and her art became intertwined with the fashion industry.

One could convincingly argue, that Emin’s greatest achievements in relation to feminist art, are firstly, the fact that she gives women a voice through her own experiences and that she speaks out about the so-called unspeakable. Secondly, her presence as one of the most successful contemporary British female artist’s confuses and transgresses the borders of what has traditionally been associated with the role of a genius, i.e. the male creator of cultural artifacts. Here we have a woman, a successful female artist, who broke into what might once have been the domain of

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<sup>207</sup> At that time, a woman could not have a male visitor in her hotel room in Istanbul and this gave her the idea for this performance. (Dougary, G. 2004)

male artists, who speaks openly about female experiences in a way that makes it hard to ignore her, who has no quandaries about using whatever medium is to hand to articulate her emotions and feelings and who is not afraid to use her celebrity status and the media to further her art and her success.

To find a successful female artist, like Tracey Emin, who is represented by one of the most prolific art dealers in Britain, Jay Jopling<sup>208</sup> and who is acknowledged by the Tate and the Royal Academy and who has been chosen to represent Great Britain at the 2007 Venice Biennale must have been what feminist artists were striving for when they fought for equal cultural representation during the 1960s and 1970s. Not only to talk openly about what it means to be a woman, but to have these utterances in what ever form they were made, accepted by leading national and international establishments, was very likely unthinkable for a previous generation of feminist artists. Equally, it could be thought of as absurd to consider a female artist, such as Tracey Emin, to be able to produce and exhibit art in the way she does and to be taken seriously and critically discussed, without the foundation provided by an “older” guard of feminist artists, who once stepped ahead and tried to pursue the impossible, i.e. to make themselves heard and recognised as active producers of cultural forms - something that seems to be part of the norm in our contemporary cultural Zeitgeist.

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<sup>208</sup> It has to be said at this point that Jay Jopling is hardly ever mentioned in articles or books about Emin and he appears to work very much in the background while Emin seems to be marketing herself entirely on her own. She does take his advice, as she did for instance, for the Venice Biennale 2007, but at the same time consults others as well. Lynn Barber writes about Emin at the Biennale: *‘The installation is finished except that she is just waiting for a few trusted advisers - Jay Jopling, Lorcan O’Neill her Italian gallerist, Matt Collishaw, her old boyfriend, and Julian Schnabel, her American artist friend - to inspect it before signing it off.’* <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/art/visualart/story/0,,2093995,00.html>, accessed 18.6.2007

## **5. Gender and Feminism in Sam Taylor-Wood's Work**

*'Gender is an issue to a certain degree, more so in the earlier works, which were about defining myself as an artist, and as a woman artist. The groundwork is there, but I don't sit down and say, "This is about a certain aspect of my femininity or a certain angst against my femininity". It carries through the later work but it's more subtly placed.'* (Interview: Carolin, C. 2002: not paginated)

At first sight, it appears to be obvious that Tracey Emin and Sam Taylor-Wood are positioned at opposite ends of the spectrum regarding their media image and approach to the public. While Tracey Emin is outspoken, to an extent that inducts the public in her most private matters, Sam Taylor-Wood gives the impression of being much more of a recluse with her calculated and controlled approach towards the media and the audience. There are some known similarities, such as, both artists have been nominated for the Turner Prize and did not win. Both are not only nationally, but also internationally very successful. Jay Jopling is their art dealer, with his White Cube Gallery providing them with regular solo exhibitions. Both artists went to college at around the same time and both of them are associated with the YBAs. (Chapter 3) Furthermore, they both regularly appear in the mass media, they are closely compounded with stars from the fashion, film and music industries and both have been involved in advertising commercial products.

What materialise in a less noticeable way are the other common threads that link Tracey Emin and Sam Taylor-Wood. For instance, not only do both artists come from a working class background, (at least by their own definition), but also both have been traumatised from experiences in their childhood and later on in their lives. These painful events are reflected in Sam Taylor-Wood's work in a similar way to that in Tracey Emin's. The difference being and this makes the comparison of the two artists interesting, that Emin is still continuously re-working her personal traumatic experiences. She confronts the viewer with details of her life, many of which can be considered as horrific, such as her abortions and rape. However, Sam

Taylor-Wood, now an artist interwoven with the world of celebrities, appears to reflect consciously on some of her life experiences, such as cancer, but facts such as her troublesome childhood and her working class background, appear to fade away behind her public “glossy” appearance.<sup>209</sup> For example, both left school early, did not appreciate their college years and initially did not want to follow an artistic career. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated that both artists re-appropriate works and styles of old masters for their own ends, make use of the confessional television soap-opera style and deal with the idea of desire and victim-hood in their works. Finally yet importantly, they have been the first women to reach the zenith of recognition by being accepted into the halls of fame of arguably the two of the most important British art establishments. Tracey Emin, as already noted, by gaining her own exhibition room at the Tate and Sam Taylor-Wood, as will be revealed, by being the youngest female artist to be granted a retrospective at the Hayward Gallery.

### **5.1. Beyond Glamour: Growing up in a ‘Mismanaged Family’<sup>210</sup>**

*‘Making art about all my fears and anxieties means that I’m always dealing with them on some level, and that’s probably the reason why I am not a manic-depressive,...I get it all out there, so I can just be a chirpy, normal person.’*

(Interview: Rugoff, R. 1999: 156)

To be a “chirpy, normal person” was most certainly not part of Sam Taylor-Wood’s upbringing. Her insecure and confusing childhood is, to a certain extent, reminiscent of Tracey Emin’s and in a similar way led her to gain an independence of spirit very

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<sup>209</sup> The reflection of some of these experiences in her works (similar to Emin, but not so important for Gillian Wearing’s work) is the reason for the biographical background given here for Sam Taylor-Wood.

<sup>210</sup> Sam Taylor-Wood spoke about the painful part of growing up in a “mismanaged family” in relation to the feeling of alienation, which forms a leitmotif in most of her work and which will be taken up at a later stage. (Interview: Rugoff, R. 1999: 156)

early on in life, a necessary tool for surviving a ‘...weird...’ family, as she recalls it. (Interview: Rugoff, R. 1999: 156)

Born in 1967<sup>211</sup>, she lived in South London<sup>212</sup> until the age of ten, by which time her parents had divorced and her father disappeared from her life for the following decade. ‘*It was very sudden, very weird, and abrupt, just from one day to the next, literally. I didn’t see my dad for the next 10 years.*’ (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Sawyer, M. 2001) This was the beginning of a long period of disorder and chaos that at first saw her mother marrying a fellow yoga instructor and moving her family to a country town called Crowborough, to later abandoning them all and starting a new life on her own. Taylor-Wood despised the life in the countryside and this would later become apparent in her nearly complete omission of any references to anything other than the urban in her art works. ‘*The borough of crows-how dark can you get? I hated the country. I was frightened by all the trees.*’ (Holmes, P. 2002: 155)

It soon got “darker” for Taylor-Wood, with her family house becoming a hippie commune. They had little money and “weird” people constantly visited. An altarpiece in her living room was used to at the same time worship Buddhist, Christian and Hindu gods, leaving Taylor-Wood utterly confused about, which denomination she had to see herself attached to, something that had substantial influence on her approach to art. (Holmes, P. 2002: 155) When Taylor-Wood, who escaped regularly to the school art room to get away from her domestic turmoil, reached fifteen, her mother Geraldine left the family and she was stuck with her stepfather. (Holmes, P. 2002: 155) ‘*We didn’t see her for a long time and then it transpired she was living only two doors away. That was the moment when I realised, okay, you are on your own now.*’<sup>213</sup> (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Belcove,

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<sup>211</sup> Sam Taylor-Wood was born ‘...in the same hospital as Tracey Emin and Kate Moss...’ a point she seems to be proud of. (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Sawyer, M. 2001)

<sup>212</sup> For the first ten years of her life, she lived near Streatham Common in South London with her parents and her younger sister Ashley. (Sawyer, M. 2001)

<sup>213</sup> The betrayal caused mother and daughter to be estranged for several years until Sam Taylor-Wood gave birth to her daughter. ‘*I realised how easy it was to make mistakes, even though hers were a bit*



J. 2000) *'For a long time the house became a bit of a commune for weird druggy people. It was freaky.'* (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Sawyer, M. 2001)

With the fighting spirit that she is proud of, at the age of sixteen she arranged her escape to Art College in Hastings. There she met Jake Chapman<sup>214</sup>, her soon-to-be boyfriend and a member of the YBA group, whom she dated for the following eight years and whose middle-class family gave her the feeling of belonging to a real home for the first time in a long while. (Sawyer, M. 2001) The idea of somehow being middle-class in her newly adopted family and at her college, was novel for Sam Taylor-Wood, who grew up as part of working-class society, by her own definition. Because of the lack of money her family suffered from, she was one of the 'free-school-dinner' kids, something that she found embarrassing. She was beaten up a lot at school and her academic performance was bad. *'I was thick, I think I was traumatised.'* (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Sawyer, M. 2001)<sup>215</sup>

After Hastings, Jake and Sam moved into a squat together in Upton Park, London and Taylor-Wood attended North-East London Polytechnic at first and then the sculpting department of Goldsmiths College - the stomping ground of the YBAs - while Jake Chapman went to the Royal College of Art. (Holmes, P. 2002: 155) She describes Goldsmiths as *'...a Swiss finishing school...'* and for the whole time she felt like an outsider again<sup>216</sup>, being surrounded by people who were not short of confidence or creativity. (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Sawyer, M. 2001) She spent her time there making small boxes, which she then sanded for hours, trying to keep away from all the debates that were happening. *'I just used to sit and listen.'* (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Sawyer, M. 2001)

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*bigger than most. I think I just had to let go of the anger, and I also felt I was too tired with my own sufferings to have anger mixed in with it.'* (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Smith, D. 2005: 5)

<sup>214</sup> Jake Chapman is the brother of Dinos Chapman with whom he formed the renowned artist duo "The Chapman Brothers". Jake is still a very close friend of Sam Taylor-Wood and the godfather of her daughter Angelica. (Belcove, J. 2000)

<sup>215</sup> Interestingly enough, in answer to the question whether she would ever want to write poetry, similar to Tracey Emin she answered, *'I can barely write a letter and I can't spell.'* (Interview: Thomson, A. 2005: 8)

<sup>216</sup> Similar to her years at school.

Lacking confidence, Sam Taylor-Wood stopped making art after her graduation in 1990 and started to support herself by taking on various jobs, including, barmaid in Vic Nailors and manager of the Camden Palace, a job she absolutely hated. (Mackay, A. 2004: 4) A testimony of this time were her first experiences in photography, for instance, “Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank” (1993), an “abuse me”-self-portrait with her pants round her ankles.<sup>217</sup> What really inspired her during those two years was when she started to work for the Royal Opera House as a dresser, which she describes as ‘...*the most amazing experience of my life.*’ (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Sawyer, M. 2001) The music, the drama and the theatrics she was confronted with on a daily basis, influenced her later work profoundly and caused her to once again connect with her unhappy teenage years. Her stepfather in particular, who used to play opera music when in a bad mood, provoked subconscious anxieties in Sam, of which she was finally cured by her positive experiences at the Royal Opera House. (Paphides, P. 2004: 12)

By that time, influenced by film and photography, she had started to try some self-portraits, including some of the most documented ones, “Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank” (1993) and “Slut” (1993), before she took bouncers from the nightclub that she was manager of, to the Tate Gallery and posed them in front of Mark Rothko’s and Franz Kline’s paintings. ‘*I had them looking how they would when they were on the door of the nightclub,...so it looked like there was a barrier you had to get through in order to look at this art.*’ (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Belcove, J. 2000) This early work already indicates her interest in the re-appropriation of established artists’ work.<sup>218</sup>

“Bouncers” (1993) could be seen in correlation to her earlier work “A Gesture Towards Action Painting” (1992), a series of large colour photographs which parody Hans Namuth’s studies of Jackson Pollock in his studio and which depict Taylor-Wood blurred in the middle of her very own “action painting”, surrounded by pots

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<sup>217</sup> This image will be looked at in more detail later.

<sup>218</sup> This point plays an important part in her work and will be taken up later in this thesis.

of paint. (Archer, M. 1993/1994: 19) “Bouncers” (1993) juxtaposes ‘...*besuited rectitude with images of cultural dominance inevitably producing the impression of an impenetrability...*’ and can be seen as an early investigation of concepts such as, intention, responsibility and effectivity. (Archer, M. 1993/1994: 19) Soon after these works, she made “Killing Time” (1994), a four-projector film of four friends lip-syncing to an opera, a piece that Jay Jopling saw in an East London gallery and, impressed by what he calls the ‘...*discrepancy between high culture and mundanity...*’, he subsequently offered her a show at his gallery, White Cube. (Jay Jopling quoted in Belcove, J. 2000)

Jay Jopling not only became her dealer, but in 1997 also became her husband and is the father of their then born daughter Angelica. His artistic and economical influence as, not only his wife’s, but also Emin’s dealer, appears to be continuously played down by both artists and his name is rarely mentioned in the press as an influential part in their working lives. So for instance, while Emin was preparing the final touches for the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, he was *one* of a group of advisors, but certainly not the only one, as perhaps expected from her dealer and he also left Venice early to deal with representing his artists at the Basel Art Fair. Furthermore, Sam Taylor-Wood is always stressing the fact that she is *not* treated in any privileged way but that her husband is actually putting more effort into marketing Emin than herself. This might actually be true considering the fact that Sam Taylor-Wood had no more solo exhibitions than Tracey Emin did over the last couple of years at his White Cube Gallery.

Nevertheless, over the years Sam Taylor-Wood and her husband became well known as part of a celebrity couple, counting stars such as, Elton John, Kate Moss and Stella McCartney as her close friends and Taylor-Wood regularly turns up on the party pages of glamour magazines, in her capacity as an artist. This celebrity ethos coupled with the fact that twice she was diagnosed with unrelated forms of cancer<sup>219</sup> with consequently long chemo therapy treatments, not only changed her

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<sup>219</sup> The first one was colon cancer in 1997 followed by breast cancer in 2000.

attitude to life, but they were subsequently reflected in her work. For instance, in October 2001 when the Hayward Gallery offered her two dates for a solo exhibition, she did not hesitate to accept the earlier one for spring 2002, saying *'After all...you have no idea where you'll be in two years time.'* (Beechey, J. 2002) Commercial work that developed out of her celebrity lifestyle included a film installation for the Pet Shop Boys and a video for Elton John's single "I Want Love"<sup>220</sup>, to give the most well known examples. She also frequently used and still uses, her showbiz friends in her work, whether it is in her films such as "Third Party" (1999), where she employed the performance skills of Marianne Faithful and Ray Winstone, or in her photographs for "Crying Men" (2004), including for instance Paul Newman.

Neither her celebrity lifestyle nor her illness can be divorced from her work. Since her second bout of cancer, her work grew more and more introspective, referring more explicit to intimations of mortality. Images like "Self-Portrait in a Single-Breasted Suit with Hare", which is a self-portrait of Sam Taylor-Wood in dandy style suit, with its title being a bleak witticism on the terrible after-effects of the disease, let the viewer detect a certain black humour. Nevertheless, even though her work has strong autobiographical links, what distinguishes her from her contemporaries such as, Tracey Emin, is the fact that she disdains Emin's solipsistic, confessional mode and chooses instead to remain a detached voyeur of the situations, she contrives. *'My life informs my work, but I don't think it's unique to me...'*, rather she is using *'...a personal perspective to illustrate universal themes.'* (Beechey, J. 2002)

Actively participating in the current era of celebrity and contrary to her point that her lifestyle contributes to her art, Sam Taylor-Wood constantly runs the risk of not being taken seriously. (Paphides, P. 2004: 12) Making videos for stars, such as the Pet Shop Boys and Elton John, wrapping giant likenesses of her friend Alex from "Blur" around Selfridges, appearing regularly in party photos and in every name-

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<sup>220</sup> Elton John was responsible with this commission in getting Sam Taylor-Wood off the ground and back to work again after months recuperating from cancer, unable to think about making art ever again. (Beechey, J. 2002)

dropping column, being photographed by Testino and depicted in “Vogue” numerous times might, as Waldemar Januszczak proposes, grant her the title of the ‘...celebrities’ pet artist’ and he adds, the ‘...degree of her involvement with the ruling celebrity class might almost be described as Warholian.’ (Januszczak, W. 2002) Nevertheless, to win the prize for the most promising young artist at the Venice Biennale 1997, to be nominated for the Turner prize in 1998 and to be the youngest artist ever to be granted a solo show at the Hayward Gallery in 2002, are all incidents that evoke the impression that Sam Taylor-Wood is taken, by at least some critics and institutions, seriously. This can be considered as a testament to her prodigious creativity, to her will to get on with her life after her illnesses and to her ability to distance herself from being exclusively seen as her husband’s protégé<sup>221</sup>, who happens to be one of the most influential art dealers in Great Britain.<sup>222</sup>

Characteristics of her work such as, the re-appropriation of old masters, questions surrounding topics like, role reversal, effeminacy, female desire and fantasy and female voyeurism, ideas of masquerade and authenticity, the relationship between acting, performing and reality, examinations of constructions of masculinity and femininity, the limitations of narrativity<sup>223</sup> and finally, the representation of female experience, should give a solid indication of the relationship between her work and the concerns of feminist art from the 1960s and 1970s, as will be shown in the following sections.

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<sup>221</sup> There appears to be quite a substantial front of harsh criticism of Taylor-Wood’s work. Many critics have found her celebrity status and her dealer husband obstacles to objective appreciation of her work. They tend to describe her work as ‘...incredibly irritating and smug...’ (Hensher, P. 2002: 69) As ‘...narcissistic displays of her access to celebrities...’ (Email correspondence with Merck, M. 2006) and as the outcome of ‘...the frisson of celebrity...’ (Jones, J. 2004: 20) “The Scotsman” even wonders whether she is an artist at all, ‘All very clever but superficial. One wonders whether the artist can draw, sculpt or paint at all. But, given the explosion in high-tech tools, perhaps that no longer matters.’ (The Scotsman 2002: 15) Overall, it can be said that she had a difficult time to convince people of her ability to work successfully as an artist- independently from the influence of her husband.

<sup>222</sup> See chapter 3 for more information on Jay Jopling. Nick Hackworth describes the rise of Sam Taylor-Wood to a successful artist within just a decade and her being granted a solo exhibition by the Hayward Gallery, as being ‘...stamped with the seal of state approval.’ (Hackworth, N. 2002)

<sup>223</sup> Narrativity refers here to the processes by which a story is both presented by the artist and interpreted by the viewer. The term must be distinguished from narrative, which refers to the story itself. (McFarlane, B. 1996: 13)

## **5.2. Female Experience, Desire and Gender in Sam Taylor-Wood's Work**

*'Sam Taylor-Wood's work - film, video, sculpture, photography - is based on an uninhibited and explicit form of kleptomania which steals from iconographic memory, following a now well-established postmodern eclecticism which depends upon a seepage between different genres and discourses. Deploying diverse codes with lucid freedom she creates a play of references between reality and its image, between technology and art, its referents drawn from television, cinema, and the art of the past. The result is a kaleidoscope of images which frees the work from any obligatory destination, opening it up for an extremely wide audience.'*

(Santacatterina, S. 2002: 52/53)

Sam Taylor-Wood's work appears to owe more to "old masters", than it does to the pop sensibilities of her YBA peers. Her work, which in her own words, adopts '*...the language of film, where there is a shift away from narrative into something else...*', can generally be described as rooted in human relationships, but resisting the literal interpretations often associated with such a work. (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Renton, A. 2003b: 39) The interest in the gap between the performance of and the reality of human conditions was first fuelled, as already indicated, by her experiences at the Royal Opera House. Here she found inspiration and metaphors in the struggles of dancers and singers as they were trying to reconcile the gap between the intense passion of the characters they played and the often-banal experiences of their everyday lives. (Field, M. 2003: 1)

Mortality, mutability and transience have all been consistent themes of the 'Brit Art' movement, but one could argue that in the light of Sam Taylor-Wood's traumatic experiences, they take on a different dimension - a dimension created from a knowingly subject position. When she examines topics, such as, the frailty of the human condition and the struggle of overcoming physical limitations in her work, knowing her personal history, it is viable to read some of her work in an autobiographical context.



### **5.2.1. Sam Taylor-Wood and the Self in her Work**

Contrary to Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood's work tends not to be regarded as confessional, even though there is a certain emotional tone detectable and the peaks and troughs of her own story are observable in her work. As Susan Bright points out, her self-portraits '*...form an important autobiographical thread which weaves through her overall practice...*', concluding that Sam Taylor-Wood '*...shares with the audience emotional and revealing narratives that touch on issues such as her role as an artist and her feelings towards the art world.*' (Bright, S. 2005: 30) It becomes apparent by looking at her entire work, that there seems to be a male dominance in the choice of her models, she explains that '*It's difficult for me to work with women, because I find that direct references are made back to me too fast.*' (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Jeffrey, M. 2004: 1) Nevertheless, she has produced a couple of self-portraits, which, as explorations of the variety of the self, reflect certain important stages in her life. As she says, '*I only photograph myself at poignant moments in my life as a check of where I am and how large my thighs are.*' (Interview: Thomson, A. 2005: 8)<sup>224</sup>

"Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank" (1993) was one of her earliest self-portraits. Here, she is wearing a T-shirt stamped with the above words. Sunglasses are shielding her eyes. Her trousers are around her ankles, the tripod is visible and a cabbage<sup>225</sup> is placed onto the shelf behind her together with another pair of sunglasses. Her pose echoes that of the Venus de Milo, which she deliberately copied. (Interview: Fogle, D. 1995: 78) Sam Taylor-Wood explains, '*"Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank" was about me realizing that your work can be about who you are and acknowledging that I was good enough to be part of the tradition of art history.*' (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Holmes, P. 2002: 156)

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<sup>224</sup> The reference to her thighs is not meant light heartedly. When she produced one of her first self-portraits, "Fuck, Suck Spank, Wank" (1993) she had just hit a low point in her life and was shocked, by what she saw when she got the contacts back from the printer.

<sup>225</sup> The cabbage had no real purpose apart from as she said '*The cabbage I took from the fridge, so that people would say- and they do- "What about the cabbage".*' (Interview: Fogle, D. 1995: 78)



"Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank" (1993)

Superficially examined and the above quote taken into account, it appears that Sam Taylor-Wood did what probably quite a lot of young artists did when they started of in their career: she used herself as a readily available model, to explore the genre of self-portraiture. (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 256) However, to declare that one is good enough to be included in the canon of art history has echoes of questions formerly raised by feminist artists, namely why are women *not* included? (Chapter 2) By using the pose reminiscent of the Venus de Milo, one of the most famous pieces of ancient Greek sculpture, one could argue that she is questioning the idea of the male genius. A comparison of her work with the original, a prime example of high culture, or "male- only" territory, does not seem to embarrass her and she, apparently ignorant to women's "incapability" to higher art, regularly puts herself on the same pedestal with famous, male artists. (Chapter 2) One could add that by comparing her photograph with sculpture, she might also touch on the comparisons made between art and craft, especially when work was produced by women.

(Chapter 2) In addition, by including the tripod in her image she presents us with the technicalities involved in making a photograph and creates a possible reading of the image as clearly constructed, as produced within a kind of studio, where she as a female artist directs this process of image making. Therefore, it could be seen as a re-enforcement of herself as a female artist, somehow similar to the layering and repetition of confirmation as herself as an artist in Emin's work.

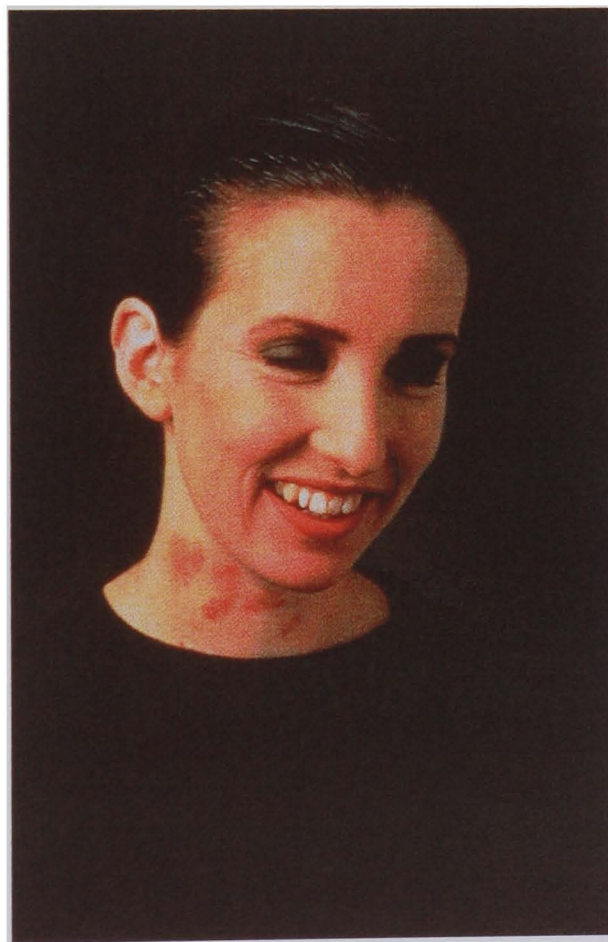
The self-portrait could also be interpreted as making a statement about the myth of beauty and the representation of women in art in general, altogether issues that were of high priority for many feminist artists. *'...I wanted to expose myself in all my ugliness and discomfort - at the time I felt like a wreck, having just got out of a long relationship that had left me fat and guilty - and I depicted myself as a monster...'* (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 256) By depicting her "overweight" body she questions what is representable and what not, obviously contradicting the idea of the female muse, the beautiful model that is depicted, according to art history, by a male artist for "consumption" by other predominantly male viewers. (Chapter 2) It could be read as a gesture of rebellion and vulnerability, *'...a disturbing representation of self-defined gender...'* as Katharina Vossenkuhl argues a self-portrait where she defines herself and her role as artist which she adds is *'...also poking an ironic finger at the fighting spirit of feminism in the heroic 1970s.'* (Vossenkuhl, K. 2003: 169)

To recap: the depiction of oneself was highly problematic and much discussed between feminist artists and there seemed to exist two opinions. The first, was not to depict the female body at all, while the second, questioned how to depict the female form in a way that did not allow it to be objectified. (Chapter 2) Nevertheless, the T-shirt with its inscription "Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank", made for gay activists (Stallabrass, J. 1999: 142) and evoking the idea of the female artist as "bad girl", (Chapter 3), *'...almost as if I wanted to play a different role, to assume all those sexual acts, to offer myself in a provocative fashion...'* (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 256) suggests a further reading, which has connotations of sexual freedom and equal



rights for men and women to express their sexual fantasies and desires in an equally open way, which was something that was already promoted by feminist artists in the 1960s and 1970s.

In contrast to “Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank” (1993), where Taylor-Wood appears to depict herself naturally, for “Slut” (1993) she portrays herself, with the help of a make-up artist, strongly made-up, ‘...almost like a pin-up from an erotic magazine, a practically masked figure. Violent bite marks are on my neck; they have left their marks but were made without passion. I wanted to offer myself as a term of abuse, even if I was showing an extremely passionate relationship.’ (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 270)<sup>226</sup>



“Slut” (1993)

Interestingly enough, she offers a different explanation for ‘Slut’ (1993), in an earlier interview with Douglas Fogle, which contradicts the above statement and is somewhat reminiscent of Carolee Schneemann’s film “Fuses” (1964) where the

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<sup>226</sup> She did not want to have any make up on her neck, so that there is a visible discrepancy between face and neck.

artist '...established the desiring female subject by showing the artist happily, hippily copulating under the dispassionate gaze of her cat.' (Elwes, C. 2005: 181) Taylor-Wood explains 'In *Slut* I have these love bites, but my expression suggests that I'm happy about it. Happy that I had wild sex the night before, rather than being a victim of something.' (Interview: Fogle, D. 1995: 78) In this earlier context, the image could be interpreted, as building on the previous feminists' use of role-reversal, parody and irony, in order, to subvert the status quo. In this work, one could construe that she was interested in putting herself in a *seemingly* vulnerable position and then turning this position on its head by using humour. Masking oneself, as she explains above, together with the idea of masquerade, as discussed in chapter 2, have been powerful tropes through which women artists have represented femininity. The love bites in this image were not conceived, by an act of passion, much more, they were the product of her instructions to somebody else to help her to create this mask. Through masquerade, as Marsha Meskimmon explains, identities normally fixed by social rules can be temporarily dislodged and fantasies can momentarily be acted out, before returning to ones "proper" place. (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 122)

If<sup>227</sup> one wants to follow her later explanation, which involves terms such as abuse and violence and if one sees the love bites as the signs of her own sexuality that "damaged" her body, then as Catherine Elwes would argue, a declared feminist artist<sup>228</sup>, one could link "Slut" (1993) to the use of ritualised and controlled mutilation in Gina Pane's<sup>229</sup> razor performances (Elwes, C. 2000: 164). While Pane sees the body as a system of social signs through which one could potentially rise above the frontiers of oneself by overcoming pain, to open up to whatever might be

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<sup>227</sup> This explanation needs to be taken into account. It is her own, convincing or not. It might give a completely different reading as demonstrated above. Nevertheless, for this writer, her smile in "Slut" (1993) and the title of this work contradict her later interpretation.

<sup>228</sup> See chapter 4 and her work "Menstruation".

<sup>229</sup> Gina Pane (1939-1990) took her body as the material bearer for her artistic actions. Her aim is to demystify the image of the body as the citadel of our individuality, in order to restore it to its true reality, which is the function of social communication. Pane was of major importance for feminist artists and theorists, either as a symbol for the continuation of traditional heroic images of the artist, or as the bearer of pain and as somebody who can go beyond the frontiers of the self. (Wege, A. 2001: 426-431)

there, Elwes argues, that this takes on a more interesting dimension in Sam Taylor-Wood's work '*...since it speaks of relationship, of desire and the primitive urge towards symbiotic union, with the consumption of the other as a necessarily violent act.*' (Elwes, C. 2000: 164)



Gina Pane "Psyché" (1974)

If it is possible to link Sam Taylor-Wood's "Slut" (1993) to Gina Pane's work, as Catherine Elwes suggests, then it should also be viable to connect her work to the art of Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) and Nan Goldin (\*1953), both female artists used by Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, in their book "Art and Feminism", as cases in point for feminist art.





Ana Mendieta "Self-Portrait with Blood" (1973)    Nan Goldin "Nan one month after being battered" (1984)

In her work, mostly based in some way on her own body, Ana Mendieta confronted the public with the taboos that envelop the female body in western cultures, such as, birth, sexuality and death, to ultimately represent processes of transformation and the dissolution and destruction of sexual, ethnic and cultural identity. (Hess, B. 2001: 342) In "Self-Portrait with Blood" (1973), Ana Mendieta deals with the idea of sex and violence, fused by the rape and murder of a fellow student on her own university campus. (Hess, B. 2001: 342)

*'I photograph directly from my life...'* is the slogan Nan Goldin's work is based on. (Lehmann, U. 2001: 156) For over thirty years, Goldin traced the story of her life and that of her friends, depicting in "Nan one month after being battered" (1984), the aftermath of a violent encounter that occurred in her relationship with a lover and illustrating, in a similar manner to Sam Taylor-Wood, the signs of this experience. Goldin and "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency", from which the above photograph is taken, could also be seen as a precedent for Taylor-Wood's tendency to develop a fragmentary sequence of images based on narrative film sequences.



What unites all the above artists is that they all deal in one way or another, with some sort of intimacy, or more directly sex, combined with some sort of violence. What differentiates them is the authenticity of violence depicted. Taylor-Wood's piece, as shown above is completely artificially contrived and staged. Gina Pane and Ana Mendieta undergo voluntarily their self-mutilations and only Nan Goldin is an actual real life victim of violence. Furthermore, the absence of causality in all of these images, the implication of violence but never its depiction, work to displace the viewer's ability to comprehend each scene as a narrative. Rather the images seem to challenge the viewer, to heighten a sense of dislocation, something that was of great importance for feminist artists, in the respect that they wanted to challenge the viewer by stepping away from traditional patriarchal models of narrativity, which as will later be shown is a trademark of Sam Taylor-Wood's work. (Chapter 2)

As pointed out earlier, Sam Taylor-Wood produces self-portraits, when she is at particularly poignant times in her life. "Self Portrait as Tree" (2000), which could be considered in conjunction with "Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare" (2001) and her series of photographs "Self Portrait Suspended" (2004) all deal with the trauma of her illness. It was shown in the last chapter that Jo Spence and Matuschka, each in their own way, deal with the ordeal of breast cancer in their works. This way of working might be considered as challenging conventional fine art and mass media stereotypes, both of which suggest that only young and healthy female bodies can be displayed in public. (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 89/90) Sam Taylor-Wood does not challenge the viewer in the same way as Spence or Matuschka do. Nevertheless, there are links to feminist art in her photographs.

For instance, "Self Portrait as Tree" (2000) was produced when Sam Taylor-Wood was recovering from her second bout of cancer at her in-laws' house in the countryside. She only later realised that this single photograph summed up all her feelings at that point in time and that she did not have to explain it through a narrative piece of work. What is remarkable about this image is the fact that Taylor-

Wood, one could say, “dares” to compare it with the landscape painting of old masters. *‘It was only later that I realized that it’s great because the history of landscape painting is there, that it looks somehow like a work by Caspar David Friedrich.’* (Interview: Carolin, C. 2002 not paginated)



“Self Portrait as Tree” (2000)

Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) was one of the greatest exponents in European art of the symbolic landscape. To compare her photograph with the paintings of this “genius”, similar to relating her pose in “Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank” (1993) to the ancient Venus de Milo, could again be considered as challenging the question of what it means to be part of the canon of art history, what is considered as high art versus low art, or art versus craft, questions that were raised by feminist artists around forty years ago. (Chapter 2) It also appears that by uttering these statements, Sam Taylor-Wood, as a female artist, is putting herself on the same pedestal as Caspar David Friedrich, considering herself of the same calibre, one could argue, rather naively. The power to name oneself in the same context as male, so called, “geniuses”, to be a speaking subject rather than the silent object of someone else’s ideas, formulations, or images, signifies agency. And clearly, as Marcia Tucker

explains, '*...the restoration of subjectivity, voice, and agency to those who have not had it is a crucial project of feminism.*' (Tucker, M. 1994: 20)

Sam Taylor-Wood does not hesitate to appropriate old masters to her very own ends and to compare their works with her own. One can even say that her work displays a certain humour and, consciously or unconsciously, there might be a level of mockery involved. To query the power associated with the accoutrements of masculinity and to subvert it through parody was a tool that feminist artists employed to disenchant the idea of the male genius and to turn it into a foolish display. (Chapter 2)

As indicated above, "Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare" (2001) was a self-portrait produced by Sam Taylor-Wood after her second bout of cancer and following the aftermath of her mastectomy. She uses, as Penny Florence argues, a man's suit '*...as synecdoche for her post-operative, single-breasted female body.*' (Florence, P. 2004: 84) The black suit combined with a white shirt, her seemingly confident pose with casually styled hair, her eyes looking straight at the viewer and her hand gripping the cable release, again suggesting the self-made image and the female subject as the artist and agent of the portrait, let Jeremy Millar conclude that it '*...is as crisp an image of contemporary dandyism as one could hope for,...*' and that the photograph '*...introduces another important subject, that of gender.*' (Millar, J. 2002: not paginated)

As much as the topic of gender in Sam Taylor-Wood's work will form the main discussion point of the next section, it is important to note here that with this image she establishes the idea of sexual ambivalence, a thread that can be seen in much of her work. The dandy has often been seen as a figure of sexual ambivalence, although most often in connection with the male adoption of female characteristics, the effeminate male. However, the dandy also allows the opposite to happen and therefore, renders the binary oppositions between men and women as meaningless. Cross-dressing - as was quite common for middle-class women of the late



nineteenth and early twentieth century, who saw themselves connected to the development of modernism - allowed the possibility of reconsidering the culturally defined categories of masculine and feminine. (Elliot, B. 1998: 77-79)



“Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare” (2001)

Artists such as, Claude Cahun, Gluck, Romaine Brooks and Frida Kahlo, very early on participated in an aesthetic dandyism. They were attracted to the strolling flaneur/dandy, who is extricated from clichéd sexual roles and who provides them with the means for their own artistic positioning as modern voyeurs. Using the figure of the dandy blurs traditional rules of making art and the world becomes no longer grounded in certainty.<sup>230</sup> At the very least, as Bridget Elliot points out,

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<sup>230</sup> For examples of works by Gluck and Romaine Brooks, look at (Elliot, B. 1998: 78/79). Claude Cahun’s work is discussed in (Cole, J. 2005: 343- 359) Frida Kahlo’s work is extensively represented in: Kettenmann, A. (2003) *Frida Kahlo*, Taschen GmbH, Koeln

images of women artists as dandies, confused the traditional identification of women and nature and added '*...another performative layer to the old Bohemian game of men posing as artists*' (Elliot, B. 1998: 78) because, as Marsha Meskimmon concludes, '*...men's clothes indicated the public professional, 'masculine' social standing of women artists.*' (Meskimmon, M. 1996: 119)

Hence, dandyism in women's self-portraits helped feminist artists to question gender roles and the power associated with these. (Chapter 2) In this light, Frida Kahlo's "Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair" (1940), can be considered as a risky commotion in the self-representation of public and professional freedom, considering the time that it was painted. Similar to Sam Taylor-Wood's "Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare" (2001), Frida Kahlo is depicted here in a highly self-conscious cross-dressing scenario. The scissors and cut hair can be seen as distinct references to castration. Sam Taylor-Wood, in a similar manner to Kahlo deals with the idea of loss, castration and female attributes in "Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare" (2001). The title of this work plays a crucial role and the content must be seen in connection to works such as "Knackered" (1996) and "Mute" (2001).

The excerpt of the song in Frida Kahlo's "Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair" (1940) indicates the artist's belief that she was loved only for her female attributes. The cropped hair and the cross-dressing scenario can be seen as a refusal of the feminine image demanded of her<sup>231</sup>, somehow similar to Sam Taylor-Wood's "Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare" (2001). By including the dead hare in her image, which Taylor-Wood holds up with her right hand as traditionally done by young, curvaceous women in old Dutch paintings, she warns of the dangers of lust, usually associated with feminine bodily attributes. (Januszczak, W. 2001: 17)

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<sup>231</sup> The images was produced after her recent divorce from Diego Rivera and as a sign of her newly gained independence. (Kettenmann, A. 2003: 52-55)





Frida Kahlo "Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair" (1940)

Ultimately one could wonder whether by lacking the female attributes of long hair, in Kahlo's case, or the female breast, in Taylor-Wood's case and by masquerading as men, (in psychoanalytical terms, the sign of the empowered masculine position assumed by boys during their development, but denied to girls), these two artists might be challenging the patriarchal model, which assigns women to positions of lack and penis envy. According to this traditional idea, women, realising their lack, will develop into the "other", which is the female position, during their formative years. Now one could question, that if by lacking the female attributes and assuming the male ones, do the roles reverse and they automatically become the "other" of the "other", which is the male, or do they become positioned as neither? These questions of what it means to be a woman, how gender is developed and how women are represented with their female attributes, were issues that feminist artists explored in their work.



Bringing Sam Taylor-Wood's autobiographical self-portraits to an end, one of her more recent images, the series "Self Portrait Suspended" (2004), as well as "Bram Stoker's Chair" (2005), deal once again with her trauma of cancer. They can be seen, as Moira Jeffrey suggests, as once again pieces about freedom and constraint and as signs '*... of both her public triumph and her private bonds she has overcome.*' (Jeffrey, M. 2004: 1)



Clockwise from top left: "Self Portrait Suspended VIII" (2004); "Self Portrait Suspended II" (2004);  
"Self Portrait Suspended VII" (2004); "Self Portrait Suspended VI" (2004)

"Self Portrait Suspended" (2004) shows the artist suspended in mid-air, using bondage.<sup>232</sup> It seems as if she is frozen in another space, neither here nor there and

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<sup>232</sup> Sam Taylor-Wood apparently invited a bondage specialist to tie her up and drape her from the studio ceiling. Once the ties were digitally removed, she seems to fly free. '*I'm constricted in this completely compromised position, but when you look at the photographs you don't have an ounce of that: you just see this moment of absolute release and freedom. You don't have any sense of the restriction at all, but you know there must have been in order to get to that point.*' (Interview: Jeffrey, M. 2004: 1)



she explains *'I think it has a lot to do with my own experience of my mortality being tested to its maximum. When you are going through a major illness such as I've been through, you go into a bubble of space...Your life gets literally suspended. You go into this other world....'* (Interview: Mackay, A. 2004: 4) And Serena Davies speaks of a *'...setting for the sublime...'* and an *'...unbearable lightness of being...'* when she describes Sam Taylor-Wood's *'...attributes of an angel...'* in these images. (Davies, S. 2004: 21)

"Bram Stoker's Chair" (2005) was conceived, in a similar manner to "Self Portrait Suspended" (2004), but with the inclusion of a chair, which plays a central role in the images. The sense of an ephemeral state is taken a step further from her previous series, with the chair symbolising the pinnacle on which she balances herself. *'You don't see the shadow of the chair, so the chair is the unknown entity that is keeping everything buoyant. There is something sinister about it...It's like leaping into the unknown. The chair is so precariously balanced on one leg that everything can just fall away at any moment.'* (Interview: Shani, A. 2006: 131) The title, as in a lot of her work, plays also here a particular role. It was chosen after the Bram Stoker version of Dracula, in which Dracula has no shadow. This creates an extra dark layer, as he is one of the "un-dead", something one could argue Sam Taylor-Wood perceives herself as, after her experience with two bouts of cancer. (Interview: Shani, A. 2006: 132)



"Bram Stoker's Chair I/ V/ II" (2005)

Interestingly enough, similar to Tracey Emin, Jo Spence, Matuschka, Frida Kahlo, et al, Sam Taylor-Wood speaks about the unspeakable in her work, when she voices her fears and hopes regarding her cancer, in a comparable manner to Emin's work about her abortions. She utters her feelings from a knowingly subject position, but differentiating herself from Emin, she does not see her work as entirely personal, but much more as standing in for other people's encounters as well. Sentences such as, *'It's important for me to talk about cancer....When I had it, there was no one willing to discuss their experiences as a patient, because it's a f\*\*\*\*\* tough thing to go through. But if I can help other people, by showing them you can conquer it and survive. I will'*, might be considered as her inclination to turn the personal message into a political one, reminiscent of the slogan used by feminist artists, as explained in chapter 2. (Interview: Cork, R. 2004a: 25)

The trauma of cancer has not only influenced her autobiographical self-portraits but also some of her other works. However, these other works also touch on a variety of alternative issues, which are prevalent in Sam Taylor-Wood's works, such as the idea of subjective pluralities, which go beyond the familiar binaries of the critical tradition of cultural identity constructions. The exploration of gender and role reversal, the effeminacy of male attributes, the relationship between acting and performance, the idea of the female voyeur, the questioning of female desires and finally, the examination of constructions of masculinities and femininities are just some of the concerns that Sam Taylor-Wood deals with in her works.

### **5.2.2. Sam Taylor-Wood and the Question of Gender and Desire**

*'It's all about reducing something down to its absolute basic.'* (Interview: Carolin, C. 2002: not paginated)

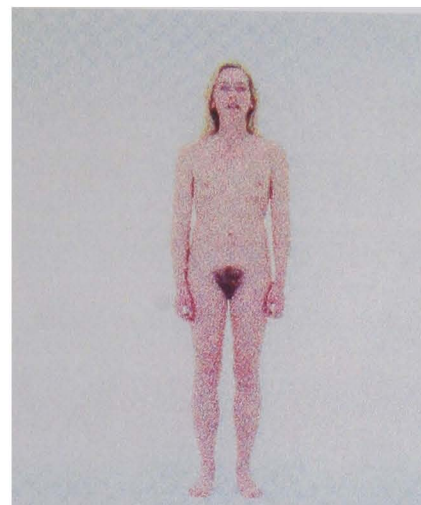
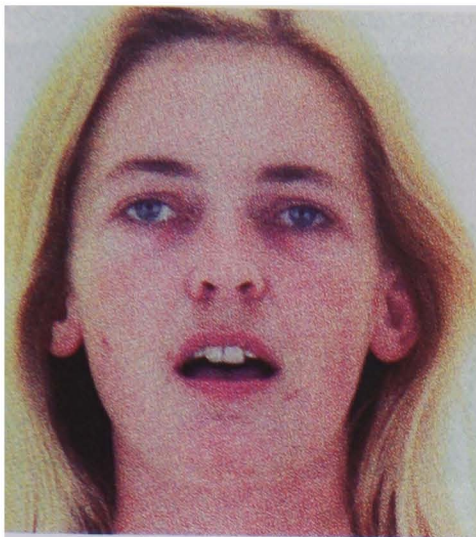
“Knackered” (1996)<sup>233</sup>, which could be deemed as an antecedent of “Mute” (2001) and a successor of feminist artist Laurie Anderson’s “O Superman” (1981)<sup>234</sup> is such an example for Sam Taylor-Wood, stripping away everything to explore incongruities of typical male and female gender characteristics. In the film, a woman is depicted naked, standing in the middle of a completely empty room, lit by harsh fluorescent light, which shows up any blemishes and flaws, stripping *...the woman back to something almost more unconcealed than just the nakedness of her flesh.* (Interview: Freedman, C. 1997a: 145) Her lips are moving, although the voice heard is not hers, but that of the last castrato Alessandro Moreschi. The woman portrayed has been consciously chosen for her particular kind of body, one that was both womanly and androgynous. Additionally, deliberately deciding on the voice of a castrato ensured further eradication of particular gender attributes. As Francesco Bonami, seeing in the woman an expression of embarrassment, so rightly points out that once *'...deprived by the basic signifiers of our clothes, we will seek our identity through our voices, only to discover that it is naked too, both anonymous and meaningless.'* (Bonami, F. 1997: 100)

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<sup>233</sup> “Knackered” (1996) was in the same year transformed for television, with Kylie Minogue taking on the role of the naked woman, thus as a well known media personality reaching a broader audience, as Sam Taylor-Wood explains. (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 192)

<sup>234</sup> Laurie Anderson dissolves here and in other performances the sharp distinction between male and female characteristics by means of a vocoder that allowed her to change the pitch of her voice during her performances so that she intermittently spoke and sang as a man. In appropriating male voices, she embodied the masculine attributes and traditions that would normally be credited only to men, and investigated femininity through *'...the prism of masculinity.'* (Elwes, C. 2005: 43/44) For more information on “O Superman” (1981) and its success in the charts please see also <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/plain/A874758>, accessed 4.3.2007





“Knackered” (1996)

The strong, sexual ambiguity, that Sam Taylor-Wood deliberately created in this film, renders the vulnerability associated with a naked woman depicted in this particular manner, she argues, ‘...into a strong and provocative condition.’ (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 185) What might make this film so strong and thought-provoking, is not only the fact that the woman’s nakedness underscores her vulnerability, but the same applies to the castrato, who is, as Sam Taylor-Wood puts it, ‘...someone having something taken away to give that voice.’ (Interview: Carolin, C. 2002: not paginated) His voice and his gender seem to be just as much a contrast as the woman and “her” singing. The sexuality of both becomes ambiguous as a woman of relatively masculine appearance, stands juxtaposed to a man with a light, feminine voice. In spite of that, both blend into each other, with the emasculated singer lending his voice to the mute woman, who in turn imparts her body, which is mercilessly exposed to the viewer’s gaze, to him – both deeds making a clear gender differentiation unattainable by transgressing the boundaries of familiar binaries.

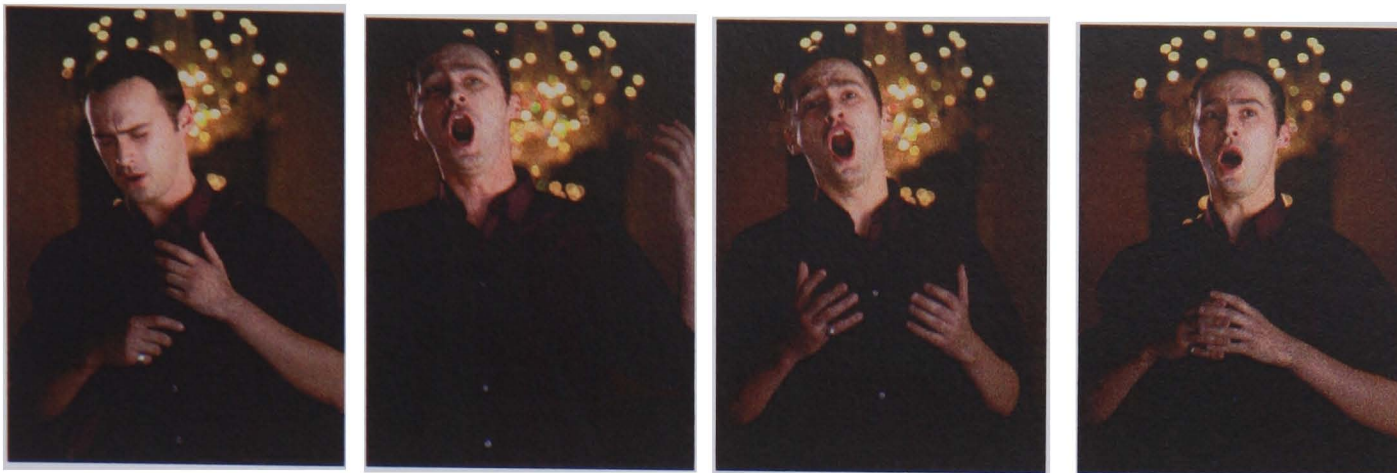
As Katharina Vossenkuhl suggests, in opposition to *radical* feminism, Sam Taylor-Wood explores the differences between the sexes, causing the assumed basic equality between women and men to be less meaningful. (Vossenkuhl, K. 2003: 173) Furthermore, one could argue that she plays with the possibility of overlapping feminine and masculine traits that in a patriarchal society are traditionally associated with female and male positions. She may also question the rigidity of gender definitions by consciously using traits of androgyny, which according to

Vossenkuhl, '*...embodies the longing for an ideal, harmonious unification of the sexes.*' (Vossenkuhl, K. 2003: 172) In a similar manner, Virginia Woolf stated in 1929, '*It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.*' (Woolf, V. 1949: 157) This is reminiscent of the discussion about the feminine, male genius, as discussed in chapter 2, where the great artist ironically possesses "feminine" qualities, even though creativity was traditionally associated with male traits.

Generally speaking, Taylor-Wood develops further, what some feminist artists, at the beginning of the feminist art movement, started when they were exploring gender differentiations and possibilities to explain *why* and *how* we become women and men. Sam Taylor-Wood not "only" questions what determines gender differentiation, but to a certain extent, she assumes that such segregation is not straightforwardly viable. Consequently, she playfully merges traits that were traditionally connected to either male or female positions.

As indicated before, some of her works are not self-portraits, but are strongly influenced by her traumatic experiences of cancer and at the same time, touch on other relevant issues. In "Mute" (2001), for instance, similar to "Knackered" (1996), she once again removes the most important part of her subject: '*I felt it needed silence. I needed to extract a huge element. It was about fighting for a voice and not actually having one, which was how I was feeling at the time it was made. All my previous work had sound, so taking it away became a powerful statement.*' (Interview: Carolin, C. 2002: not paginated) Sam Taylor-Wood is referring here, to her second bout of cancer and the implication of the silence in this piece, as Miranda Sawyer rightly points out, is that of '*...powerlessness over the body - you're screaming, but no one can hear.*' (Sawyer, M. 2001)





“Mute” (2001)

*‘I’ve taken away the most important element of the situation. It was cruel, almost like a castration.’* (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Campbell-Johnston, R. 2001) In a sense, she “castrates” the singer by rendering him silent and it could also be argued that, by trying to find a voice, the man presents the viewer with a subversion of the traditional understanding of who has and does not have a voice in society. The theatrical mimic usually connected to an opera performance has all the ingredients necessary to persuade the viewer of the emotional involvement of the performing subject, but it is lacking the most important part, the powerful part that actually makes him a singer, his voice. One could question whether the male here is lacking the ‘symbol of power’ which, according to psychoanalytical theory, is what the female is lacking in her socialisation process, in her case - the penis, in his world of music - the voice.

What is interesting here and in much of her other work, is the fact that as a female artist she is, first and foremost, the agent of her work and secondly, she is in control of her mainly *male* subjects, as explained above. They are obeying the female director’s orders. She is the one who decides whether or not to “castrate” her singer and whether she reveals to the viewer the male form in all its fragility and vulnerability, hereby consciously subverting the traditional idea of the man as the powerful creative initiator and the woman as the passive muse. The whole idea of rectifying the long-established representation of women as mainly passive, in order to give women a voice and to acknowledge their status as artists, was a major concern for feminist artists, as shown in chapter 2.



The theme of vulnerable men, as Linda Nochlin points out, has resonances in social history and in ideas about gender difference and is a subject specifically adopted in the context of Sam Taylor-Wood's work in general, an oeuvre in which male fragility has played an important role from the start. (Nochlin, L. 2004: not paginated) "Brontosaurus" (1995), "Noli Me Tangere" (1998), "Crying Men" (2004) are all instances that could be seen as exemplifying the above.

In "Brontosaurus" (1995) a video piece, Sam Taylor-Wood presents a solitary, naked man dancing in a domestic interior. His movements are set in slow motion and the original techno song is replaced with the orchestral music of Samuel Barber's "Adagio For Strings".<sup>235</sup> (Buck, L. 2000: 94) This piece gives a first indication of Sam Taylor-Wood's tendency to present the viewer with something that is not what it seems, a tendency that can be widely found in her work. The dancer who, enforced by the sad music, appears like a '*...tragic Adonis figure*', whose ecstatic, yet graceful movements resemble ballet, whose taut athletic body at once appears heroic and poignant, as his muscles alternately tense and relax in response to the rhythmic flow of the music and whose physique has been compared to '*...the tortured, masochistic torsos of Baroque sculpture and painting...*' (O'Pray, M. 1995: not paginated), is in reality, a '*...club kid...*' a man at home gyrating to the sounds of his personal stereo system. (Spector, N. 1999: 28/29) Sam Taylor-Wood, as Germano Celant connects, stages somehow '*...a shapeless glory that of a dancing body, along with light and shadow, where the eroticism is ironic and light, almost a slight unveiling of the dissolution of the male sexual form.*' (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 192)

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<sup>235</sup> Samuel Barber's "Adagio For Strings" was also used in the soundtracks for Oliver Stone's "Platoon" (1986) and David Lynch's "Elephant Man" (1980). As will be shown later Sam Taylor-Wood is an active film consumer and regularly incorporates these influences in her work. (Spector, N. 1999: 27)



“Brontosaurus” (1995) “Noli Me Tangere” (1998)

“Noli Me Tangere” (1998) is allied with the above ideas. Here, the two-screen laser disc projection presents a well built circus performer, posing as Atlas, with the screens arranged in a manner that creates the illusion of him holding up the gallery’s ceiling, while in reality he is performing a handstand, filmed from the front and back and projected upside-down. (Lewis, J. A. 1999: CO1) Here Sam Taylor-Wood confronts us again with something that is not what it seems. She presents the viewer with a false impression of a man, who appears to be weight lifting, with his muscles swelling, his breathing noticeable and his gradual loss of control - only for the spectator to find out at the end that he is not performing a Herculean task at all.

*‘I thought he would stay in this position for at least ten minutes, but that was an impossible length of time, and the most he could endure was five minutes. At the end*

*of this time, his physical being was in crisis, his muscles trembling, his body covered in sweat, his arms trying to bend, until he fell....I'm interested in the idea of vulnerability that is discovered through experience. The presence of the body is strong and serene, it reaches monumental dimensions...The effect is of the weakness of strength.* ' (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 202)

What also relates this piece to the idea of the fragile male body is the title. "Noli Me Tangere" (Latin for "touch me not"), which correlates to what Jesus said to Mary Magdalene in a post-resurrection appearance and which refers to the fragility and friability of a man caught between mortality and immortality.<sup>236</sup> In addition, as Michael O'Sullivan rightly points out, "Noli Me Tangere" also applies to the fact, that the viewer literally can not touch the model's body because it does not physically exist and even if she/he tries to, by stepping close to the screen, '*...your shadow will literally "break" his flesh...*' (O'Sullivan, M. 1999: 54)

Vulnerability, breakdown and loss of control are recurring motifs in her art and "Noli Me Tangere" (1998) must be seen in that context. Firstly, because it was produced shortly after her first bout of cancer and while she was still suffering the consequences of her chemotherapy, '*...Noli me Tangere...can refer to the feeling of being immortal, until the moment when you must come to terms with your own mortality.*' (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 210) Secondly, once again, she deals here with questions surrounding the idealisation of the male form. Vulnerability, breakdown and loss of control, are traits usually associated with women, at least in social history. What differentiates "Noli Me Tangere" (1998) is that, in this case, they are attributes of her male subjects. This could be seen as a subversion of traditional characterisations of men and women in patriarchal societies. This sedition, in a sense, underlines the questions raised by a previous generation of feminist artists namely, how characterisations of women and men are developed and

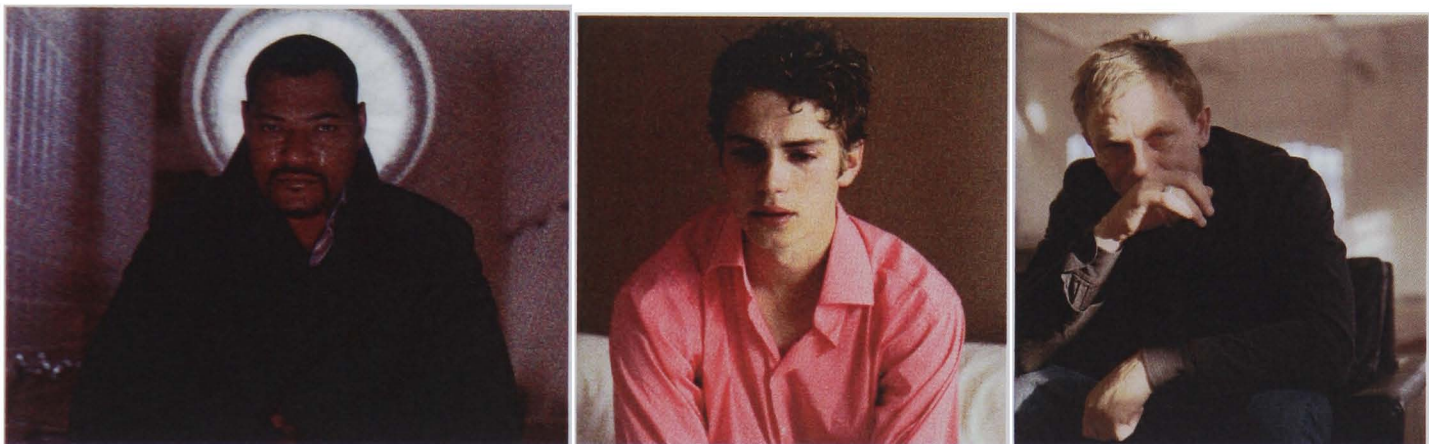
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<sup>236</sup> "Noli Me Tangere" (Latin for "touch me not") <sup>236</sup> is what Jesus said to Mary Magdalene in a post-resurrection appearance (John 20:17), and refers to the fact that Mary was clinging to Him in the hope that He had returned to earth for good, (when in actual fact He had not yet fully left - ascended). (Guthrie, D. et al. 1977: 965)



how one can subvert those and ultimately change the representation of women in society. (Chapter 2)

Ultimately, “Crying Men” (2004)<sup>237</sup> can be considered as an artistic interrogation of the idea of celebrity and at the same time an examination of constructions of masculinities. It could be understood as playing with the concept of masquerade, with ideas about the effeminacy of male attributes, with notions of the female voyeur and finally, with the traditional understanding of who has control over whom in the process of art making, all concepts that were of relevance for preceding feminist artists.



“Crying Men” (2004) left to right: Laurence Fishburne, Hayden Christensen, Daniel Craig

At first sight, the use of celebrities in “Crying Men” (2004) seems to attract a fair amount of disbelief<sup>238</sup> and the authenticity of the emotions of the various sitters is a matter of speculation for the viewer. (Higgins, C. 2004a: 9) While Sarah Kent rightly argues, that the ‘...*star-studded cast*...’ makes a belief in the genuineness of their tears impossible (Kent, S. 2004a: 58), for Taylor-Wood, this appears to be the main attraction, because ‘...*they’re actors you recognise, you don’t know if their sadness is real or not. ...The idea was to fight against the cliché of pointing a camera at someone and saying, “Smile”. I thought about early paintings of*

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<sup>237</sup> “Crying Men” (2004) consists of twenty-eight large scale photographs, twenty-two in colour and six in black and white and all about well known, male movie stars in different stages of apparent despair. For more information, see Taylor- Wood, S. (2004) *Crying Men*, Steidl, Goettingen, Germany.

<sup>238</sup> At the time of the exhibition, quite a few newspapers criticised her choice of celebrity, speaking about ‘...*boring and one-tired*...’ (Jones, J. 2004: 20), asking whether these portraits ‘...*take us further than a Hello! candid shot of a bad moment?*’ (Taylor, J. R. 2004: 16) to give but a few opinions.

*martyred saints with tears in their eyes. I wanted to take these icons of our era and make them more human, more vulnerable.* ' (Interview: Cork, R. 2004a: 25)

Tim Marlow defends Taylor-Wood's examination of male vulnerability: *'In our culture masculinity is most often explained from the standpoint of the macho, predicated on men in control...'*, likening the apparent loss of control in these portraits to David Beckham's vulnerability in Taylor-Wood's video portrait of him asleep for the National Portrait Gallery. (Higgins, C. 2004a: 9) In addition, Sam Taylor-Wood argues, that her images are not only about the demystification of celebrity, but also about the authenticity of emotions. *'People fixate on the fact that it's celebrity without thinking that it's also about what that emotion means.'* (Interview: Brockes, E. 2004: 4)

"Crying Men" (2004) is certainly not the only example of an artist using tears in connection with celebrity.<sup>239</sup> Whatever one might think about this piece and superficiality might spring to mind, Linda Nochlin, analysing it from a feminist point of view, points to the deeper connotations that might be drawn from the depiction of men in tears. First, she recognises the importance that gender and the use of celebrity play in these images and secondly, she acknowledges the fact that Taylor-Wood, from the very beginning, informs the viewer about the staginess of the portraits. Nochlin recognises and stresses the fact that because these images are not documentary style and their subjects are actors, one could see them as obeying the director's orders and performing. In other words, the *'...woman artist has control over these powerful males; they weep at her bidding.'* (Nochlin, L. 2004: not paginated)

Hence, here we have again the idea of role reversal with the woman as the active, creative producer of these images, while the men are reduced to their passive roles

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<sup>239</sup> The Czech photographer Jiri David made a work called "No Compassion" which was exhibited at the Hayward Gallery in 2004 in a show entitled "About Face", where he depicted in a series of nine, photographic portraits of world leaders including Toni Blair, George W. Bush, Berlusconi, and Arafat in tears. The photos were real, superimposed with his own tears. (Norman, N. 2004: 27)

of being models and following instructions. Furthermore, men crying has a whole set of additional connotations that are grounded in social history and in ideas about gender difference. Not only might they raise more than mere sympathy in a woman viewer, or in other words the female voyeur, Nochlin teases that they are ‘...*so sexy when they’re sad, these beautiful men.*’, but they also call to mind the disfavour associated with men crying in public. (Nochlin, L. 2004: not paginated) The figure of the vulnerable, even ‘...*abject male...*’ is, despite the cult of male sensitivity, quite often seen as an embarrassment. (Nochlin, L. 2004: not paginated)

One could say that here Sam Taylor-Wood is again playing with different aspects of the human condition and once more does not recoil from the amalgamation of male or female character traits with the opposite sex. Traditional borderlines between the male or female individuality are at least blurred if not transgressed and gender differentiation by conventional measurements, appears to become more complicated. As explained before, by mixing up what are supposedly known and *naturalised* in society as male and female attributes, Sam Taylor-Wood stresses, similar to some feminist artists, the *artificial* nature of gender structures. She questions power relations that according to a patriarchal history of gender structures have been explained by the psychosomatic *internal* processes of men and women. (Chapter 2) In other words, feminist artists stressed the importance of representations of women in culture which contribute to the understanding of gender roles in a society. One of their arguments is that male and female characterisations are superimposed by society and not given through birth. Hence, with the effeminisation of her crying male actors, she is superimposing female characteristics on them and consequently, following feminist artists, she is emphasising the external nature of these traits.

As indicated at the end of last section, Sam Taylor-Wood regularly refers to the idea of female desire, something that feminist artists wanted to raise awareness of, by subverting the idea of the male gaze and by introducing the concept of the female voyeur. “Soliloquy”, a series of images produced in 1998, comprises five giant



photographic tableaux, each consisting of a main panel and a narrow predella placed underneath. Within this structure of a Renaissance altar, two different modalities of vision are deployed to represent the dual registers of subjective bodily and psychic functioning. (Lajer-Burchard, E. 1999: 141) Here, an old master format, developed to convey different orders of existence (heavenly and earthly) in the scenes of a saintly life, is updated to evoke different orders of experience, objective and subjective, public and private, perhaps conscious and unconscious. (Foster, H./ Krauss, R./ Bois, Y.-A./ Buchloh, B., H., D. 2004: 661) It alternates between depictions of men and women as subjects and objects of desire, an equal focus of attention that feminist artists strived for. By the revelation of profane, subconscious fantasies, as exemplified in “Soliloquy III” (1998) and “Soliloquy IV” (1998), Sam Taylor-Wood transforms the noble, historical model/muse into a secularised contemporary female, whose desires evidently know no limits. (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 151-156)

“Soliloquy II- IV” (1998) all consist of two images each. The lower, panorama one, could be interpreted as a representation of the interior world of the figure presented above, but as James Roberts suggests, it could also be the other way around, with the upper image reflecting the self-image of the isolated figure, as they are absorbed into the cyclical scene illustrated below. (Roberts, J. 1999: 54) These two different modes of vision represent a subject split by fantasy or dream. In the upper part, we see the physical body of an individual sleeping, daydreaming, or otherwise caught in a moment of self-reflection that brackets her from the surrounding reality. (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 137) In the predellas, an imaginary world unfolds as the oneiric space of sexual fantasy. Sam Taylor-Wood acts here as an ‘...excavator...’, as Susanne Beaumont proposes, exposing what lies beneath the surface, what we imagine to be the subconscious of the individual. (Beaumont, S. 2000: 26)

In “Soliloquy III” (1998), somewhat reminiscent of Diego Velazquez’s “The Toilet of Venus” (1650), a woman is shown, one could perhaps interpret, taking pleasure in looking at her mirror reflection, the photograph being slightly opaque, as if shot



through a semi-transparent veil. In the predella below, one can see a phantasmatic scene of orgy that she seems to be imagining: a kind of studio space full of naked people, some of them having sex while others seem to be waiting their turn, not without boredom. The woman from the image above the predella is herself once again depicted in the back of the room, sitting in an armchair, her eyes closed, ostensibly indifferent to the action surrounding her. *'...I wanted to represent a situation based on beauty and vanity, on the relationship between flesh and sex. ...Thus this female figure is thinking of herself as a decidedly attractive sexual object, like someone who is accustomed to being looked at and being an object of desire. In the lower part, however, she is dressed in red...protected and witnesses an orgiastic scene to which she does not belong and to which she is indifferent.'* (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 151)



"Soliloquy III" (1998)



What is most salient in “Soliloquy III” (1998), one could perhaps say, is the contrast between the gently outlined feminine body filtered through the aesthetic screen of the culturally acceptable nude and the scene below, the product of her imagination, her sexual fantasies, thinking and speaking the unspeakable, a woman with desires that she so obviously articulates.

In “Soliloquy IV” (1998), Sue Tilley, who was Lucien Freud’s favourite model, appears to be recreating one of his paintings, showing her naked, big-breasted torso, in deep sleep, with her mouth agape, spreading on a sofa. (Saltz, J. 2000: 59) Here the artist does not juxtapose the gentle form of a female nude as in “Soliloquy III” (1998), but the raw fleshiness of a naked woman with the product of her imagination envisioned below. The predella shows three dwarfs and a child gazing upward from an empty room - perhaps at the female’s giant elbow that crosses the border of the upper panel and intrudes into the lower one - and some hefty male twins, who flank the mantelpiece in the picture.



“Soliloquy IV” (1998)

The interesting point in this image might be seen in Taylor-Wood's choice of model. While Sue Tilley was in Lucien Freud's paintings presented as the passive muse, whose "fleshiness" might have been Freud's attraction to her as a model in Taylor-Wood's image, she becomes the seat of subjectivity and desire.<sup>240</sup> In other words, in these photographs Sam Taylor-Wood transforms what was once seen as the female model of a great male painter reduced to passivity, a shell of a woman with no particular personality, into a woman as an active agent of ideas, dreams and desires, something that was of highest priority for feminist artists. (Chapter 2)

Not only does Sam Taylor-Wood depict women as the active loci of lust, she further denaturalises the predictable gender hierarchy of woman as object and man as subject of desire that continues to exist in the dominant visual culture, by rendering the man as passive, as the object of desire, as exemplified in "Soliloquy II" (1998). Here a young man, shirtless, unshaven, the belt of his pants suggestively unbuckled, is posing amidst stray dogs that sniff, lick and scratch. *'There is an ache of wantonness to the scene.'*, as Susanne Beaumont suggests. (Beaumont, S. 2000: 30) Below him, the predella shows a subterranean landscape of pornographic fantasy, a bathhouse full of naked characters, either having sex or leaning solitarily against the walls. The central character himself appears in one corner, one could argue somewhat resigned, sitting on the floor with a dog lying by his side.

According to Sam Taylor-Wood, the term "soliloquy" refers to a condition of detachment that an actor experiences in relation to both his character and the play in which he performs. (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 156) One can see the notion thematised, as Lajer-Burcharth explains, in the woman in the centre of the dog man's pornographic vision, for instance, her facial features liquified via digital manipulation to mark her disengagement both from the scene and from her own body. (Lajer-Burcharth, E. 1999: 144) As Ewa Lajer-Burcharth suggests, *'...the de-*

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<sup>240</sup> It might be important here to mention that this image has to be seen in context with the other four of the series to understand the fact that the predella shows the internal thought process of the character above. In this framework, Sue Tilley at least becomes a thinking subject and not a passive object as in Freud's case.



*realizing spatial effects produced by the panoramic camera were enhanced by some local digital manipulation of the image to represent the work of condensation and disfiguration of reality in fantasy or dream.* ' (Lajer- Burcharth, E. 1999: 141)



"Soliloquy II" (1998)

Michael Bracewell raises an important point in relation to condensation and disfiguration of reality in dreams, that whilst dreaming, we '*...subcontract our conscious identity to the entire cast of our dreams: we are all the people within our dreams...*' (Bracewell, M. 1999: 39) In other words, all the figures of Sam Taylor-Wood's predellas can be understood as the multitude of personalities that the character in the main images consists of, which once again, one could argue, contradicts the traditional notion of a "typical" male or female characterisation, usually positioned as binary opposites, which excludes possible transitions between them.



Adding to this, it may be of particular interest that it is not so much the prominence of sex in these images, but much more how they are configured, '*...the way in which these libidinally saturated fields of fantasy are traversed yet unstructured by sexual difference.*' (Lajer-Burcharth, E. 1999: 144) What Lajer-Burcharth refers to here, is Sam Taylor-Wood's assumptions about the lusts of woman, somehow evocative of "Fuck, Suck, Spank, Wank" (1993), her displacement of binary oppositions, her destruction of patriarchal narratives and finally her extension and expansion of cultural limits of representation, which denaturalise the sexual hierarchy in a patriarchal society, a task that informed feminist aesthetic practice of the previous decades. Alternatively, as Katharina Vossenkühl argues, referring to the equivalence of men's and women's fantasies in Taylor-Wood's work, which according to her '*...might be interpreted as an achievement of feminism, in whose wake Sam Taylor-Wood entered the art scene.*' (Vossenkühl, K. 2003: 172)

Sam Taylor-Wood draws on precedents in cinema, theatre and the tableau vivant as much as in painting and photography and like some of her YBA peers, she moves back and forth between mediums in an attempt to offer a variation of meanings. (Chapter 3) In her work the basic identity structures, which divide society into men and women, as proposed by Sigmund Freud, no longer exist. Sam Taylor-Wood seems to examine the relationship between portraiture and mediation, the possibility of multiple identities avoiding a single type of gender knowledge and the manner in which human expression, language and soundtrack can be manipulated to reveal the frailty or strength of inner, emotional constitutions. Critics quite often seem to fail to see these deeper connotations in her work and as Penny Florence rightly points out, '*Reviews of Taylor-Wood's work in general tend to worry about its supposed emptiness, and yet at the same time appear to avoid tackling either its manifest content or its feminist antecedents.*' (Florence, P. 2004: 87)



### **5.3. Genius and Narrativity in Sam Taylor-Wood's Work**

Arguably Sam Taylor-Wood follows the legacy of artists such as Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall, who were constructing images at the crossroads of a variety of media a generation ago, initiating new, hybrid genres, such as, the film still, which inhabits a space between cinema and photography. Today, as George Baker argues, this approach has been expanded in two ways, '*...toward an increasing mannerism of the hybrid photographic images as its own form... and toward analogous experiments at the limits of other media such as film and projected-image work, where cinema meets sculpture or video.*' (Baker, G. 2001: 115) Taylor-Wood could be seen as exemplifying both styles. Summarising her approach, she says her art '*...adopts the language of film, where there is a shift away from narrative into something else.*' (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Renton, A. 2003b: 39)

Consequently, as Bruce W. Ferguson comments, Sam Taylor-Wood, with her constant blurring of mediums, genres and allusions in order to create multiple points of reference, epitomises why comparisons between art works in the same media and artists who work in a similar manner seem obsolete today. She exemplifies why it becomes necessary to look at work in any medium, including oil painting and sculpture '*...as semiotic devices or fields of meaning...*' which run across media and culture and across the normalising tendencies of any categorisation. (Ferguson, B. W. 1999: 9/10)

Sam Taylor-Wood draws on inspirations from cinema, theatre, painting and music to deal with subjects such as boredom, urban excess, individual vulnerability, alienation, spirituality in contemporary society, artificial media constructions, mortality and hope. She cites among her influences Bruce Nauman, Alfred Hitchcock, Andy Warhol and the Old Masters. However, it is the importance of her involvement with the YBA movement that Taylor-Wood speaks about most, '*We captured the Zeitgeist of the era. We really supported each other, and had adventurous and crazy times - it was all very alcohol - and drug-fuelled.*' (Sam

Taylor-Wood quoted in Holmes, P. 2002: 155) As a result her work can be seen as '*...a portrait of the last decade*', as Clare Carolin, the curator of the Hayward Gallery points out. (Clare Carolin quoted in Holmes, P. 2002: 154)

Critics might argue that some pieces of her work could be considered as '*...either intriguing variations on a theme or undisguised homages to the works of others or merely derivative, depending on your point of view.*' (Norman, N. 2004: 27)

Ferguson explains that in contemporary culture where distinctions between disciplines, such as, high and low art, academia and entertainment, empirical and conceptual research and so forth, are collapsed and art in itself with its limitations and challenges, becomes a subject in its own right for artists such as Taylor-Wood. (Ferguson, B. W. 1999: 11)

“Wrecked” (1996), a contemporary version of Leonardo da Vinci’s “The Last Supper” (1498) shown at the Sensation exhibition (Chapter 3), might be seen as a testimony to her influences from the YBAs, as well as her “plagiarism” from old masters. As Sam Taylor-Wood explains, *‘Wrecked relives a historical condition, that of the Last Supper, but it doesn’t overlap with it. Memory of the banquet is abandoned, and there is pleasure rather than expiation...The central figure, the woman, was someone I had met at a dinner and I had liked her Caravaggio-like look. I chose her because of her allusion to history, but iconographic fidelity doesn’t interest me...’* (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 184)



“Wrecked” (1996)

“Wrecked” (1996), by using some of Taylor-Wood’s friends to produce a photographic recreation, transforms Leonardo’s “The Last Supper” (1498) into a contemporary dinner party, in which the central figure of Christ is replaced by a woman bare to the waist, her arms outstretched in a gesture that is both ‘...*spiritual and insane*.’ (Buck, L. 2000: 94) Sam Taylor-Wood explains, that it was done at a time where there was a ‘...*real hiatus in the art world. It came out of my sense that everyone was going completely wild*.’ (Interview: Carolin, C. 2002: not paginated) The nudity of the central figure, is according to Taylor-Wood a reference to a moment of freedom, to a woman who does not care and who feels ‘...*elated and separate*.’ (Interview: Carolin, C. 2002: not paginated)

Interestingly enough “Wrecked” (1996) can be seen as not only referencing Leonardo’s “The Last Supper” (1498), but also Mary Beth Edelson’s “Some Living American Women Artists/ Last Supper”, an offset poster from 1972.<sup>241</sup> Here the design ironically asserts women’s place in the history of art, depicting over eighty living women artists and commemorating them in the same manner as paintings or photographs typically dominated by men, which were produced to show their allegiances. As Mary Beth Edelson explains, ‘*Organized religion’s penchant for cutting women out of positions of authority is challenged in this poster, as well as the widespread assumption that women do not have access to the sacred. But here we are instated in this famous religious icon for all the world to see*.’ (Artist statement in Reckitt, H. / Phelan, P. (Eds.) 2001: 80)

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<sup>241</sup> Produced as a poster, the work was widely reproduced in feminist publications. (Reckitt, H. / Phelan, P. (Eds.) 2001: 80)





SOME LIVING AMERICAN WOMEN ARTISTS

Mary Beth Edelson "Some Living American Women Artists/ Last Supper" (1972)

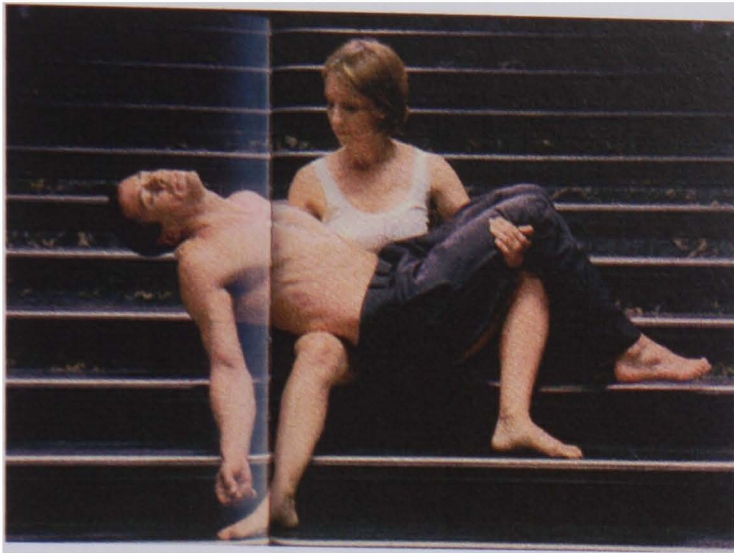
Sam Taylor-Wood, in a similar manner to Edelson, challenges the idea of authority by replacing the figure of Jesus Christ, on whom Christianity is based, with a female figure. The woman then takes the place of the messiah, the "king" of the Jews, the saviour and liberator of the world, attributes that are conventionally associated with the man in society. (Chapter 2) Furthermore, this woman in her nudity represents freedom in a way that was perhaps not permitted for women, to *act as she* desires, subverting the idea of female passivity, of being the muse and model for the male gaze with no right to act or to express her desires. (Chapter 2) In addition, here, she is possibly challenging again the idea of genius, similar to Michelangelo's "Pieta", by taking and re-appropriating an image that is associated with highest culture and that exemplifies a symbol of male creativity, something women were devoid of, according to cultural history.

In "Pieta" (2001)<sup>242</sup>, comparable to Marina Abramovic's still from her performance "Pieta" (1984), Sam Taylor-Wood recreates Michelangelo's famous sculpture with the same title, from 1499. (Vetrocq, M.E. 1997)

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<sup>242</sup> "Pieta" was produced after Sam Taylor-Wood had undergone her second treatment for cancer and immediately followed the filming for Elton John's "I Want Love" video, a work that reinstated her confidence and kick-started ideas, with "Pieta" being the immediate one. (Interview: Carolin, C. 2002: not paginated)





“Pieta” (2001)



Marina Abramovic

Still from Performance “Pieta” (1984)

While Marina Abramovic, a declared feminist artist and co-exhibitor of Sam Taylor-Wood at the Venice Biennale in 1997, performed “Pieta” (1984) as an element of a three part performance “Lying”, “Standing” and “Sitting”, seeking out the line between the restrictions of the physical body and the individual potential of the human spirit, Sam Taylor-Wood, in a similar manner, explores the limits of endurance in her work. (Abramovic, M. 1998: 251-257) In “Pieta” (2001), Taylor-Wood films herself cradling Robert Downey Jr.’s body, focusing on the sheer corporeal weight. *‘I’m trying to look calm and serene, but my arms are trembling, and you can see my breath. It was exhausting.’*<sup>243</sup> (Sam Taylor-Wood quoted in Campbell-Johnston, R. 2001)

Richard Dorment, comparing Sam Taylor-Wood’s “Pieta” (2001) with Michelangelo’s, makes the interesting observation, that in both pieces the Madonna is represented by a relatively young woman in contrast to other depictions of the same subject.<sup>244</sup> Consequently for him, the pose of a woman cradling a man of similar age, which seen in any other context would evoke some kind of sexual connotation, does not do so in either Michelangelo’s or Taylor-Wood’s

<sup>243</sup> For their performance, Taylor-Wood wears ordinary clothes and Downey strips to the waist. The film is shot in real time, with no sound and little movement and Taylor-Wood can hold the actor for little under two minutes before the film loops.

<sup>244</sup> He argues that in most other Pietas the Madonna is shown as an old or at least mature woman. (Dorment, R. 2001: 1)



compositions. (Dorment, R. 2001: 1) In Michelangelo's case, the Madonna has no difficulties in supporting the body of her son and his Christ is clearly dead, while in Taylor-Wood's film there is no pretence of such a thing. Neither Sam Taylor-Wood nor Robert Downey Jr. pretend to be the biblical figures whose arrangement they have assumed. Much more, by showing the effort in keeping such a pose they reassure the viewer of their human nature. (Dorment, R. 2001: 1)

Furthermore, the identities of both characters in Sam Taylor-Wood's "Pieta" (2001) are central to the understanding of this piece. Instead of hiring a model for the Madonna, Taylor-Wood herself adopts the role and for the pose of Christ she makes use of a well known actor, both of whom are recognised for their personal tragedies, Taylor-Wood's as already described above and Downey Jr. for his repeated drug offences. Consequently, one could read the work as the artist who is still recovering from cancer and who is supporting physically and probably emotionally, the vulnerable male actor, recuperating from his drug problems. As the medium for this performance is film and not a still photograph, the friability of the encounter becomes even clearer and lets the viewer participate in the artist's failure to hold on to her burden. Michelangelo's Madonna holds her son for all eternity, but by allowing us to see her frailty, Taylor-Wood does not set herself apart, instead she shares her own vulnerability and in seeking the spiritual in man's nature, expresses an insight into what it means to be human. (Florence, P. 2004: 85)

One could possibly comment here, that not only has she once again re-appropriated a symbol of male creativity to her own means and challenged the idea of the male genius, but also at the same time, by daring to render Michelangelo's sculptural "Pieta" (1499) in film format, she challenges assumptions about ideas of high art versus low art. (Chapter 2) Moreover, even though her body is debilitated from a life threatening illness, *she* is supporting *him*, who, one could argue, enfeebled his body voluntarily by the abuse of drugs. In other words, the image is composed of a double frailty, i.e. the frailty of her body and his physical and mental frailty, contradicting the traditional idea of the man as the mental stable versus the woman as the volatile

part of the gender dichotomy. It is with her, the female artist, actor and director of “Pieta” (2001), that the responsibility of the realisation of the idea, composition and bodily endurance lies. Comparing the time-based medium of film, with its beginning, middle and end, to the cycle of life, one could arguably conclude, that once again she refers to the transience of life, neatly synthesising two conventionally male artistic traditions: the memento mori and the still life. (Dorment, R. 2001: 1)

In a similar way to Tracey Emin and a previous generation of feminist artists working with the idea of abjection, Sam Taylor-Wood consciously tries to destabilise the patriarchal structures of narrative and to draw the viewer to a place where traditional meaning collapses. (Chapter 2/4) Sam Taylor-Wood does not construct narratives and nothing is, as it seems, neither in her photographs nor in her films, a trait, which was important for feminist artists, i.e. to deconstruct traditional narratives and representations. (Buck, L. 2000: 94) / (Chapter 2) Overall, she presents the viewer with scenarios where gestures become poses and where the borderline between reality and acting becomes blurred. (Muir, G. 1996: 80) Her work does not intend to construct coherent, easily recognisable viewpoints or positions and the viewer is regularly left alone to complete the story by creating his own narrative. (Sawyer, M. 2001) Sound plays an important part in her work in order to re-route the senses of the viewer and to evoke immediate emotional responses.

For instance, her series “Five Revolutionary Seconds” (1995-1998), could be seen as combining elements from film with elements from photography. The time aspect of film, usually with a beginning-middle-end, can be found in these panoramic images *within* the photographs.<sup>245</sup> Firstly, they are too big to be taken in one glance and secondly, due to the use of a rotating still camera, that registers a 360-degree

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<sup>245</sup> For a comprehensive explanation of the experience of time in still photography see: (Vanvolsem, M. 2005: 49-56)

view in one continuous take, not every point in the individual photographs is taken at the same time. (Vanvolsem, M. 2005: 53/54)

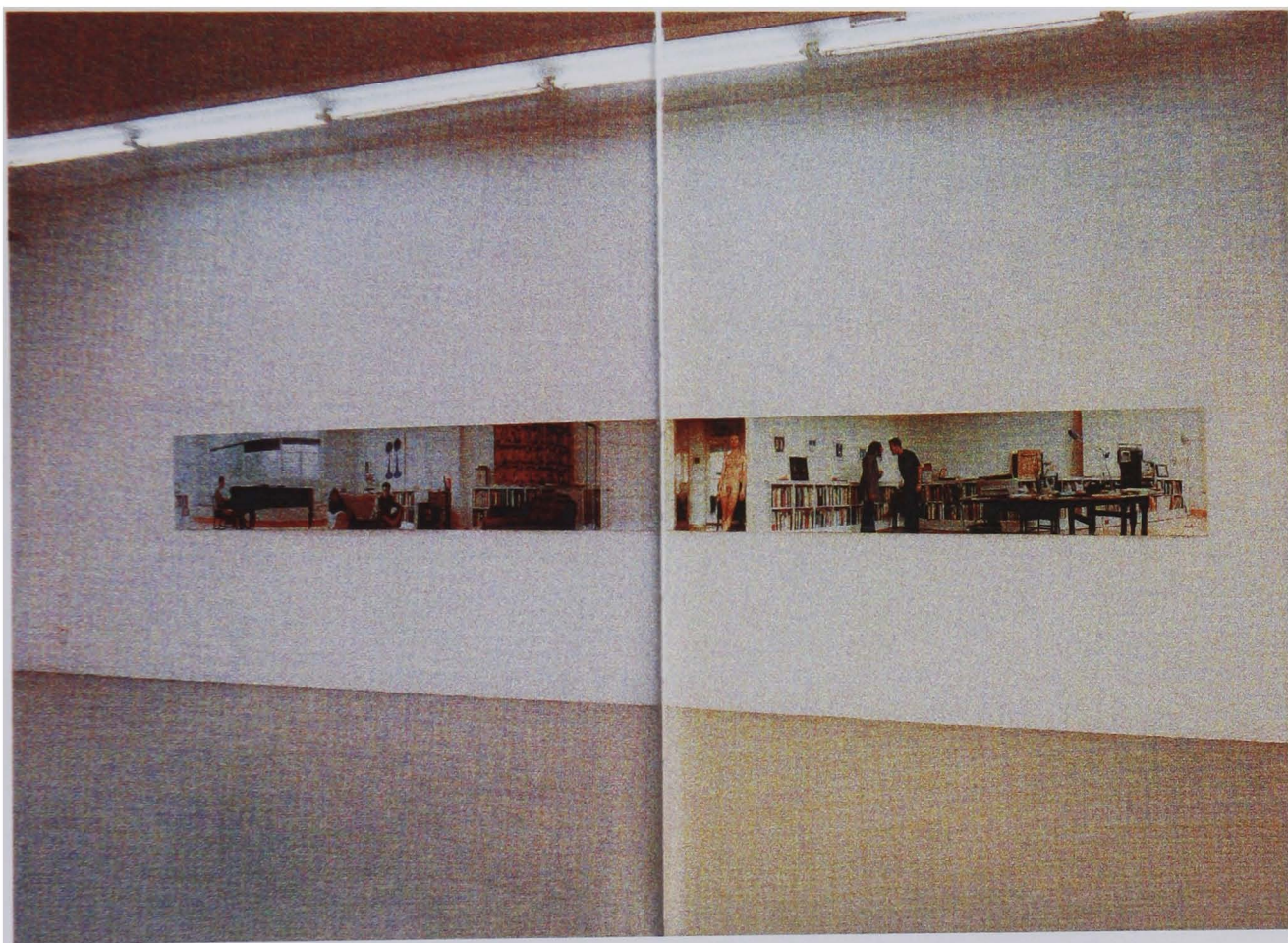
For five seconds, as the title indicates, Sam Taylor-Wood depicts various people in luxurious surroundings, each doing different things, being completely absorbed in their own worlds and appearing to be devoid of conversation. As Susanna Beaumont describes, '*...saturated with ennui, they are set in isolation and socially frigid. One imagines that they anaesthetise their anxieties with fantasies,...*' (Beaumont, S. 2000: 30) and Katharina Vossenkuhl concludes that, '*...the artist depicts a snobbish society crippled by boredom.*' (Vossenkuhl, K. 2003: 172) Combined with the photographs are different sounds and voices and for a short while, the viewer is possibly convinced that all these reconcilable elements in the image could share the same ground, even though '*...they come from the opposite sides of the social spectrum.*' (Bonami, F. 1997: 96) However, on closer inspection of this anthology of human relationships, it appears that every fragment remains clearly isolated from the others and that each of the individual characters depicted in the photographs are trying hard to maintain or regain their own independence.

Adding to this dislocation is the fact that the viewer himself needs to recreate the panning motion of the rotating camera to be able to read the image. The soundtrack, the ambient noise of the space captured during its pictorial record, which underlies the images and is reinserted as yet another point of disjuncture, is five seconds long and on a continual loop. The moving viewer, the dislocated sound and the disharmony in the images themselves produce an uneasy tension, something feminist artists tried to achieve when exploring the concept of abjection. (Grenville, B. 2005: 10/11)

Sam Taylor-Wood, repeatedly, exposes the problems of relationships, not only between individuals, but also among people and their objects, their space, the time and among the different body parts that make up a person, as well as between different sensations and perceptions. Her work could therefore be understood '*...as a*



*journey through all of these interrupted relationships.* ' (Bonami, F. 1997: 100) The characters in "Five Revolutionary Seconds" (1995-1998), as James Roberts rightly observes, do not look remotely happy and they seem to be preoccupied '*...in their narcissistic introspections...*' in such a way that even sex is reduced to '*...something that couples are meant to do, so they go through the motions in a dispassionate dress rehearsal.*' (Roberts, J. 1999: 53)



"Five Revolutionary Seconds I" (1995)

Ewa Lajer- Burcharth makes an important point in stating that Sam Taylor-Wood, in engaging with the conventions of photography, panorama and avant-garde film, '*...concocts morphologically complex visual images that address the issue of subjectivity in the era of screen.*' (Lajer- Burcharth, E. 1999: 140) In other words, the different characters that Taylor-Wood displays in "Five Revolutionary Seconds" (1995-1998), could be seen as standing in for different subject positions. Furthermore, they represent different fantasies of the self, as regularly mediated by television and magazines. Finally, with this kind of work Taylor-Wood contributes

to the discourse of cultural constructions, which in itself leads to questions surrounding the construction of gender, as proposed by feminist artists.

Recapitulating, one could conclude that in “Five Revolutionary Seconds” (1995-1998), as in most of her other works, Taylor-Wood deliberately plays off discrepancies between form and content, appearance and intention, sound and vision, consciously avoiding a traceable narrative and encouraging a sense of dislocation and anomaly. At first sight, the work also reflects a febrile and often decadent world of glamour and celebrity. This seductive sterility might distract from the deeper content of the piece, which deals with the relationships between individuals as well as, by depicting the same person more than once in the image, with the different personalities and fantasies of a singular person. The soundtrack of background noise and snippets of conversation adds to the voyeuristic appeal, as well as to the futility of trying to make these individuals fit into an unfolding sequence of events. The idea of multiplicity of identities and the blurring of them, the exemplifying of complex relationships within an individual as well as interpersonally and the deconstruction of narratives, as usually constructed within the laws of a patriarchal society, might be seen as reminiscent of feminist art from the 1960s and 1970s. (Chapter 2)

Within an increasingly confessional media culture and similar to Tracey Emin and Gillian Wearing, in “Travesty of a Mockery” (1995), as well as in “Atlantic” (1997), Sam Taylor-Wood explores ideas such as, the dissolution of domestic harmony and the public revelation of private affairs, touching on voyeuristic feelings that might be evoked in the viewer.





“Travesty of a Mockery” (1995)

In “Travesty of a Mockery” (1995), following the legacy of Bruce Nauman’s twelve-monitor video installation “Violent Incident” (1986), Taylor-Wood stages a violent confrontation between a woman and a man in the setting of a domestic kitchen. (Spector, N. 1999: 23) A young couple are shown at the height of emotional turmoil, throwing not only insults and accusations back and forth, but also the occasional household object. The characters, played by an amateur male performer and a professional actress, are separated from each other in unconnected pictorial zones and delineated by two projections, which expands the interpretative possibilities of this work. In between them is a gap, even though both actors inhabit the same environment, their proximity is underlined when the woman throws objects which transcend from her projection into his. At the peak of their confrontation, one character enters the space of the other for a physical assault.

The formal device of a split screen helps to distance the viewer from the interpersonal attacks being enacted. Furthermore, in this work, a coherent narrative is again missing and it remains unclear how and when the clash started as well as there is no evidence of the closing stages. The ten-minute video is divided into fifteen brief vignettes, or micro-moments, of either intense emotional exchange or deadly silence, that are signalled by the sound of shifting radio stations. *‘I used music as an emotional and experiential evocation. It is the sound track that directs the “projections”... I didn’t want to convey any significance to what the couple were discussing, so that it was impossible to decide what was right and what was wrong.’*

(Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 246) The order of these vignettes appears to be quite arbitrary. As Sam Taylor-Wood explains, *'My work's never structured in a narrative way. The concepts of beginning, middle, end never comes into it...the thing I'm trying to do is just hone in on fragments of situations and expand them right to their maximum.'* (Interview: Etherington, D. 1997: 17)

The fact that the female role is played by a professional actress while the male role is performed by an amateur can be seen as significant in feminist terms, referring to the idea of role reversal. As Sam Taylor-Wood points out, she wanted the man to rely on his instincts and to improvise, while the woman's role was to react by acting a response, which put her in the more powerful position as she was guiding the whole conversation. (Interview: Hilty, G. 1998: 44) *'In the piece she could be seen as a victim; in reality, she was the manipulator, because she was relying on her professional skills.'* (Interview: Carolin, C. 2002: not paginated),

Hence, Sam Taylor-Wood once again recognises the limitations of the photograph, or in this case the film, in being nominated as a fundamental truth. As Bruce W. Ferguson stresses, Sam Taylor-Wood, similar to other contemporary artists, is *...deeply suspicious of the notion that photographic sorcery convinces us that the body seen is the body known.'* (Ferguson, B. W. 1999: 17) Consequently, her work recognises the false history of any kind of image as symbolic of the tense relationship between image and language and the impossibility to deduce any ultimate truth from it.

"Atlantic" (1997), a three-projection video installation which is an emblem of gender difference with its complex image/sound presentation, once more exemplifies that filmic capture is always incomplete and unfinished. Here, a young couple seated in a noisy restaurant seem to struggle through an agonizing break-up. On the left, there is the woman in tears, on the right, only the man's hands are visible, nervously toying with his wine glass and bits of tobacco on the table and in the middle, a view of the bustling restaurant is revealed, with the couple's table



being one of many. The conversation between the two main characters is barely audible and once again the narrative of the scene is, as Nancy Spector proposes, anchored '*...through its utter banality.*' (Spector, N. 1999: 31) '*I wanted the effect to be that of another person, seated at the same restaurant, three tables away, who sees the couple, tries desperately to understand their conversation, intuits the situation and understands a phrase here and there.*' (Interview: Celant, G. 1999: 246) Again, this piece is not about an emotional mayhem, but much more a study of how the trauma of private life is played out in, subsumed by and reflected back by the public. (Freedman, C. 1997a: 144/145)



“Atlantic” (1997)

In “Travesty of a Mockery” (1995), as well as in “Atlantic” (1997), the artist is working from an apparently domestic, or commonplace situation, where the ordinary, the-every-day and the banal are paradoxically *...the most complex states of all to define, serving as they can, as portals to the wholly extraordinary, the disturbing and the underground of consciousness.*’ (Bracewell, M. 1999: 35) The slogan the “personal is political” might spring to mind when looking at this work, with the slight variation that here the domestic and private become public. Referring to Sam Taylor-Wood’s “fly on the wall” method, similar to that of television documentary, Michael Bracewell explains that both works can be seen as a *‘...contemporary amplification, and reinvention, of a tradition of social portraiture which is concerned with psychological crisis, the eclipse of the mundane by extreme states of mind, and, eventually, a form of elevation into allegory.*’ (Bracewell, M. 1999: 37)

Both, “Travesty of a Mockery” (1995) and “Atlantic” (1997) could be equally understood as charging and initiating the viewer’s desire to interpret and simultaneously frustrating any possibility of complete knowledge. As Bruce W. Ferguson states, the *‘...dysfunction of narrative cuts the bond of interpretative desire and acts to both frustrate completion in the scopic and the psychic sense. ...Thus the lie that is the image together with the lie that is the text produce a truthful rhetorical meaning only by virtue of their combined aesthetic force acting on the viewer.’* (Ferguson, B. W. 1999: 19) In other words, the combination of incongruent elements in her work that neither produce a line of narrative, nor present any obvious character relation, initiate in the viewer an increased and insistent demand for narrativity, which could in turn heighten the viewer’s perception of her or his dependence on conditioned meanings.

Furthermore, the two pieces might be seen as evocative of the sensibilities explored by performance artists over the past decades. As Helen Potkin suggests, such work *‘...with its wraparound narrative and display of intense emotion which may be acted or real, implicate[s] the viewer in a similar way to live performance. Certain tendencies within video art may be seen as performative.’* (Potkin, H. 2001: 84) For instance, “Travesty of a Mockery” (1995) might be considered as a descendent of Marina Abramovic’s performance “AAA-AAA” (1978), where she and her partner Ulay, slowly build up a tension by facing each other and producing a continuous vocal sound until they are screaming into each other’s open mouths. (Elwes, C. 2005: 11)/ (Abramovic, M. 1998: 184/185)

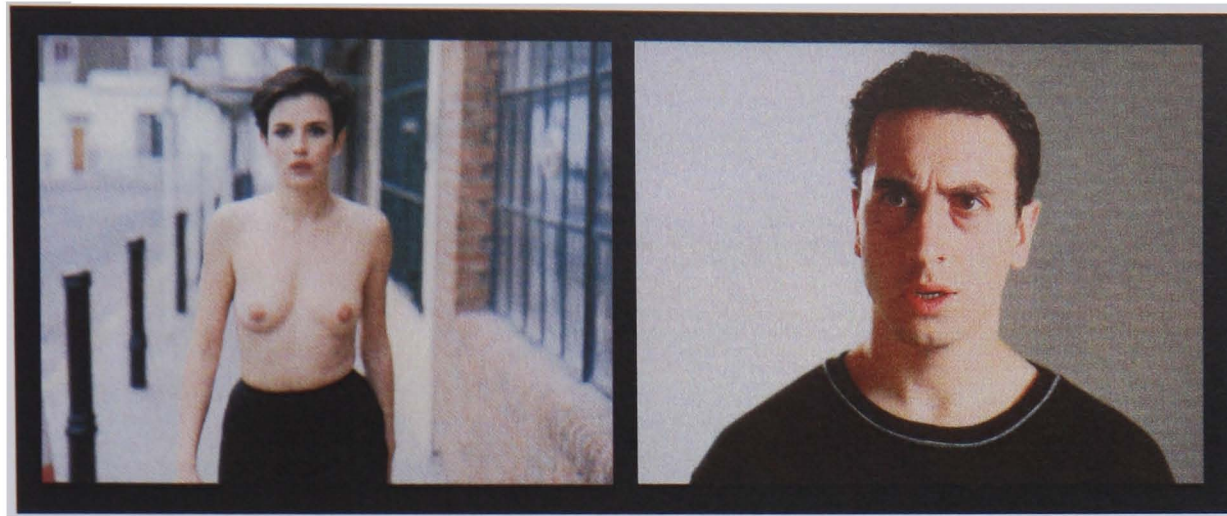
Sam Taylor-Wood, as Katharina Vossenkuhl suggests, defines the social, mental and personal context of one person, through confrontation with another. (Vossenkuhl, K. 2003: 172) Consequently, one could argue, Taylor-Wood once again questions the superficiality and limitations of representations and presents us with a visual indication of what might lie under the surface, similar to feminist artists who interrogated and transgressed the borders of representations of the female body, denying the ostentation usually demanded from it. Arguably, Taylor-

Wood stresses the fact that there is more than one possible reality. Truth behind appearance might be different from its shell and there is more than one subjectivity worth exploring. As feminist artists might have argued, truth is only true as far as its historical and disciplinarian limits allow.

“Sustaining the Crisis” (1997) is a two screen projection. Returning once again to the male/female dichotomy, this work follows at first sight a clear gender differentiation that fits within the historical limits of a patriarchal society. A male actor, whose head and torso are projected onto one gallery wall, appears to be watching a young woman, projected onto another gallery wall, who walks topless down a street. (Myers, Y.R. 1998: 52) The soundtrack consists of both actors’ breathing and can be seen as the interacting point between the two projections. (Hilty, G. 1998: 45) As Jessica Morgan argues, the ‘...operatic fluctuations...’ in this work are not conveyed by words, but by breath alone. (Morgan, J. 1998: 230) The anxious breathing of the man is “answered” by the strangely collected rhythmic breathing of a woman, who, as Morgan contends, ‘...*despite her nudity is not out of breath.*’ (Morgan, J. 1998: 230)

Richard Dorment sees some kind of aggression augmenting between the woman’s provocation and the man’s voyeurism. (Dorment, R. 2002: 25) Sam Taylor-Wood, basing this piece on a real life experience and explaining her intentions, states that the male actor ‘...*would be confronting a fear of this woman who was strong and powerful in her sexuality, but at the same time, was walking along very busy London streets without her top on. He had to think about possible reasons why she is doing that...I wanted him to act as though he feared something that he was constantly pushed towards.*’ (Interview: Carolin, C. 2002: not paginated)





“Sustaining the Crisis” (1997)

The contradiction between the male actor/ anxious breathing/ shot in the safe confines of a studio and the female actor/ regular breathing/ nude in a public place, is once again reminiscent of Taylor-Wood’s urge to deny the viewer any narrative and to press the spectator to create her or his own. One might wonder why it is he and not she that is obviously frightened about something. Usually to be topless in public and be subjected to the gaze of others would entail some sort of unease. Is it because historically women are used to being exposed to the predominantly male gaze and are therefore, accustomed to being seen as objects of desire? Is it because women, in our media culture, are depicted bare breasted on a daily basis, while the nude man still seems to be a rarity? Sam Taylor-Wood does not give the answers, she scarcely presents the viewer with the questions, she merely provides the viewer with fragments of experiences, with a feeling of, perhaps one could say, unease and conundrum, kindling the need for further contemplation and solvability.

Comparable to Gillian Wearing’s “Sixty Minute Silence” (1996) and as a final example of Taylor-Wood’s exploration of narrative and the boundaries between film and still image, “The Last Century” (2005) again plays with the limitations of different media. It is a film that looks like a still photograph of people in a bar, as Sam Taylor-Wood explains ‘...classically set up, not unlike those Doisneau photographs of French lunchtime drinking or any of those Manet paintings....The strangeness of it is that the group is frozen in time but the outside world keeps



*moving so that in the reflections on the walls you see the cars passing outside.'*

(Interview: Shani, A. 2006: 132/133)



“The Last Century” (2005)

What Taylor-Wood refers here to, is the duality of time: ‘...*one completely frozen and one carrying on, irrespective.*’ (Interview: Shani, A. 2006: 133) It is the contradiction of time within the same piece of work that attracted her to its production. ‘*It’s peculiar and hypnotic, that way that you stare and kind of start thinking when you’re watching something which is still.*’ (Interview: Shani, A. 2006: 133) One could add here that the image is somewhat uncanny. It transmits the sense of how irrepressible life is and how much effort it takes to keep still. The frozen smile on the woman’s face in the front could be seen as unsettling, considering the fact that she had to hold the expression of laughter for seven minutes and twelve seconds. It appears as a frozen moment in time, as a “hold frame” situation in a film, where one expects something to happen in close proximity to that one moment in time. A film, like life, consists of many such short frames or split seconds that could go by unnoticed and in a kind of democracy of vision, Sam Taylor-Wood raises their importance.

Sam Taylor-Wood over and over again, plays with the idea of suspension as an ephemeral state in life, evocative of her series “Self Portrait Suspended ” (2004).

Once more, she is not shy of comparing her work with those of the “Old Masters”. She puts herself in the same rank or league with those who might once have been called “geniuses”, a confidence that may well be based on the foundation provided by a previous generation of feminist artists who fought for equal artistic rights and for the acceptance of women within the canon of art. (Chapter 2)

#### **5.4. Summary**

Similar to Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood comes from a working class background and her youth was flanked with traumatic experiences. Her art is markedly influenced by her upbringing and by the two bouts of cancer that she endured later in her life. Analogous to Emin and in a sense, related to feminist art, she turned the personal political and produced self-portraits at significant stages in her life. Perhaps in a less obvious way than Emin, but nevertheless, in a highly emotional manner, she deals with her female experiences and possibly, by questioning what can be considered as representable, she gives a voice to women with similar traumatic experiences.

Furthermore, she speaks the unspeakable by rendering women as desiring subjects. Instead of their traditional passive role, they become active agents, who stress their sexual freedom. One could argue that she liberates women from their subordinated position as the traditional, objectified muses whose only justification for being was for the pleasure of the male gaze. Men and women seem to be treated equally in Sam Taylor-Wood’s work, with their positions interchangeable to a certain degree. Both become the object of the other’s gaze and being either the subject or object of desire.

Gender traits in general, are mixed up, combined and blended in interesting ways in Sam Taylor-Wood’s work, generating a certain sexual ambivalence, reconsidering the culturally defined categories of masculine and feminine and exploring the

possibility of subjective pluralities by avoiding a single type of gender knowledge. Men, in her work, regularly undergo effeminacy, while quite often women are represented in her images either as the more powerful characters, the ones who are in control and the ones who take on the traditional male position as the voyeur. The idea of masquerade, as explored by feminist artists, can be also found in Taylor-Wood's work, contributing either to the destruction of any obvious narrative, or to the challenge of traditional binary oppositions between men and women.

Arguably, the idea of stripping away essential attributes, or the key elements of certain situations in her work, relates to the question of power. While Tracey Emin is preoccupied with the representation of the female body, Sam Taylor-Wood, one could conclude, is dealing with the male body and its fragility, unveiling the dissolution of the male sexual form and its typical attributes. The question of power can be seen here as two fold: firstly, there is the *female* artist who directs her male models, a subversion of the idea of the creative male artist and his female muse and secondly, with the use of effeminacy, she strips her male characters of their traditional attributes and their historical association with power.

Sam Taylor-Wood repeatedly questions, consciously or unconsciously, the idea of the male genius, by either comparing her own work to the old masters or by re-appropriating their works and styles to her own ends. She is not shy of mixing ideas of art and craft, or high and low culture. By measuring her work up to those male artists, who are considered as being part of the canon of art history, she seems to see herself as on a par with them, a goal that was at the heart of previous feminist art.

Sam Taylor-Wood is not presenting the viewer with a pre-given story line in her work and generally, things are not what they appear to be. Much more, either she actively interrupts traditional narratives by combining contradictory elements and by stripping away what could be considered as essential parts of conventional representations. In doing this, she evokes the urge of, and the necessity for, the spectator to create his or her own possible reading.

## **6. Subjectivity and Feminism in Gillian Wearing's Work**

*'I feel I'm quite reserved, an inhibited person, and I'm always interested in people who can more openly be out there in any respect, whether through drink or their own personality.'* (Interview: Caldwell, R. 2002: R5)

Gillian Wearing, who is very different in the cultivation of her public image to Tracey Emin and Sam Taylor-Wood and who leads a much more secluded life, nevertheless regularly overcomes her shyness and employs the collaboration of complete strangers for her work. She, in a similar manner to Tracey Emin, as it will be debated, raises taboo issues and gives her subjects a voice, rendering them from a passive and silent position in society to active agents of their feelings and expressions. She shares her interest with Sam Taylor-Wood, in the gap between the performance and the reality of human conditions, by asking questions such as: What is true and authentic versus simple play? (Chapter 5.2.) Where does the artist fit in and what is the role of the viewer? When does she/he become voyeur? What is the specific nature of artistic expression, compared with a sociological approach? And ultimately the red threads throughout her work are: a) the exploration of the possibility of such thing as a "core" identity and the disguise mechanisms that take place such as performance and performativity, something that formed part of the later feminist art debates. Further, b) how "true" identities are, not only distorted by the individuals themselves, but also on another level, through the representational means employed. Similar to feminist artists, as it will be shown, Wearing questions the link between representation and reality. She explores repeatedly the validity of handed-down truths and opens up the possibility of a multitude of realities and plural subjectivities.

Within the themes she tackles, the deconstruction of the role plays and masks that human beings regularly use in their interactions, and the social norms that do not allow the uncontrolled outpour of unpleasant feelings and experiences, Wearing follows at first sight in a documentary tradition dedicated to ordinary people and to a certain extent, *'...to society's rejects....'* (Canada NewsWire 2003) At the same time, she also



follows in Martha Rosler's and Victor Burgin's footsteps in realising the necessity to interrogate the ideology of the documentary and its claim to display so called "social truths." (Chapter 3.4) In this vein, she works on the ambiguity of perception. She questions the representation of play and reality, by attempting to involve all parties in her work. Plural subjectivities are possible in her work and comparable to Sam Taylor-Wood's work. By replacing and mixing identity traits such as voices, she generates an uncertainty that questions the significance of certain handed-down truths. Behaviourism and identity of human beings in their everyday lives are, as her art reveals, dependent on the constraints and expectations imposed and enforced by societies. Reality, as she shows can be staged. Gillian Wearing brings to light the superficiality and limitation of representation that the viewer is confronted with on a daily basis. It can be hidden by masks, by distortions of sound and picture, by editing effects or by the performance and performativity of her subjects. The viewer is faced with all these possibilities and similar to Sam Taylor-Wood's work needs to create regularly her or his own interpretation and narrative.

### **6.1. "Core"- Identity versus Identity "Design"**

*'It's very hard when you're in your own body to know what it consists of, and what you consist of. You're forever contradicting yourself and fighting against things, which are probably the things which are you the most. We're whole, but we're also fragmentary...It's hard isn't it? I'm not someone who can write those things, my only way is through kind of sensing them.'* (Interview: Smee, S. 2003: 14)

Questions surrounding female experience, gender and sexual identity, including the interrogation of a possible "core" identity that profoundly differentiates men and women in society were at the heart of many feminists and feminist artists of last century. (Chapter 2.2.2.) To reiterate, many feminist artists were aware of the fact that the relationship between the sexes in society is one of inequality and oppression and that all forms of artistic representation play a key role in the social construction of gender.

Where they differed was how to deal with this issue. While some demanded equality, others celebrated gender difference. While some continued to use the female body in their imagery, risking of furthering the problematic issue of objectification, others distanced themselves from such representations and started to deal with women's issues in different ways. (Chapter 2.2.2.)

Psychoanalytical theory was used to develop a model, which explained how these differentiations were and are naturalised and internalised by men and women. The question for feminist artists was, how these internalisations are then represented in images to cement those ideas within the ideological processes of a given society. As Simone de Beauvoir already declared in 1949, '*...you are not born a woman; you become one...*' and the body is always a part, if not the whole, of one's situation. (Interview: Brison, S., J. 2003: 200) In other words, feminists started to question what it is that makes us female or male, besides the given natural differences, which according to Julia Kristeva were explained as functions and not determining factors of the female and male roles in society. (Chapter 4.2.2.) They further started to examine precisely the idea of role-play and fluid identities, by which men and women "perform" in their daily lives roles according to certain expectations in and from society. (Chapter 2.3.2.)

One could argue that Gillian Wearing continues and develops these explorations further by interrogating in her work with or without the use of props, how far it is possible to reveal and to perceive a so-called "true" self. Hereby the identification of "typical" "core" elements that divide human beings into *men* and *women* is supplanted by the more general question, or perhaps doubt, which relates to the later feminist art debates from the end of 1980s onwards<sup>246</sup>, namely is it possible to identify *any* core elements *at all* that differentiate one individual from the next? Or do individuals not always perform a multitude of identities that are continuously and instantly adapted according to changing circumstances?

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<sup>246</sup> See chapter 2.1. to be reminded here of Luce Lippard's quote referring to feminist art debates from the end of the 1980s, beginning 1990s onwards, '*Difference is what it's all about, but not just gender difference.*' (Lippard, L. 1989: 29)

Gillian Wearing, one might claim, is questioning exactly this phenomenon by which, even though her subjects might be in some sort of disguise the viewer can never be sure of the authenticity underlying the visual and acoustical representation of whatever he or she might think to be able to see, read, know and understand from the work presented. By using masks, by ventriloquial interventions or, by representing marginalised identities in unusual settings, she destabilises the system of representation. This is similar to some feminist artists' evocation of abjection and it leads the viewer to a place, where handed-down truths lose their validity. Traditional meaning collapses regularly in her works and the viewer is left to fill the created gaps with his or her own narrative, questioning perhaps in the process the authenticity and authority of society's so-called realities. As she stresses, *'I don't believe in handed-down truths. We live in a society, which is always telling us what to think and what we should or shouldn't do. For my own sake, I have to gauge what makes us live, breathe and tick using my own methods.'* (Interview: Bonaventura, P. 1995: 25)

#### **6.1.1. Performance versus Performativity in Gillian Wearing's Work**

*'We are not satisfied with the life that is in us and in our own being: we want to live an imaginary life in the minds of other people. For this reason, we are anxious to shine. We work continually to embellish and preserve this imaginary being, and neglect the true one.'* (Pascal, B. 1962: 150)

What French philosopher Blaise Pascal raises here is a natural phenomenon not only found in society, but also very common in animals' courtship behaviour. It is not only human beings, who try to shine and to impress others, by adapting their behaviourism according to the expected rules and norms in any given situation and at any point in time, but also animals pretend to be more or different from what they actually are. In other words, both humans and animals perform certain roles to reach certain goals, which might be considered as some kind of natural behaviour. However, as will be

shown, this seemingly “natural” behaviour is actually, or at least partly based on certain internalisation processes by which it *becomes* naturalised.

Judith Butler’s model, developed to comprehend the fluid notion of gender and identity in society, as discussed in chapter 2.3.2., explains the notion of performativity as an internalised process, by which both gender parts *learn* early on in their lives, to perform their respective male and female roles *unconsciously*. These roles are internalised during the socialisation process starting with the Oedipus/ Elektra phase of infancy, by which the young child learns to adopt a certain role leading to “acceptable” male and female conduct in later life. (Chapter 2.3.2.) According to Sigmund Freud, who identified the maternal role as an essential component of the feminine gender role, the “desirable” and “normal” outcome for a woman would be, to “naturally” aspire to motherhood, bear her children and take on the role as the raiser of her offspring. (Oakley, A. 1990: 187) Feminist writers, as already mentioned, such as Julia Kristeva, Nancy Chodorow and to some extent Madelon Sprengnether strongly opposed the idea of a “normal” femininity. They stressed the fact that “normal” femininity, which entails passivity, has been conflated with normativity. This refers to the development of femininity as a particular psychological organisation in some women, within an empirical framework of various pathways for her, of which some are seen as normal and desirable, others as deviant. (Chodorow, N. 1994: 10/11)

In other words, what feminist writers generally agree upon and criticise is that there is no such thing as roles designated by nature. Much more, they argue that these roles have been learned and internalised in a patriarchal society. That they are initiated within the core of the nuclear family and implemented within the ideology of a certain society as norms, which as a structural concept, explain and rationalise the social status quo. (Sprengnether, M. 1995: 143) Feminist artists, following this idea of the artificiality of role expectations in society, tried to elucidate the disingenuousness of gender expectations, by creating imagery that questioned exactly this status quo and that illuminated the role understanding implemented within society and documented in the representation of the female body in art. (Chapter 2.3.) They not only contested the



normativity of these gender roles, but also elaborated on the idea that these gender traits might not be static, but much more fluid. This is an idea that Sam Taylor-Wood, as already discussed, explores extensively in her work.

Gillian Wearing deals with similar issues when she depicts herself in bed with transsexuals in various stages of transformation.



“Take Your Top Off” (1993)

The mid-gender status of the subjects depicted in “Take Your Top Off” (1993) possibly introduces in the viewer some of the same ambivalences produced in most of her other works. In a gesture that might be interpreted as either confidence-winning, exhibitionist, or perhaps intimate, Wearing sits here in bed alongside her subjects. The bodies of the



depicted, through their transformation from man to woman reject any final gender positioning. They could be seen, referring to the above discussion, as literally sitting somewhere in the gender fluidity between male and female sexual attributes.

Arguably, the literal stripping bare of everyone depicted suggests a metaphor of revelation. It appears that we will see more than just partially exposed bodies and that we are offered access to deeper levels of the psyche, to which the presence of the artist gives promise, her vulnerability suggesting an '*...almost mythical willingness to expose her body to risk in order to find out the secrets of another world.*' (Gillian Wearing quoted in Ferguson, R. 1999: 42) In the context of feminist art, she most certainly raises a taboo subject with her depiction of transsexuality, something that documents ostensibly a deviant behaviourism, opposing Freud's natural gender development, as described above. According to the artist, transsexuals '*...represent the most overt form of sexuality. They experience both genders; in their minds they are starting afresh. They have to be more open all of a sudden.*' (Gillian Wearing quoted in Aliaga, J., V. 2001: unpaginated)

At first sight, there do not appear to be major differences between her own nude body and that of her subjects, raising perhaps again the question so often posed by feminists, what is it that makes individuals female or male? Her subjects in "Take Your Top Off" (1993) have possibly transgressed the expectations of male performativity in the sense of Judith Butler, by subverting the so-called internalised process of becoming male, with all the expectations bound up with such a role understanding and proven to some extent that these roles are not naturally given, but normalised through society. One could conclude that Gillian Wearing most certainly tests the spectators reaction to people, who are genetically male. Yet she casts doubt on received wisdom about sexuality and social behaviourism about people who are undertaking a sex change. She shows a scepticism towards society's "truths", that is evocative of feminist art.

Performativity, as discussed in chapter 2, was distinguished from the idea of performance, a *conscious* act by which the body becomes the site, as well as the

material, for the acting out of particular issues. Performance was an important tool for some feminist artists and quite often problematic in a sense that it played into the idea of fetishisation and objectification of the female body, which many feminist artists so actively thought to dismantle. On the other hand, it provided female artists with a tool, to question ideas of performativity in a playful and sometimes excessive way, allowing spectators to read their representations as some sort of masquerade and illuminating in the process the superficiality and artificiality of gender traits.

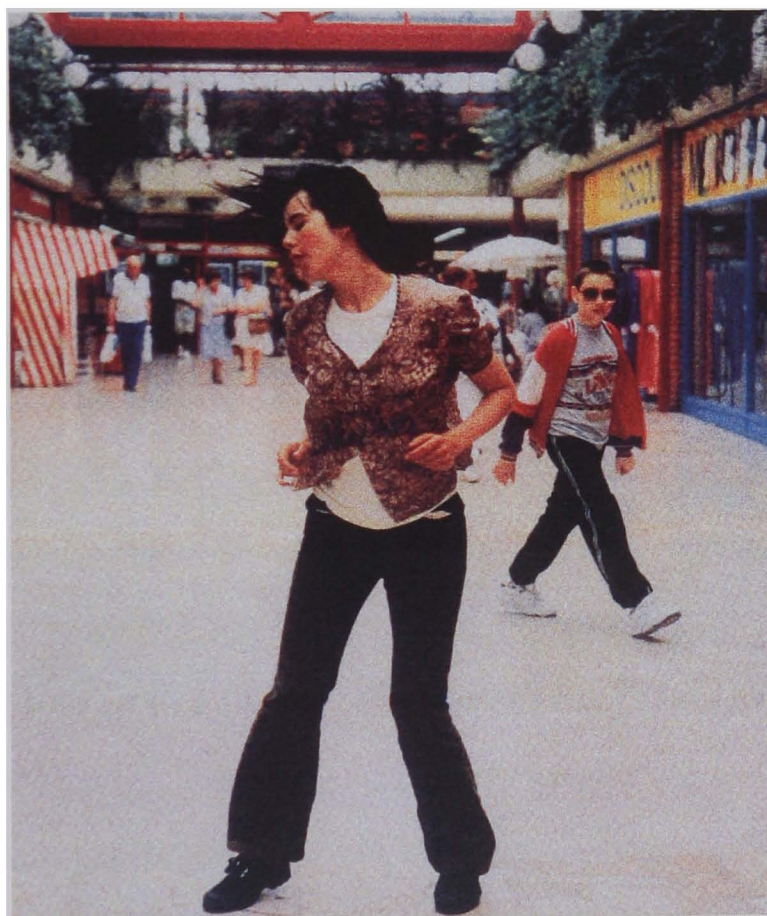
“Dancing in Peckham” (1994) is a video taped performance by and of Gillian Wearing, somewhat reminiscent of Tracey Emin’s “Why I Never Became a Dancer” (1995), with the important difference that Wearing’s video is silent and that the site of her performance is a public space.<sup>247</sup> Similar to “Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road” (1995), “Dancing in Peckham” (1994) presents the viewer with a rare glimpse of the artist performing within the public realm. Here she re-stages, as the title of the first piece confirms, the “performances” of two to her unknown women that she had encountered.

In “Dancing in Peckham” (1994), Wearing gyrates, in a shopping arcade in London’s Peckham, to the music in her head. Passers-by either ignore her or stare blankly at her.

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<sup>247</sup> There is a useful article written by Catherine Elwes, that highlights the problematic difference between a live performance and the experience of a video-taped or photographed performance. She explains in detail how and why the experience of a live performance is transformed by the subsequent creation of documentary evidence. Here, a ‘...kind of pared down vision is at play but the registration of temperature, the senses of smell, taste, touch, hearing, and that illusive sixth sense that picks up ambience have to be reconstructed in the imagination rather than experienced somatically.’ (Elwes, C. 2004: 195) Both of Gillian Wearing’s pieces, “Dancing in Peckham” (1994) and “Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road” (1995) touch on this problem of somatic experiences as they are not live performances for an audience, but they are usually shown on television monitors within a gallery space. A discussion of this issue would lead too far for the purpose of this thesis. For more information on this debate including issues such as differences in voyeurism between live and mediated performances and the key role of duration, please see: Elwes, C. (2004) “On Performance and Performativity”, in: Third Text, Vol. 18, No. 2, March, pp.193-197 and the counter argument to Elwes can be found at Jones, A. (1997) “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation”, in: Art Journal, Vol. 56, Issue 4, pp.11-13 and Jones, A. (1998) Body Art: Performing the Subject, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, particularly pp.1-10

For “Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road” (1995), she wrapped gauze around her face and retraced the steps of a woman she had observed walking down this street in south London. It is important here to acknowledge that instead of asking her subjects to perform for her in this work, Wearing deliberately decided against this approach, avoiding criticism of exploitation. (Craddock, S. 1998: unpaginated) Instead, impersonating her two paragons, she entered the physical and mental space of the subjects in order to empathise with their experiences. She was also like an anthropologist hoping to better understand the ‘...*cultural pathology*...’ surrounding them, as Lisa Corrin names it, concluding that Wearing ‘...*unmasks not only her participants, but also the society which seeks to judge them.*’ (Corrin, L., G. 2000: Introduction unpaginated)



“Dancing in Peckham” (1994)



“Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road” (1995)

As Gillian Wearing explains, referring to “Dancing in Peckham” (1994), *‘I had to make a conscious decision to do that piece. It didn’t come easily. It was actually because I had seen someone else dance crazily- she was someone whom I instantly liked, or was interested in, someone who could do that without feeling totally self-conscious. It was about taking that kind of fantasy and being able to do something in a public space, where you do end up looking like a nutter, ultimately because it is not acceptable behaviour.’* (Interview: De Salvo, D. 1999: 26/27) Referring to “Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road” (1995) she explains, *‘I was answering a lot of my own questions about how I perceive people, and the perception of someone looking at me. Even though I was still holding the camera and I was a total voyeur, I really stood out somewhat manically from everyone else. They still looked at me, en masse, as the one, the freak, the odd person out. ...I had seen someone with a bandaged face like that, and I just knew that this wasn’t one of the times that I could approach the person. So she remained a mystery; I couldn’t work out who she was or why her face was bandaged.’* (Ibid.: 30)

The interesting points she raises in the above quotes are the idea of the “outcast”, what is and what is not acceptable behaviour and finally the question of voyeurism, who is watching who and for what purpose in these videos? In “Dancing in Peckham” (1994) the viewer observes a woman without music, dancing to a melody in her mind which he/she can neither hear nor necessarily guess, leaving him/her wondering about the woman’s, one could perhaps say, “absurd” movements. The performance, as Dominic Molon suggests, can be seen as a demonstration of how certain bodily movements appear normal in one context, for instance the private sphere, yet utterly bizarre in another, in this context the public one. (Molon, D. 2002: 14)

In “Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road” (1995), Gillian Wearing herself becomes the embodiment of the uncanny, by presenting herself as somebody who has become too light, but ought to have remained hidden. As a “monster”, somewhat similar to the subject in the film “The Elephant Man” (1980), she “dares” to walk public streets and works her presence to a climax by



returning the gaze. She defies her spectators by looking back, or as Gordon Burn puts it, '*...she stares down the starers.*' (Burn, G. 2004: 113)

As Gillian Wearing is not only filming herself but more so the reactions of her encounters in the public space, one could say that there are various layers of voyeurism within both pieces. Firstly, there is the "final" viewer of the performances at the gallery, who is provided with an unsettling view through the eyes of the freakish "other", Gillian Wearing, who films her own conceptual gestures and the reactions of the community, emphasising in the process the alternately comical and disturbing results of exposing private thoughts, actions and visions in the public domain. This leaves the viewer with the question, which feminist artists so often posed and still pose, who is being depicted, by whom and toward what end?

Furthermore, the fact that it is a woman who is depicted in "Dancing in Peckham" (1994), might add another charge to the performance. Besides questioning what is and is not acceptable behaviour in the public sphere, one could append what is and is not normative conduct for a *female* individual in the outside world, somewhat reminiscent of the idea of the "Angel of the House", as proposed in chapter 2. Psychoanalytical concepts such as hysteria, usually associated with women, might spring to mind.

Gillian Wearing's film "I Love You" (1999), evokes such connotations. Here four protagonists get out of a car in an empty suburban street. Three of them assemble themselves variously around a woman, who staggers back and forth across the lawn and into a house, screaming, "I love you" repeatedly. The same scene is repeated seven times, the tone, inflection and intent of the woman's delivery of the words changing, sometimes only slightly and sometimes dramatically. (Craddock, S. 2005: unpaginated)

Her cries and actions, according to Molon, '*...swerve from impassioned pleading to pugilistic anger and anxiety.*' (Molon, D. 2002: 20)





“I Love You” (1999)

“I Love You” (1999), similar to “Dancing in Peckham” (1994), demonstrates a woman, who has apparently lost both physical and mental control due, it seems, to her intense feelings and thoughts. This is somewhat reminiscent of Max Almy’s piece “I Love You” (1983).<sup>248</sup> At the same time, she shows the viewer her excessive emotions and her lack of restraint, traditionally associated with women and bordering on pre-existing notions of female hysteria and madness.<sup>249</sup> Madness, according to Michel Foucault,

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<sup>248</sup> In “I Love You” (1983), Almy re-recorded four sequences of the same pair of a woman’s lips giving four different views on a story of love. The piece describes ‘...*the progressive withdrawal of a woman from a love relationship, each time reinventing her position to suit the current state of her mind.*’ (Elwes, C. 2005: 87)

<sup>249</sup> The ideas of hysteria and madness are taken up once again in chapter 6.1.2. There they are discussed in relationship to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical theory. For the moment, it suffices to acknowledge that the differentiation between madness and hysteria was and still is never straightforward. When Freud developed his theories, it was believed that ‘...*women were more subject than men to diseases arising from the passions of the mind.*’ (Rousseau, G., S. 1993: 176) The line between hysteria and madness, at that point in time, was drawn by social class, with madness being the hysteria of the poor woman and being usually tarnished by stigma. For the purpose of this text, it is not important to discuss further distinctions and it should be only recognised that madness and hysteria were generally associated with women and their excessive emotions and feelings, of which men, as was believed at that point in time, were not capable. (This is not to say that this was

*'...participates both in the necessity of passion and in the anarchy of what, released by this very passion, transcends it and ultimately contests all it implies. Madness ends by being a movement of the nerves and muscles so violent that nothing in the course of images, ideas, or wills seems to correspond to it: this is the case of mania when it suddenly intensified into convulsions, or when it degenerates into continuous frenzy.'*

(Foucault, M. 1965: 91/92) The above ideas of excessive feelings, lack of restraint, of madness and insanity could be read into "Dancing in Peckham" (1994) as well as "I Love You" (1999). Furthermore, they are somewhat evocative of the already discussed correlation between women's emotional world versus men's rational one. The slight twist in this work is, that the viewer knows in "Dancing in Peckham" (1994) that it is the artist herself, as the agent of her work, who brings those connotations to mind.

Furthermore, it is her conscious act in "Dancing in Peckham" (1994) as well as in "Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road" (1995), to put herself deliberately into a situation where she transgresses the border between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, highlighting and questioning at the same time the viewers reaction to it. As much as "I Love You" (1999) and "Dancing in Peckham" (1994) could perhaps be linked to ideas of hysteria, "Dancing in Peckham" (1994) and "Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road" (1995), could also be connected to ideas such as the artist as the active agent over her body. The subversion of the male gaze by depicting herself not as the objectifiable muse might spring to mind. Finally, the sedition of the idea of the passive woman, as the angel of the house, is opposed here, by women depicted in the public sphere, who appear to act out their personal desires. These are all thoughts that have been raised already in connection with feminist art and are reminiscent of works such as

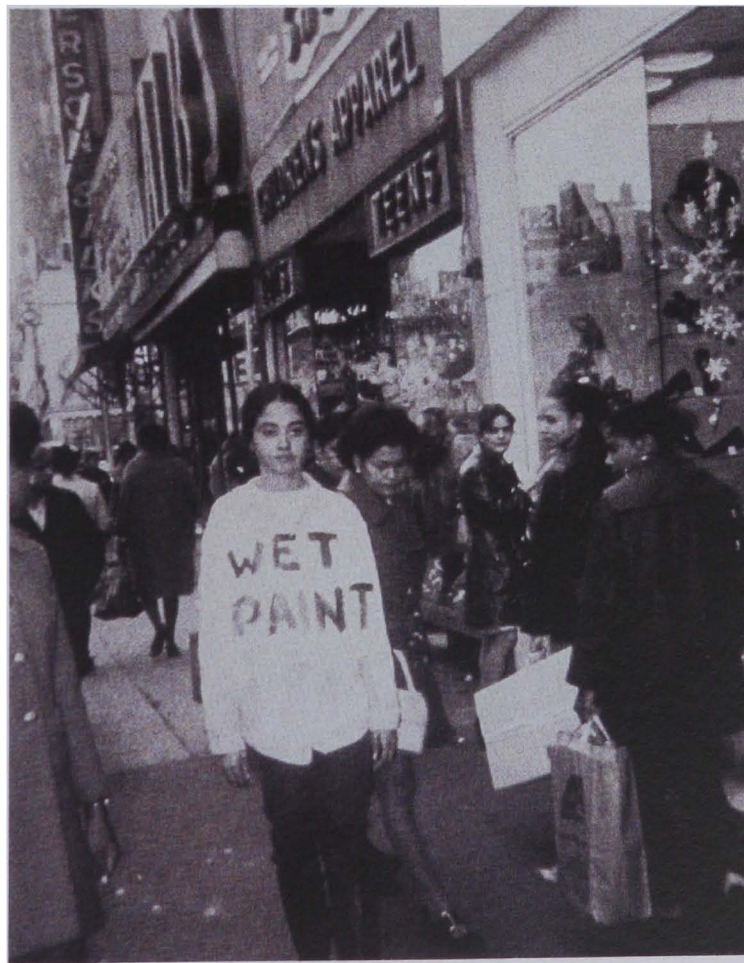
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exclusively a case of women, but while women's hysteria was mostly due to excessive feelings, men's could more often been found due to an excessive life style.) For more information on hysteria and madness please see: Rousseau, G., S. (1993) "A Strange Pathology: Hysteria in the Early Modern World" in: Gilman, S, L./ King, H./ Porter, R./ Rousseau, G., S./ Showalter, E. Hysteria Beyond Freud, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, pp.91-222 in particular pp.176/177



the street performances<sup>250</sup> of feminist artist Adrian Piper, as for instance in “Catalysis III” (1970- 71).

In this piece, Piper painted her clothes with sticky white paint and wore, on top of them, a sign saying “wet paint”. She then went shopping for gloves and sunglasses at Macy’s, the world’s largest department store at that time. Piper dealt, in a comparable manner to Gillian Wearing, with the issue of social stances towards difference and questioned, how these attitudes are provoked by one’s appearance and conduct. Her performances, such as the one depicted below, were seen in the 1970s as aberrations in the social field and were intended to inspire a new perception of what constitutes the order of society, at the level of dress, sanity and the distinction between private and public acts. Her actions, that were understood at that particular moment in time as genuinely disruptive and as forcing a direct confrontation with the public, can be seen as antecedents to Gillian Wearing’s work, more than twenty years later. (Reckitt, H./ Phelan, P. (Eds.) 2001: 28, 29/ 89)



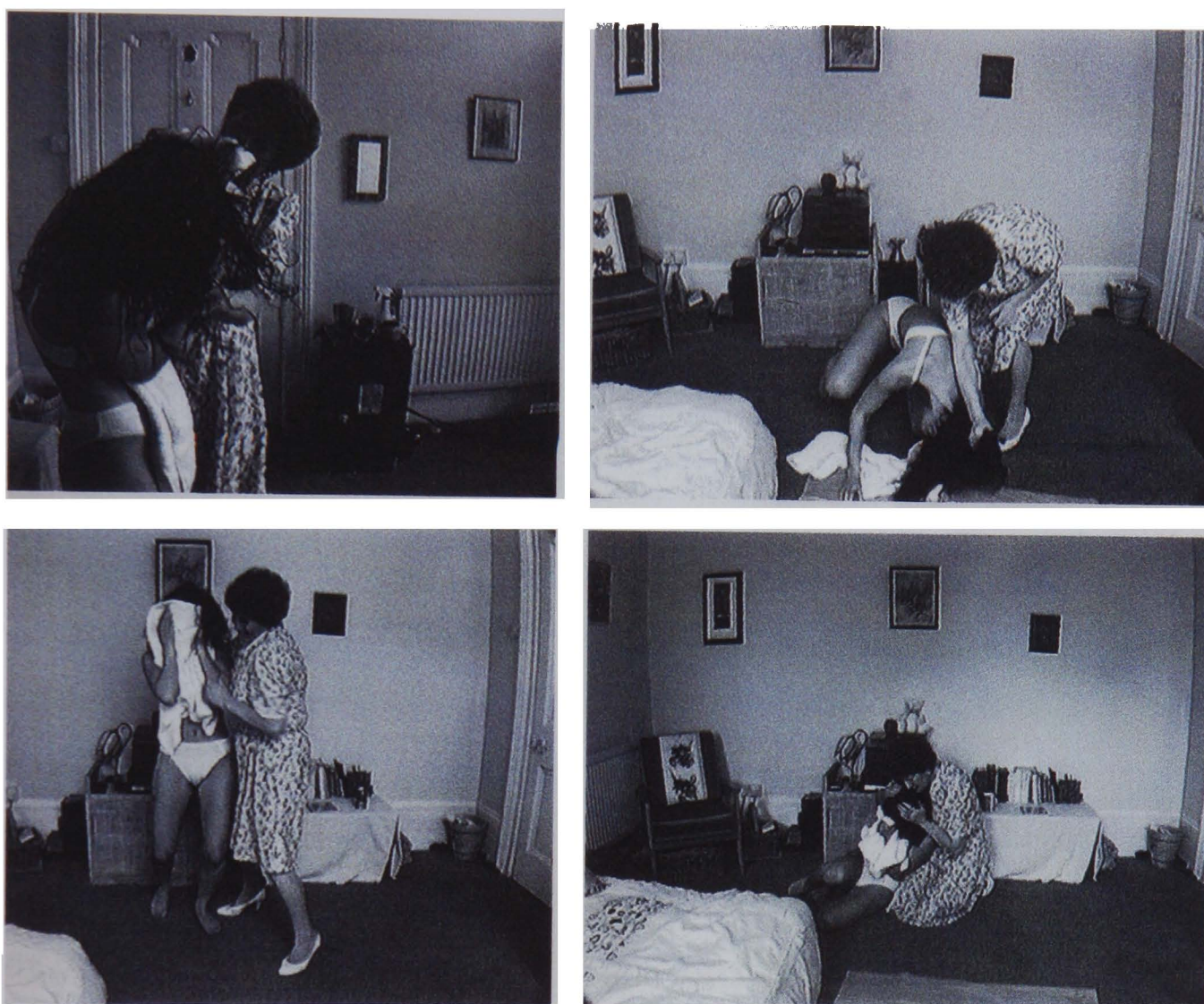
Adrian Piper “Catalysis III” (1970-71)

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<sup>250</sup> Particularly in the case of “Dancing in Peckham” (1994) and “Homage to the woman with the bandage who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road” (1995)  
Stefanie Kappel



“Sascha and Mum” (1996) as well as “2 into 1” (1997) could be seen as examples linking both the concept of performativity with the idea of performance.



“Sascha and Mum” (1996)

The idea of the mother and child image is rooted in the Christian iconographic tradition of the “Virgin and the Child”. The western iconography diverged from that of the east in the fourteenth century, developing a theme of the suffering mother. In the eighteenth century, the “Happy Mother” motif was popularised, thus transforming the cult of the Virgin into a secular cult of motherhood. (Kristeva, J. 1986: 165) This cult obviously served an important role for church leaders and as Kristeva writes, ‘*Christianity is doubtless the most refined symbolic construction in which femininity...is focused on Maternity.*’ (Ibid.: 161) Despite the endurance of the mother and child icon in art and culture, in the last century there have been varied reactions to, and rejections of the Christian ideal of motherhood. Many feminists, as already indicated above, strongly

opposed the vision of an idealised motherhood and used psychoanalysis and visual imagery to deconstruct what they considered to be a myth.

To repeat, to make the personal political was one of the leitmotifs of feminist artists. To tackle issues close to their hearts and express what it means to inhabit a female body were aesthetic means, to express female experiences and domestic issues. In addition, feminists very soon discovered that female experiences were and still are strongly linked to the idea of subject development. (Chapter 4.2.2.) Here they negotiated not only the '*...troubled psychic and social territory between self and a male other with whom one shares a common humanity, emotional ties and/or genetic inheritance...*', but also the bonding between mother and daughter, which was considered as equally troublesome. (Elwes, C. 2005: 45)

Sigmund Freud always insisted that it is the presence and absence of the phallus<sup>251</sup> that distinguishes the sexes. Boy and girl share initially the same sexual history, which he terms masculine. They start by desiring the first object, the mother. (Wilcox, H./ McWatters, K./ Thompson, A./ Williams, L., R. (Eds.) 1990: 38) In fantasy, this means having the phallus, which is the object of the mother's desire. (The Phallic phase) This position is forbidden (castration complex) and the differentiation of the sexes occurs. The castration complex ends the boy's Oedipus complex (his love for his mother) and inaugurates, for the girl, the one that will be specifically hers. In other words, she will transfer her object love to her father, who seems to have the phallus and identify with her mother who, to the girl's fury, lacks it. (Freud, S. 1986: 418) Therefore, the girl will desire to have the phallus and the boy will struggle to represent it. (Mitchell, J./ Rose, J.

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<sup>251</sup> Strictly speaking, the term "phallus" designates the representation of an erect penis, but in psychoanalytical terms, it is associated with the phallic stage in the development of a child, approximately, when the child is around five years old. Here the phallus is not equivalent with the penis, but much more with the idealised form of it, through the eyes of the child. The sexual part that the mother lacks in the image of her body is not the penis, but the fiction of it as powerful and charged with libidinal tension. Nevertheless, Sigmund Freud barely distinguished between the fantasised phallus and the anatomical penis. Jacques Lacan, then at a later stage, introduced the term "phallus" for the imaginary and symbolic representation of the penis, in order to distinguish the role of the penis in the fantasy life of both sexes, from its anatomical role. For more information on the term "phallus" please see: Nasio, J.-D. (1998) *Hysteria from Freud to Lacan: The Splendid Child of Psychoanalysis*, Other Press, New York, pp.42-44



1982: 6/7) This Elektra process<sup>252</sup> implicates a fixation on the father as a sexual object and at the same time a resentment of the mother.<sup>253</sup> Consequently, as Catherine Elwes explains, over the centuries, the relationship between mother and daughter has been, problematic due to the mother's conflict between protecting her daughter from the *'...brutalities of Patriarchy whilst succumbing to the pressure to groom her for a secondary role in the social order. The daughter for her part has sought from her mother clues for how to break the rules whilst condemning her for being instrumental in imposing them.'* (Elwes, C. 2005: 45/46) Both arguments, the psychoanalytical one and the iconographic tradition of the mother child image, can be used for the interpretation of Gillian Wearing's works "Sascha and Mum" (1996) and "2 into 1" (1997).

"Sascha and Mum" (1996) is a black-and-white video projection, with manipulated sound and image. It is shown both forward and in reverse, so that the movements appear out of control and the voices unreal. It shows a scene of domestic abuse between two adults, apparently a mother and her daughter. Proceeding from the immediate strangeness of the older woman being fully clothed, while the younger one is only wearing a bra and panties, the interactions between the two participants quickly develop into a violent and abusive struggle. Wearing, as Virginia Button argues, by carefully choreographing both their movements, attempts here to unmask the ambivalent emotions underpinning personal relationship within the family. (Button, V. 2005: 136)

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<sup>252</sup> Elektra is the better-known Oedipus complex in relation to the identity development of the girl.

<sup>253</sup> It has to be said at this point that obviously Freud and Lacan's theories have been developed further (as discussed at various places throughout this paper, particularly in connection with Julia Kristeva's theories). Today it is known in psychoanalysis, that by far not all female children/girls/women consider the clitoris as an inferior organ. Much more, it is considered as a locus for the initiation of intense pleasure and occasional orgasm as early as ages four to six, when conscious vaginal awareness starts to occur. Furthermore, the object choice to love the father is based on the need by female children to feel loved and valued. This need is not necessarily meant in sexual terms. Adding to that, one knows today through analytic data from female patients that penis envy is not the basis for female object choice, or in other words the trigger to substitute the relinquished wish for a penis through a baby. Nevertheless, Freud and Lacan have initiated these discussions and they are therefore taken as the basis for this dissertation. They are regularly opposed with e.g. Julia Kristeva's arguments. As psychoanalysis is at least as diversified as feminist art debates these days, it would lead too far for the purpose of this research to discuss further stand points. For more information on female object choice please see: Frenkel, R., S. (1996) "A Reconsideration of Object Choice in Women: Phallus or Fallacy", in: Journal of the American Psychoanalytical Association, pp.133-156

The fact that “Sascha and Mum” (1996) is heavily storyboarded is important here. It shows a conscious decision by Gillian Wearing, to influence the outcome of this piece of work. For the purpose of showing raw emotions, she regularly lets her subjects influence the outcome of her works. In reference to her employment of actors in this case, she admits that this ‘...*aggression is something that people would never normally reveal to me...*’ (Interview: De Salvo, D. 1999: 25) This puts “Sascha and Mum” (1996) closely into the area of theatrical performance. Concluding from her statement, one could perhaps say that Gillian Wearing is consciously subverting the idealised concept of the family, as a safe-haven. This is also reflected in the title, by the use of “Mum” instead of “mother” and by replacing an idyllic world with the real world. The concept of family harmony with an idealised image of a loving mother-child relationship, as in traditional Christian iconography, is here turned upside down and put into question. Much more, family bonds between mother and her offspring usually depicted as loving and caring, are shown in “Sascha and Mum” (1996) as volatile. Arguably, as follows, one could detect symptoms of the Elektra process and its consequential performativity in this piece.

Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum, two feminist psychoanalysts, argued that the mother is prone to confuse her gender identity with that of the girl child, which can result in the mother’s unacknowledged aggression and deprivation being projected on to the child, perceived as a narcissistic extension of the mother. (Diamond, N. 1992: 353) In Wearing’s case one could argue, that is exactly what happens. The viewer, unable to understand the conversation between the two actors, due to the sound manipulation of the piece and therefore uncertain of the cause-effect-chain only sees alternating aggression and devotion. In contrast to Freudian psychoanalysis, which is dominated by the role of the father at the expense of the mother figure, in Wearing’s piece the patriarchal family hierarchy is changed around. The mother who is usually reduced to her passive role, becomes here the active agent of her feelings and aggressions.

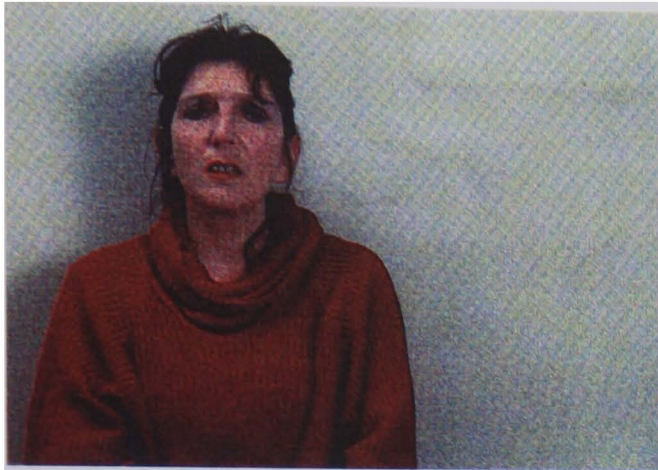
Finally, in “Sascha and Mum” (1996) Gillian Wearing not only deconstructs the iconographic image of a loving mother-child relationship, something feminist artists

have actively tried to do, since the 1960s, but she also questions the bonds within the family. She illuminates what has been known through psychoanalysis, that the mother-daughter relationship is a particularly problematic one. The mother in this case, is depicted, contrary to the usual representation of the mother-figure, as the active one, who gives up her traditional passivity and takes on the paternal acrimony usually associated with the father figure. Ultimately Wearing conforms here to the postulations of feminist artists, namely to render women into active agents and subjects, instead of the historical determination of women as passive objects.

In a similar way, “2 into 1” (1997) deals with relationships within the family. Here the artist shows two boys, Alex and Lawrence, lip-syncing the words of their mother Hilary talking about them, while she does the same in reverse.<sup>254</sup> All three participants talk with frankness about each other. This might embarrasses the viewer to some extent, who inappropriately “overhears” these avowals and feelings that the subjects disclose. Russell Ferguson sees in the lip-syncing a tool that serves in the end ‘...to emphasize not only the visceral psychological closeness of family relationships, but also the fundamental, genetic, links between members of different generations.’ (Ferguson, R. 1999: 62) What he refers to here is that lip-syncing reminds the viewer of the way in which the most basic sets of information are passed on from one generation to the next. Hilary speaks with the nasal childhood tones of her sons, while similarly the parent’s voice is superimposed on that of the children. Juan Vicente Aliaga speaks here of a ‘...schizophrenic dissonance...’ with the work betraying an interchangeability. Both the mother and her offspring imitate each other’s voices in an ironic tone, bordering as he suggests on cruelty. (Aliaga, J., V. 2001: unpaginated) The father is not included within this looping video, but is referred to at times by the boys. He remains a powerful missing presence and plays an important role within this family structure, even more important through his structuring absence.

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<sup>254</sup> Gillian Wearing does not construct this conversation, but it represents the “real” opinions of the participating subjects. For a full reproduction of the dialogue please see: Ferguson, R./ De Salvo, D./ Slyce, J. (1999) *Gillian Wearing*, Phaidon Press, London, pp.142- 143. This piece was originally produced for broadcasting on television by BBC 2, November 1997



“2 into 1” (1997)

*‘She’s a really slow driver. She can’t even make it through Devon in nine hours. ...My dad zooms through;...She doesn’t think...she kind of failed her GCSEs...she rows with my dad. ...In a lot of ways my dad has got better...um, better ways of doing things than her...’* (Ferguson, R./ De Salvo, D./ Slyce, J. 1999: 142) These sentences uttered through the mother’s mouth, but being the voices of her sons, give testimony about the power relationships that underlie this particular family structure. The father is obviously the dominant one and the mother having meekly acquiesced in submissiveness, the weak one. Hilary, through the mouths of her sons is confirming a positioning of hers as the “pathetic” other in opposition to the father and her children. She says about her son Lawrence, *‘... he said my teeth are yellow; I am old and ugly and I never finish anything...he has a way of putting his finger on the truth...he said I am a failure, which has hurt because I think of myself as a failure.’* She concludes by summarising her relationship with her kids. *‘I think having children brings out two very, very extreme emotions in us, which is that one’s constantly faced with the border of love and hate. Love is the usual, the major emotion. But at time, you do really, really, you know...feel hate - hate towards them.’* (Ferguson, R./ De Salvo, D./ Slyce, J. 1999: 143)

Gillian Wearing, through this age and gender displacement created by the shifted voices, deconstructs once more the traditionally idealised mother-child relationship, similar to her earlier piece, “Sascha and Mum” (1996). The lip-synching to recordings of one another’s voices leads to the arguably disturbing notion of describing oneself, as apparently seen by somebody else. Through the literal experience of two people at once,



the voice of one and the body of the other with the subsequent ambiguity between speaker and subject, the question arises here once again of how fixed our grasp on our respective identities really is and just how unsettling and fluid their exchange can be? Power relations are exposed in this work, something many feminist were and still are concerned with and Wearing reminds us that the roots to patriarchy lie already in the socialisation process of children.

Gillian Wearing, using multiple perspectives and techniques, continuously revisits the same set of issues, probing the delicate border where one identity ends and another begins. The possibility to enter into another person's reality, which can be at the same time both instructive and deeply disturbing, is constantly tested in her work and the question raised whether it is feasible to create scenarios that allow the participants to drop their social, protective masks and reveal more of their inner selves.

### **6.1.2. Confession, Self-Exposure and Authenticity**

*'A lot of my work is about not having preconceived ideas.'* (Interview: Bennett, O. 1999: IND)

Since Plato, the task of philosophers was to discover reality and truth was often understood as corresponding to it. They seemed to be unified in the belief, that reality exists independently of our thought about it and truthful knowledge consists of representations of bits of this reality. Postmodernists call this set of beliefs the "metaphysics of presence" (Derrida, J. 1978), while philosophers call it the "mirror of nature". (Rorty, R 1979) Sigmund Freud and subsequent psychoanalysts have contested the notion of an accessible, homogeneous, unitary and universal reason as well as the idea of a mind/body split. For them mind and body are no longer distinct and reason loses its privileged position in and access to knowledge of our mental life. The subject becomes decentred and its reason is pervaded by conflict, desire and disunity. (Flax, J. 1992: 324/325)

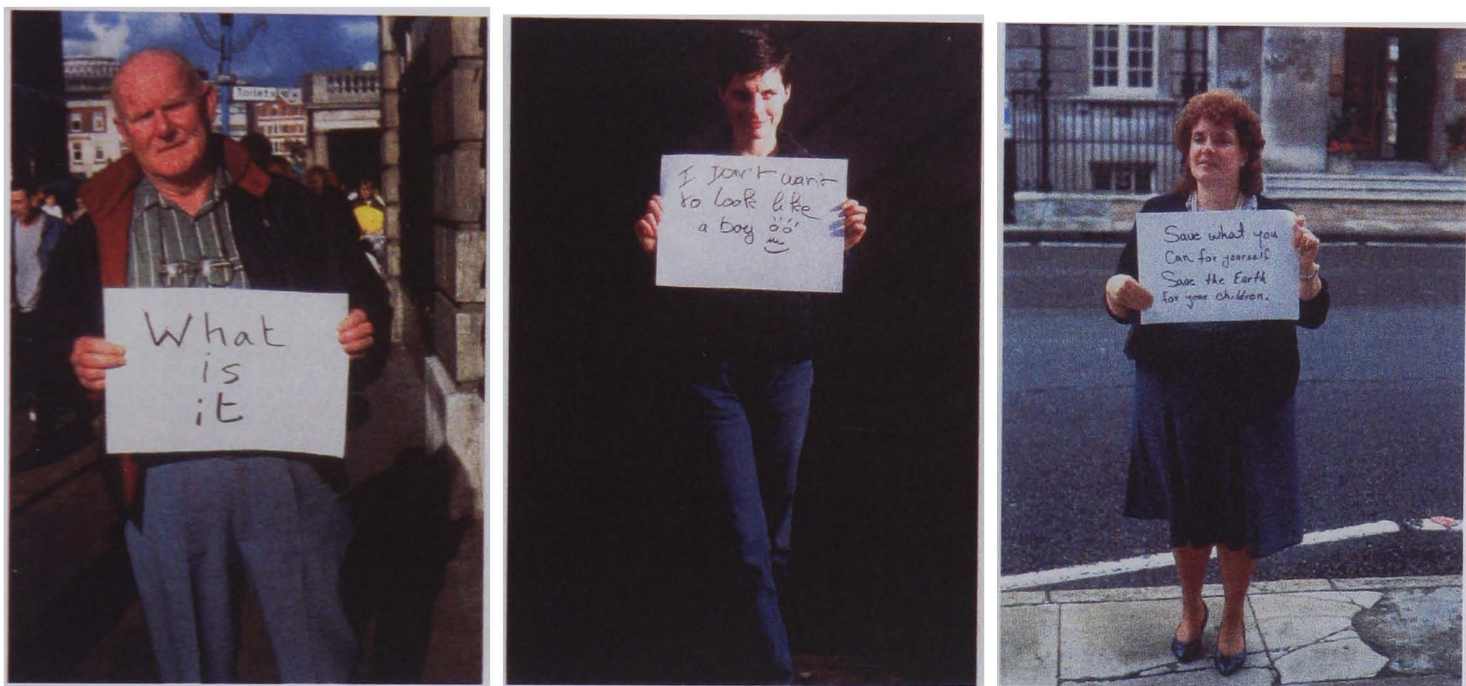


Feminists know, that the history of philosophy as well as the language of it fall within a certain patriarchal discourse, which was developed and usually written, by men for men. In order to find a place for feminist discourses within academic institutions or intellectual life more generally, they had to confront the pre-existing regimes of truth, in a similar manner to the already discussed feminist aesthetics. (Chapter 2.3.1.) To the extent that philosophy has a special role in generating and sustaining patriarchal regimes, feminists from the late 1960s onwards had to direct attention to its privilege, content and methods. They were aware of the fact that our understanding of reason, reality or knowledge depends on what they are not, on their difference from and superiority to other faculties or experiences such as passion, dreams, imagination or embodiment. Associating women with the body and the particular are two of the necessary conditions for the possibility of conceptualising a disembodied and universal form of knowledge. (Flax, J. 1992: 326) With the contaminating effects of difference located in women, who are suppressed or denied reason, reality and knowledge can acquire unitary and universal appearance. Once again, ideas are written for men, by men and they leave women and their issues out of the equation.

Some feminists have reacted with strategies such as disrupting and disordering any attempt to construct unitary master narratives. (Chapter 2.2.2.) Early on in this process, some others discovered that rather than insisting that women's reason can be as "pure" as men's, it was and is more productive to question the belief in, or wish for the purity of reason, the relations of power and the forms of desire that necessarily underlie and generate any order. (Chapter 2.2.1.) Some of its outcome can be found in the idea of *L'Ecriture feminine* (as discussed in connection with Tracey Emin), the use of abjection (*ibid*), the deconstruction of narratives (as in the case of Sam Taylor-Wood), and finally regarding Gillian Wearing's work, in her interrogation of preconceived ideas in a given society and her questioning of the possibility to uncover any fundamental truths under the exterior facade of human beings.

Quite often in her work, Wearing gives the viewer the illusion of reaching a deeper insight into the human psyche. She lets one believe, that one might perceive something

else, possibly more than the usual external facade with which human beings protect themselves. However, the attainability of such an insight into the human psyche and the possibility of discovering deeper knowledge are two of the main questions Wearing raises in her work. One of Gillian Wearing's first and best known pieces "Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say" (1992-93), can be seen as an early indication of her interest in the exploration of the human psyche.



"Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say"  
(1992-93)

Here the artist approached strangers in public places and asked them how they were feeling or what they were thinking at that particular moment in time. The replies, as the title unequivocally indicates, are the free statements jotted down on pieces of paper and held up for the camera. The photographs, as Raimar Stange suggests, reflect a wide range of fears and anxieties, as well as hopes and dreams '*...in a confusing mix of outward appearance and inner emotion, shy reticence and almost exhibitionist candour.*' (Stange, R. 2001a: 536)

One could perhaps argue that the border between the private and public is blurred in this work, something that was of highest priority for feminist artists. (Chapter 2) One might get the illusion that by looking at these photographs, a glance at the innermost self of

others is achievable, insights into people one would perhaps pass by on the street without giving them a second thought. Wearing arguably becomes the accomplice of a silent majority and the spokesperson of otherwise unheard opinions of human beings, at times considered as representatives of the margins of society.<sup>255</sup> Furthermore, Wearing is not only interested in the secrets of ordinary people, but also in how the spectators of her work identify with them. She creates contexts for people to speak, to be seen and to act out and in the process she tries to unveil, as Norman Rosenthal et al so rightly argue, ‘...*the psychological register of identity through the lens of subjective realities.*’ (Rosenthal, N. et al 1998: 209)

Nevertheless, whether the viewer *really* gets an insight into the human psyche of the depicted in “Signs...” (1992-93) remains undisclosed. Human senses operate in liminal space, in the passage between interior and exterior. They read their environment and can be read by their environment. They are also imbricated with a temporal dimension, in the passage between past and present. We offer images of ourselves, through our dress and body appearance. Our inner state of mind can also be read, at least to some extent, through our mimic, eyes, the offering of scents, sounds, tastes and touches to others. At the same time, we perceive the world and others around us through our senses and gain to some extent knowledge about another’s identity and the construction of our environment. This knowledge is dependent on the cultural variations of the senses. In other words, people across various cultures may share the physiological capacity of their senses, such as vision, but to turn this activity into *seeing* as a meaningful experience is a culturally situated activity. In other words, aesthetics are not simply empiricism, for they are always a combination of the ‘...*aesthetica naturalis and the aesthetica artificialis...*’, the senses and their cultural construction. (Plate, B. 2004: 137)

In relation to Gillian Wearing’s work “Signs...” (1992-93), this means that the knowledge the viewer can get is dependent on the offerings provided by the subjects depicted. In this case, their appearances, clothes and the environment in which they

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<sup>255</sup> Gillian Wearing regularly produces work, where she employs the help of subjects, who can be considered as marginalised and whose opinions usually are not voiced in public as in “Drunks” (1997-99).

present themselves are the exterior signs that we can interpret depending on our individual cultural understandings. Knowledge of the inner state and the feelings and thoughts of the subjects depicted, are questioned by Wearing over and over again. These apparently inner thoughts are given, by the writings on the paper her subjects are holding up, for the scrutiny of the viewer. The fact that all of them are shown in a similar environment, namely on the roads surrounding Regent's Park, or in other words removed from their private social settings, means that Wearing eliminates an important element, namely the contextualisation of her subjects, something that usually contributes to the portrayal of the self.

Furthermore, as Susan Bright reminds us, it is impossible to capture a person's true personality with a camera. (Bright, S. 2005: 20) A portrait is usually understood as the questioning or exploration of self and identity, through a literal representation of what someone looks like. (Ibid.) Paradoxically the inner workings of the complex human psyche can never be really understood by just looking at the image. The many selves the person depicted can fashion in front of the camera can say anything that artist or sitter wishes to say, at that precise moment. Depending on the caption under the image or a change of its context, the meaning will further change with it and finally the viewer with his or her knowledge will add an additional layer of meaning. Therefore, the concept of "identity" is flexible and fluid, determined by all the above circumstances and changeable in an instant.

In "Signs..." (1992-92) the title/caption suggests that it is the subject depicted and not the artist uttering the text written on the pieces of paper. The viewer might be living under the illusion that what he reads is the authentic outpour of the sitter's inner self, his or her repressed thoughts and emotions. This "authentic outpour" is deceptive in two ways. Firstly, language and writings are systems that underlie certain structures and since the advent of structuralism, an author's language can no longer be regarded as a privileged reflection on reality, but must be rather seen as a situated production. (Wright, E. 1992: 223) This means that a text written by somebody is no longer attributed to the individual author, but to the system in power, which provides a code



from which to speak, to write and to read. Therefore, it is very difficult to *really* write from the knowing subject position, ignoring all the rules (patriarchal) that govern our language. Secondly, writing from the unconscious and its meaning, analogous to Sigmund Freud's theory in "The Interpretation of Dreams" (1900), must be seen as unstable. Rather, these texts are subject to pressure from the unconscious and they are the result of unexpected shifts (displacement) and blockages (condensation). In other words, the unconscious cannot name itself except by means of substitution. This realisation demands then a new mode of interpretation, which challenges the subject position of reader and writer alike. (Ibid.: 224) For "Signs..." (1992-93), this implies that the written utterances can never be seen as authentic outpourings of the subjects depicted, but must be interpreted within the situation created and through the knowledge that the viewer himself or herself brings to it. Gillian Wearing, therefore, possibly touches here again on questions surrounding authenticity and the possibility of how to reflect on personal experiences and feelings outside the safe haven of the private sphere.

Finally, Craig Owen<sup>256</sup> noted that postmodern theories in the beginning of the 1980s had tended to neglect the '*...presence of an insistent feminist voice...*'. (Owen, C. 1983: 61) This led to an absence of discussions of sexual difference. He stressed that an important aspect of contemporary art practice was thus to render the invisible or marginalised visible. This is especially true in a culture in which visibility appears to be always on the side of the male and invisibility on the side of the female. (Ibid.) Since the early 1980s, according to Gill Perry, these issues have been incorporated within the discourse on gender and "women's art" and explorations of the cultural, psychic, aesthetic and curatorial mechanisms of in/visibility have been encouraged. Because of the above argument, one could say that Gillian Wearing follows this tradition in "Signs..." (1992-93) and other pieces and some of her works could be seen as sitting comfortably together with works by feminist artists such as Barbara Krueger and Jenny

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<sup>256</sup> The essay "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" (1983) in: Foster, H. (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic*; Essays on Postmodern Culture, Bay Press, Seattle, Washington has been widely cited as one of the first texts which identified and explored the importance of feminism within postmodern practice and theory. See: Perry, G. (Ed.) (2004) *Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, UK, p.19



Holzer. They both have sought to reveal the hidden social, cultural and sexual agendas within the visual and textual imagery of the modern mass media, similar to Gillian Wearing.<sup>257</sup> (Robertson, J./ McDaniel, R. 2005: 29)

In “Confess all on video. Don’t worry, you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian” (1994), its successor “Trauma” (2000) and in “10-16” (1997), Gillian Wearing develops the idea of public confession and the question of its possibility further, by using different sort of disguises. “Confess...” (1994) and “Trauma” (2000) feature anonymous people wearing masks.<sup>258</sup> While in the former they confess to things they have done or witnessed, in the latter, they describe events from childhood or adolescence that left them scarred for life. Both works are somewhat reminiscent of Mike Kelley’s and Paul McCarthy’s “Heidi” (1992), where subjects in disguises act out scenarios of abuse and control that unveil the radical dysfunction that can underlie seemingly normal family relationships. (Rush, M. 2003: 98) In “Confess...” (1994), the participants wear all forms of often-ridiculous disguises, including a clown’s bizarre face, weird wigs, or a mask of former American president George Bush. These masks make their confessions of criminal activities, voyeurism, and sexual transgression seem even more uncanny. In “Trauma” (2000) on the other hand, Gillian Wearing used the masks of adolescent faces, wanting ‘...the masks to transport [the viewer] back to the defining moment in the wearer’s lives. To a time when you wouldn’t have been able to see the signs yet on their faces. When the only visible signs might perhaps have been in their eyes.’ (Interview with Freedman, C. 2000: 15)

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<sup>257</sup> This idea will be taken up at a later stage.

<sup>258</sup> Other artists who used masks are Cindy Sherman and Ralph Eugene Meatyard. The use of masks through history as a semiotic system to disguise, transform, or display identity has long been a topic for anthropologists and art historians. For a comprehensive discussion about the role of masks as semiotic devices please see: Pollock, D. (1995) “Masks and the Semiotics of Identity”, in: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol.1, Issue 3, pp.581-588



“Confess all on video. Don’t worry, you will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian” (1994)

The masks used in both cases not only conceal the identity of the confessing subjects, but they also serve to hide any signs of emotion, while the participants recollect either their misconducts, or their horrific tales of physical and sexual abuse, suffered almost exclusively at the hands of family members.<sup>259</sup> Sigmund Freud’s description of trauma is relevant here if one considers the masks’ function as a figurative form of protection. *‘We describe as “traumatic” any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind of breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli.’* (Freud, S. 1989: 607) In this sense, the masks in “Trauma” (2000), suggesting a younger innocent appearance, can be considered as symbolising the various barriers and shields, such as familial love and trust of parental, medical or institutional authority, which are shattered by the actions of others.

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<sup>259</sup> For a comprehensive transcript of the conversations that took place for “Confess...” (1994) and “Trauma” (2000) please see correspondingly: Ferguson, R./ De Salvo, D./ Slyce, J. (1999) Gillian Wearing, Phaidon Press, London, pp. 102-109 and Fundacion “la Caixa” (2001) Gillian Wearing, Fundacion “la Caixa”, Barcelona y CGAC, Santiago de Compostela, unpaginated



While the subjects in “Confess...” (1994) deal with all sorts of daily affairs, quite often banal and ‘...*not particularly intricate psychologically...*’, taking this opportunity as an ‘...*act of emotional catharsis...*’, as Marta Gili suggests, in “Trauma” (2000) the confessions have ceased to be mere narrations of events about which the subjects feel guilty. (Gili, M. 2001: unpaginated) Here the confessions stand outside what is considered socially acceptable. They are morally controversial and cannot be reconciled with religious beliefs, thus practically becoming co-counselling sessions, with Wearing being the non-judgemental listener.



“Trauma” (2000)

It is an interesting fact that in both pieces it appears that there is more of a compulsion on the part of men to confess or utter their emotional distresses rather than women. (Fogle, D. 1995: 76) Usually, as discussed in chapter 2, the female part of a patriarchal society is associated with emotions, while the male is with reason. Further, according to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical thesis of gender development and its culturally necessary genital organisation of sexuality in the interest of procreation, normally the female subject suffers, particularly under the hazardous and trauma-prone process during the formative years of her socialisation process. (Weeks, J. 1992: 154) It is she, as a consequence of this not always “satisfactorily” process that usually takes place early on in her life and within the safe haven of her family, who is predominantly associated with issues such as hysteria and other pathological behaviours in later

life.<sup>260</sup> (Ibid.) It is therefore interesting to note here (similar to Sam Taylor-Wood's depiction of male fragility) that this traditional understanding of man's rationality versus woman's emotionality is questioned in Gillian Wearing's work. Here some kind of role reversal is presented. The male subject, traumatised by misconduct or his childhood experiences, shows the need to speak from *his* soul to the *female* artist/confessor. This is reminiscent of and oppositional to the Catholic confessional box, where one confesses to the *male* priest, a declaration of guilt that is necessary for the redemption of one's demons.

Ultimately, the authenticity in these two pieces might again be questionable. This is similar to the subject's utterances in "Signs..." (1992-93). The viewer cannot be certain whether the confessional set-up creates the distinction of interiority and exteriority, which Gillian Wearing undoes in her work. One cannot be sure whether the masks genuinely allow the truth of the subject to emerge and whether they enable the confessants to reveal what they would not otherwise be able to say.<sup>261</sup> (This is similar to Freud's turning away from female hysterics to listen to their speech.) (Davies, J., M./Frawley, M., G. 1994: 11-16) As discussed before, every human being is the bearer of multiple possibilities of identity and social roles and as Michael Newman so rightly argues, once you have the distinction between thinking substance and extended substance then the self and core identity of each human being, necessarily comes forth already masked. (Newman, M. 2001: 88) In other words, with or without wearing Gillian Wearing's masks to conceal one's identity, this same identity is already

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<sup>260</sup> It has to be stated here that Freud's theories on the causes for hysteria, neurosis and other pathological behaviours changed during his life. While at the beginning, around 1886-1900, he believed in the sexual causation of neurosis through sexual difficulties he then abandoned this idea and turned to the investigation of infantile sexuality. The term sexuality was widened to psychosexual, involving an extension of sexuality to all physical pleasure, including affection and love. The theory of neurosis was then replaced by the libido theory. Therefore, to clarify, the above paragraph does not refer to sexual abuse in the childhood of women, but to the fact that Freud believed that women are more prone to suffer during their socialisation process, a theory that underlined the idea of women as emotional and hysteric. For more information on the development of Freud's theories please see: Fine, R., D.(1962) Freud: A Critical Re- Evaluation of His Theories, David McKay, New York, in particular pp.13-16

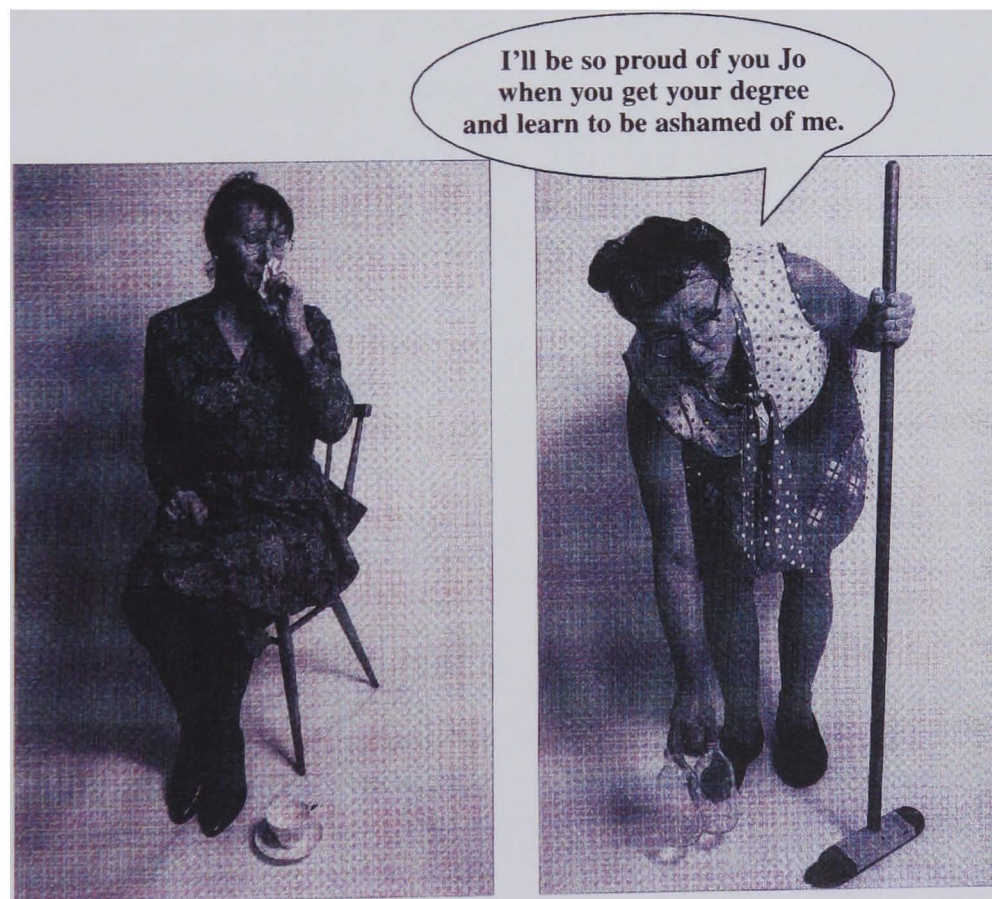
<sup>261</sup> The feminist action group "Guerrilla Girls" protects the identity of its members, by urging them to wear masks so that they are able to speak freely, without having to fear the consequences. By now, these masks have become a trademark of the group. See: chapter 2.2.1. for more information on the activities of this group.



concealed by society's conventions and norms of what is possible to reveal or not. Therefore, what her work does, is to simultaneously offer and put into question the authenticity of an inner self, a question that was already posed by feminists and feminist artists.

Jo Spence is a British feminist artist. In collaboration with Rosy Martin, she attempted, during phototherapy sessions and by playing out certain roles, '*...a form of phototheatre of the self...*', to make the unconscious conscious. (Spence, J. 1995: 165)

In "Mother and Daughter Shame Work: Crossing Class Boundaries" (1988), she not only restages the difficult relationship between herself and her mother, reminiscent of Gillian Wearing's working through the conflicting mother-daughter-relationship in "Sascha And Mum" (1996), but she also tries to explore her inner self, what it is made of and how it functions. (Spence, J. 1995: 165-171) This is similar to Wearing's scenario in "Confess..." (1984) and "Trauma" (2000).



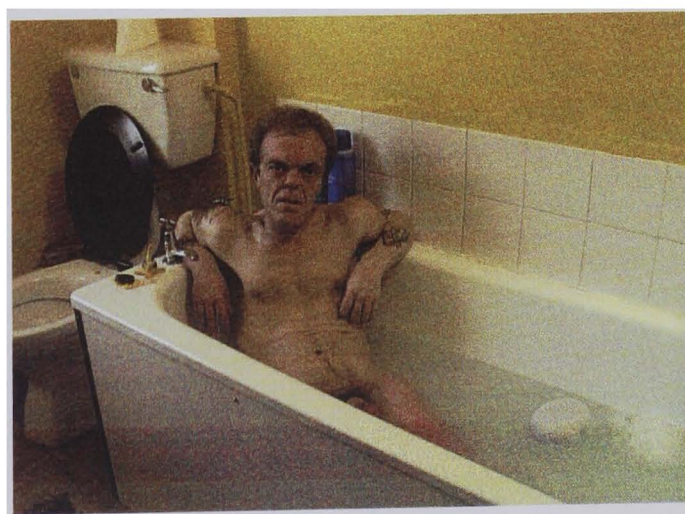
Jo Spence "Mother and Daughter Shame Work: Crossing Class Boundaries" (1988)

Gillian Wearing appears to be aware of the fact that language is more than just what is spoken or written. Virtually all communication, social structures and systems, rely in



some way on language for their form. Who controls language, who speaks, who is listened to or heard were important questions feminist artists explored. Language is power and this power is exercised in the right to speak, the right to interrupt and the right to be silent. This is a privilege that was traditionally in the hands of men. (Chapter 2) Sexual politics, ideology and language intersect in the form of attitudes, of patronising, respecting, ignoring, supporting and misinterpreting. Feminists have been interested in the different ways that women and men have been engaged with language. Writer Teresa Bloomingdale, who brings the problem of the silent female to a point, remarks, *'If you want to please your mother talk to her. If you want to make points with your father, listen to him.'* (Tucker, M. 1994: 16)

What role does the relationship between speech and image play? Who speaks to whom and with what intent? Does it matter where the voice comes from, as long as it exists and has something to say to those who are prepared to listen? Are voices interchangeable? How does this then influence the perception of the viewer? These are questions that Gillian Wearing delves into when in "10-16" (1997) she disguises the identity of children and adolescents, by using the lip-synching<sup>262</sup> bodies of grown-ups to explore once again experiences and hopes from childhood and teenage years.<sup>263</sup>



"10-16" (1997)

<sup>262</sup> The idea of lip-synching in this piece is reminiscent of Sam Taylor-Wood's work "Knackered" (1996), where she replaces the actresses' voice by the castrato's.

<sup>263</sup> For a full transcript of the speeches please see: Fundacion "la Caixa" (2001) Gillian Wearing, Fundacion "la Caixa", Barcelona y CGAC, Santiago de Compostela, unpaginated

In this piece Gillian Wearing plays again on the uncertainty triggered by exchanging bodies and voices similar to “2 into 1” (1997). What differentiates this piece is that the revelations of the seven children (within the age span described in the work’s title), dramatised in the bodies of grown-ups, become disconcerting and chilling as they talk about their present situations and their hopes for their futures and the viewer realises that it would be perfectly plausible if an adult were uttering these words.<sup>264</sup> Along the path from childhood to adolescence, from innocence to guilt, from spontaneity to presumption, the viewer can follow the journey of a child, who is still innocently discovering the world, through to a teenager, who is tempted, by the anticipation of freedom to take control of his or her own destiny and who is at the same time in conflict with the continuous value judgements pronounced by grown-ups.

Marta Gili, referring to French philosopher Pascal Bruckner, makes the interesting observation that often adults in their behaviours regress to strategies such as infantilism and victimism to avoid having to take on responsibilities that come with his or her age and demanding care and assistance. At the same time, this adult nevertheless asserts his or her own independence, speaking ‘...*the double-speak of non-conformism and insatiable querulousness.*’ (Gili, M. 2001: unpaginated) This idea of the grown-up child and grown-up teenager can be seen as to some extent parodied in “10-16” (1997).

The interdependence between the children’s voices and the possibility of the adults uttering similar statements, prompts the question of how the past influences the future. By crafting the frustrations, delusions, and neuroses of the children onto the faces of the adults, Gillian Wearing provokes consideration of how the tribulations of our past inflict mayhem on our mature lives. To hear a boy’s voice emerging from a man’s body to say, “I feel like a man in a boy’s body”, becomes disconcerting because the difference between a man in a boy’s body and a boy in a man’s body appears difficult to grasp and

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<sup>264</sup> Gillian Wearing’s transposition of voices from children to adults and her later work *Album* (2003) is somewhat reminiscent of “The Ballad of Dan Peoples” (1976), where feminist artist Lisa Steele, in her video performance, identifies with her grandfather, singing his oft-repeated stories of a country childhood, making apparent in the process, that ‘...*his perceptions and prejudices were internalised by her...*’ and key for her own identity development. (Elwes, C. 2005: 43/44)

therefore the borderline between manhood and boyhood is blurred. Considered in this way, “the child is father to the man”, one of psychoanalysis’ central precepts<sup>265</sup> is taken as a point of departure for her investigation here again, into how identity develops and forms. As mentioned before, this is an issue of highest priority to some feminist artists.

Over and over again, Gillian Wearing exemplifies in her work Roland Barthes’ “terror of uncertain signs” by *unfixing* ‘...the floating chain of signifieds...’, by deconstructing linguistic messages, by re-interpreting and re-presenting handed-down truths, by unravelling and challenging the false appearances of people’s normality, by creating in the process a tension between objectivity and subjectivity and by questioning as well as rejecting the impartiality of documentary media. (Barthes, R. 1985: 28)

## **6.2. Strategy and the Question of Visual Representation**

*‘I haven’t been influenced in any major way by artworks. When I left college, I automatically went to the idea of remembering television influences from the seventies. People have suggested for me to look at people like Diane Arbus and August Sander, but apart from that, my influences are more filmic, and I know I have quite consciously been influenced by that.’* (Interview: Caldwell, R. 2002: R5)

At first sight it appears that, many of Gillian Wearing’s works resemble journalistic methods, known from the press, photo reportage and television documentaries. However on closer examination, her photographic and filmed encounters which often depict strangers in London, emphatically do not conform to the mass-media conventions that apply to the presentation of British society in newspapers and television. As Matthias Winzen argues, works such as “Confess...” (1994) ‘...subvert the quietly enfeebling palatability of news items that are always somehow entertaining and

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<sup>265</sup> Psychoanalysis acknowledges the importance of the infantile mind including the extraordinarily important influence exerted by the impressions of childhood on the whole course of later development. In spite of all the later development that occurs in the adult, none of the infantile mental formation perishes. (Freud, S. 1938: 720)

*digestible, that insistence in television journalism that even the most unpleasant information should at least be transformed into exciting shock-horror.*’ (Winzen, M. 2003: 177) Masks as he argues, contradict the usual documentary method of presenting “facts” and in fact provide a way of documenting real personal distress, terrors and fantasies. At the same time they can be considered as a response to the presence of the all-revealing camera and as pointing towards the stage-managed core of even the most faithful documentary, the unspoken fictitious nature of every item presented as a report. (Ibid.)

In other words, what Winzen is referring to is the doubt that technical means such as photographic or film equipment and the processes involved in using them can be neutral. It appears more likely to be the case that they are powerful tools and mass-media organs of indiscretion, which break down the border between public and private. In her work, Wearing tries not to censor the distorting influences these media might have and she emphasises the artificiality of so-called documentary methods, which are traditionally seen as promises to deduct certain truths. She appears to be much more interested in how people pose for the camera and how they perform. Ultimately, she looks for gaps in her subject’s performance and spontaneous, emotional outbreaks.

The fictitious nature of seemingly factual photographic and film documents is at first shown in “Signs...” (1992-93), where passers-by follow the invitation of Gillian Wearing and the sign of the “rolling” camera, by taking up their poses and by holding up their hand-written statements. A direct dialogue, between the participants and the camera can be detected through taking up these particular poses and the performative process becomes apparent.<sup>266</sup> This artificiality of so-called documentary truth is further developed in works such as “10-16” (1997), where through processes such as splitting the sound and the image and then perfectly synchronising the voices with the images of other speakers through lip-synching, the reality of the document is blurred and

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<sup>266</sup> Film theory would call this process of making the viewer aware of his/her own voyeurism by returning the gaze, “the castration of the gaze”. Hereby the spectator is caught looking and the gaze becomes an active element in the work. *‘The cloak of invisibility is pulled away and s/he is compelled to take responsibility for scopophilic desires.’* (Elwes, C. 2005: 93)



questioned, something that was of importance for some feminist artists. (Chapter 2.2.2.) One could therefore state that Wearing is exploring the question of truth in two ways. First, through the *content* as discussed above, by asking questions such as, “do we really learn something about the subjects depicted in the work?” Secondly, she shows us some of the possibilities of distorting reality through the *medium* itself and the influence of the artist on the outcome of the work, through techniques such as reversing films, lip-synching and other technical means.

Gillian Wearing is interested in the performance of her subjects, in the discrepancy between their posing, which is influenced by what they perceive are the expectations of society in general or the viewer in particular and in occasional moments that might reveal insights into parts of the “real” subjectivities that comprise the individuals, who are depicted. Her work can be seen as interplay of fluctuating interferences. Quite often she does not control the whole process of the production of her work, but creates certain situations that give her subjects the chance to influence to a certain extent the outcome of her work by performing and presenting themselves in a way that they themselves decided to do. This idea of creating certain situations, in which processes are stimulated to develop themselves freely, is reminiscent of the work of the Situationists, a movement that already inspired some feminist artists in the 1970s. (Wilding, F. 1996: 35)<sup>267</sup>

Founded in 1957, the Situationist International was a small but influential group based in Paris and with members in Holland, Germany, Belgium and England.<sup>268</sup> Their political ideology was a combination of Marxism, with avant-garde artistic practices in

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<sup>267</sup> At this stage, it is necessary to explain that this thesis will not link Gillian Wearing’s work to either the history of photo-documentary, such as the work of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, August Sander or Diane Arbus, all links that have already been made elsewhere or to the traditions of documentary film. This is an extensive subject, that would lead too far for the purpose of this thesis. The following discussion of Wearing’s work in relationship to Situationism will introduce new aspects and continue the idea of the disruption of the ordinary, a debate that provides the continuation of ideas taken up at the beginning of this chapter. For an extensive account on different approaches to documentary film and photo works, including a discussion of Gillian Wearing’s art, please see: Cousins, M. (2006) “The Aesthetics of Documentary”, in: *TATE ETC.*, Issue 6, Spring, pp.41-47

<sup>268</sup> For more information on artists and writers usually associated with the Situationists please see: (Stiles, K. 2003: 91/ 92)



the tradition of DADA. (Macey, D. 2000: 354/355) Their main ambition was to use both artistic and more practical activities, for instance the production of pamphlets and posters, to shape situations designed to unleash a free and spontaneous creativity leading to a revolution in everyday life.<sup>269</sup> Situationism's main critique of contemporary society was encapsulated in the phrase "the society of the spectacle", referring to a criticism of capitalism which divides society into actors/ producers and spectators/ consumers.<sup>270</sup> By this division, people ended up, in their opinion, as being treated like passive and not active subjects, with "being" becoming "having" and "having" becoming "appearing". The outcome of this was feared to be a dichotomy between cultural poverty and economic wealth. Because of this apprehension, Situationists wanted to change the perception of the world, encapsulating at the same time a complete restructuring of society, by constructing situations with the aim to disrupt the ordinary and normal in society, to jolt people out of the customary ways of thinking and acting. (Albright, D. 2003: 89-92)

The Situationists and then later in the 1960s the Aktionists, performance artists of Vienna, can be seen as the first to actively disrupt the ordinary.<sup>271</sup> The Aktionists went a step further than the Situationists, by employing the abject and using shock tactics such as '*...ritualised humiliation, self-mutilation and an orgy of bodily fluids to induce a cathartic disruption of bourgeois conditioning in the audience.*' (Elwes, C. 2005: 180)

Many of the performances by the Aktionists were recorded and subsequently influenced the following generations of live artists, including Gina Pane, Marina Abramovic,

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<sup>269</sup> Favourite activities included subversion and corruption. These refer both to the techniques of creative plagiarism, exemplified for instance in the altering of posters and to comic strips to give them an unexpectedly political slant. (Macey, D. 2000: 355)

<sup>270</sup> Basis for this criticism was the understanding that capitalism had turned all relationships transactional and life was reduced to a mere spectacle. Capitalism had created pseudo-needs to increase consumption and to ensure economic growth. Modern society therefore became a consumer society, a society of "spectacular" commodity consumption, which seduces the worker.

<sup>271</sup> This is meant in relation to performance. It is clear that there have been "disruptions of the ordinary" long before the history of the feminist art movement. However, to discuss these disruptions for instance in paintings (i.e. Goya) or in sculptures (i.e. Duchamp) would require a PhD in itself. Every avant-garde movement can be seen as a disruption of the status quo, or in other words the ordinary. The two groups that are mentioned, are discussed as influential for the feminist art movement and relevant for Gillian Wearing's works.

Carolee Schneemann, and Mona Hatoum to name but a few. (Ibid.) This idea of disrupting the ordinary and normal and getting the viewer to a point where he/she has to rethink handed-down truths, similar to some feminists' idea of abjection, can also be found in Gillian Wearing's works, such as in "Drunk" (1997-99). Here the artist presents terminal drunks, which are a segment of society sometimes referred to as misfits. She takes them out of their natural "habitats", i.e. streets or pubs and films them within the confinement of her studio.



"Drunk" (1997-99)

"Drunk" (1997-99) is presented as a three screen projection, just above the floor level in a blacked out gallery space. It shows the participants wandering around, staggering, urinating, dozing, quarrelling and occasionally showing a display of affection, by embracing and caressing each other. Juan Vicenta Aliaga rightly observes, that language, '*...the official approved channel for human contact, is replaced by physical, bodily exchanges. The body vanquishes the voice, takes the lead over the reasoned word.*' (Aliaga, J., V. 2001: unpaginated)

“Drunk” (1997-99) appears to be highly choreographed, which is amplified by the subjects moving in and out of the picture, apparently following Gillian Wearing’s instructions. However, their drunken state casts doubt over their ability to do so and suggests that in fact they might be performing according to their own desires and needs. Arguing in Sartre’s terms, Wearing has put her subjects into a situation where, through their narcotised condition, the issue between situation, freedom and responsibility lends itself well to dramatic and fictional treatment.<sup>272</sup> In other words, the participants not only walk in and out of the frame but they also transcend the limitations of what can be considered as acceptable human behaviour and what not.

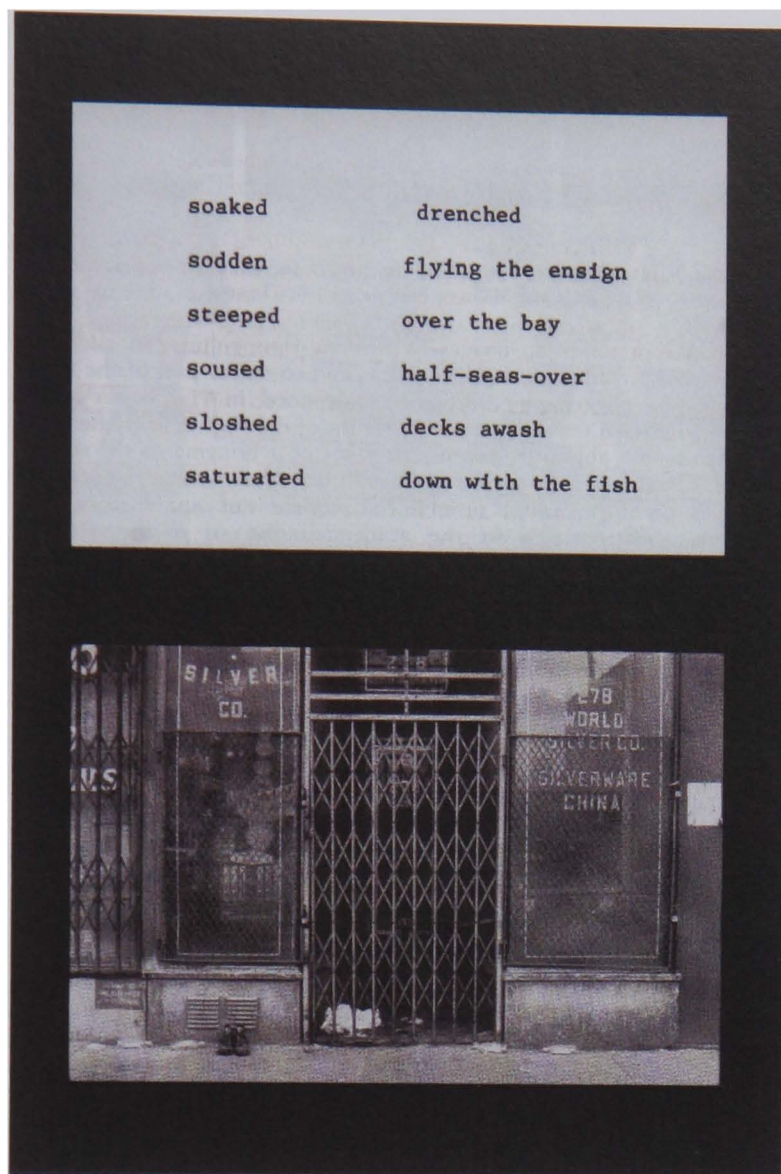
What is notable in her approach to “Drunk” (1997-99) is the relationship of this work to methods used by some feminist artists. To recapitulate, feminist artists had a serious issue with the objectification of the female subject in art, with the idea of the male gaze, with voyeurism and with the exploitation of female subjects for the pleasure of the predominantly male gaze, or more precisely with the process of objectifying through looking and the power relations involved. The idea of the objectification of women, as discussed in chapter 2, was at a later stage distended to include other topics, such as the representation of minority groups or people situated on the outskirts of society. Subject matters, such as AIDS, homosexuality, race and so forth, were increasingly the concerns of not only feminists, but also other action groups that dealt with these so-called minority fragments of society.

Feminist artist, Martha Rosler, dealt with the same theme as Gillian Wearing in “Drunk” (1997-99), with the important difference that Rosler completely omitted the subjects themselves and merely focused on the places where those individuals would usually be found. Therefore, one could argue Gillian Wearing’s work is a complete subversion of Rosler’s, with Wearing depicting *only* her subjects and not their surroundings.

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<sup>272</sup> According to Sartre, individuals are always situated in relation to others, time and space. Whilst the situation restricts and conditions the basic freedom of human beings, it can be also seen as a precondition for that freedom insofar, as the individual realises his or her freedom in the conscious and responsible action that transcends the situation. (Macey, D. 2000: 354)





Martha Rosler "The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems" (1974)

Martha Rosler repeatedly criticised the ideology underlying the images of social victims, uttering *'The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewer the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position.'* (Martha Rosler quoted in Hopkins, D. 2004: 25) Further, *'The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems is a work of refusal. It is not defiant antihumanism. There are no stolen images...what could you learn that you didn't already know? If impoverishment is an issue here it is more the impoverishment of representational strategies tottering about alone than that of a mode of surviving. The photographs are powerless to deal with the reality that is yet totally comprehended-in-advance by ideology, and they are as diversionary as the word formations- which at least are closer to being located within the culture of drunkenness rather than being framed on it from without.'* (Martha Rosler quoted in Hopkins, D. 2004: 26)

Martha Rosler is interested in the limits of empiricism and the politics of representation. In "The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems" (1974) she refuses to manifest the victimisation status of her subjects, by representing them in her work, a representation that could be considered as a double mistake. Firstly, society, one might want to argue, produces its alcoholics. Secondly, it then re-enforces the status of alcoholics as outcasts, by representing them in images. (Hopkins, D. 2004: 25) This reminds us of the argument from chapter 2, i.e. visual representations reinforce ideologies and so-called truths. This attitude was typical for many feminist artists who were very much engaged with how to represent women in art without falling in the same trap of objectifying the female body, something they accused male artists of. Some feminist artists reacted by completely omitting the female body altogether, therefore avoiding any possibility of objectification in the first place. (Mary Kelly for instance) Others used methods such as abjection, as seen before, to allow them to depict the female form but at the same time to problematise the pleasure in viewing them. (Chapter 2) These two opposing approaches are reflected in the work of Martha Rosler on the topic of drunkenness and that of Gillian Wearing.

In the 1980s, images of so-called low lives were problematic and hence they tended to disappear. (Hopkins, D. 2004: 28) The 1990s, saw a return to images of working-class culture, as exemplified in some of the YBAs' work. Some critics saw this as a return to the "real", with the artist's aim to surface repressed materials, similar to psychoanalytical methods. Others, i.e. John Roberts, saw in this return to the re-experiencing of demotic pleasures, a reaction to the theory-overloaded 1980s and the academicisation of postmodernism. (Chapter 3) Gillian Wearing's work could therefore, be interpreted as revisiting the discussion about what and how minorities can be represented in art, an argument that Martha Rosler attempted to expose the problems of. In contrast to Rosler, Wearing homes in on and aestheticises her subjects and by using a studio background, rather than their own habitats, she tries to universalise the topic of "drunkenness", whether successful, or not remains debatable.



Through the denial of any conversation in “Drunk” (1997-99), similar to the denial of sound in “Dancing in Peckham” (1994), the viewer is forced to make a judgement based on appearance alone. Through her involvement with the drunks over a period of more than two years and her “socialising” with them in her private sphere, one could argue, that Wearing creates a new poetics of drunkenness from within the culture of it, rather than from outside. “Drunk” (1997-99) might rightly be considered as another form of exploitation, as she invites drunks, provides them with alcohol and ultimately takes advantage of their dependency. Furthermore, the question might be raised, what this piece contributes to the knowledge of drunkenness. Nevertheless, the work caused and still causes controversy. As a result, Wearing arguably managed to open up the question once again, who, what and how is something representable.

The appearance of over-identification between the artist and her subjects, as seen with the above work, is something that can be regularly seen in her work. Wearing explains, *‘For me to be interested, it’s got to be something about me.’* (Interview: Judd, B. 1996/1997: 4) Her modes of social identification and interactivity between artist and subject might be seen as reminiscent of the 1970s television documentaries, that she has cited as her privileged sources. The fact that her work has been considered as playing by the mass media rules and that, at first sight, it appears to be easy to understand and identify with, has been exploited by its assimilation into advertising. Then again, in her latest work she thematises exactly this critique, by making an artwork about Paul Watson’s 1974 fly-on-the-wall documentary, “The Family”.

Since the 1990s, as Matthias Winzen recognises, dry, unedited daily lives of ordinary people virtually disappeared from television documentaries. In the 1980s, before the commercialisation of European television and before the establishment of private commercial broadcasters, which caused major structural changes in so-called “public service broadcasting”, there had been, not at least in the BBC, a school of veristic documentation, a kind of investigative journalism in one’s own home territory. In these programmes, the “people” had their say. As the interviewee confirms in “Family

History” (2006)<sup>273</sup>, these people were disarmingly direct and usually they had no experience of what it means to be the subject of the media. (Winzen, M. 2003: 178)

Wearing, often references fly-on-the-wall documentaries, such as the 1960s series “Seven Up” and in particular “The Family” from 1974<sup>274</sup>, which filmed ‘...*the warts-and-all lives of the working class Wilkins family, and kicked up a national stink.*’ (Clarke, C. 2006: 164) ‘*People couldn’t deal with the reality of reality,*’ says Gillian Wearing about the media furore over the yelling and swearing in the Wilkins’ household and she adds, ‘*They were used to “reality” being chocolate Coronation Street.*’ (Gillian Wearing quoted in Clarke, C. 2006: 164) ‘*It was unlike anything else on television. The people in that series were giving away a lot more about themselves than people tended to in everyday life, especially in the seventies.*’ (Gillian Wearing quoted in Lippiatt, M. 2006: 16 )

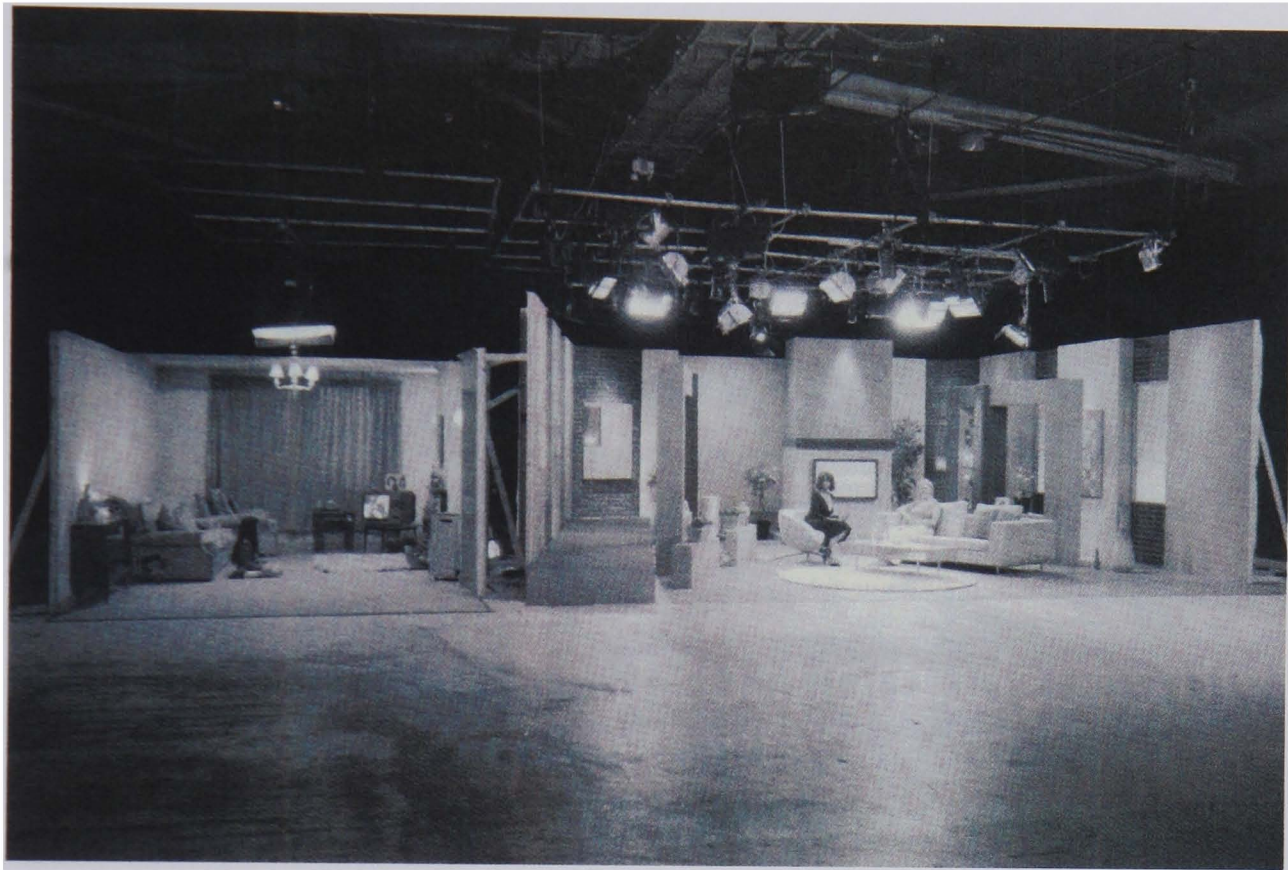
The main focus, in “Family History” (2006), is Heather Wilkins, now 48 and the former “star” of “The Family” (1974). She was fifteen years old at the time of the original filming and a heroine of anti-authority for Wearing (then ten-and-a-half ). The viewer is presented with two films that make up the installation, which takes place in two separate rooms. The first of which shows a typical TV chat-room setting, where Heather is interviewed by Trisha Goddard, the “goddess” of contemporary TV talk shows, who questions Heather about her experiences, during the filming of “The Family”, in 1974 and her life since. The second part, shown in an adjoining room on a smaller screen, focuses on a little girl, who represents the young Wearing and who watches and comments on “The Family” (1974), in a replica of the artist’s living room at that time. While the small monitor sequence only lasts a few minutes and the interview between Trisha and Heather takes about forty minutes, at times the simultaneous alignment of the theme tune creates a strange echo between adjoining rooms and possibly temporalities. At the end of both films, the camera pans back and the viewer realises,

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<sup>273</sup> This piece was shown at Interim Gallery, Maureen Paley, 21 Herald Street, London from 10<sup>th</sup> of October until 19<sup>th</sup> of November 2006

<sup>274</sup> For more information on television programs that influenced her work please see: (Maloney, M. 1997: 32)

that both episodes, past and present, have been filmed on the same stage. Here, Wearing once again stresses the artificiality of documentary practices and exposes the dissemination tactics of alleged “facts” and their influence on the construction of social and cultural meanings.<sup>275</sup>



“Family History” (2006)

The interview touches, not only, on topics such as the transmutation of fly-on-the-wall documentaries, our obsession with reality television, the changing nature of the British social harmony of race, class and gender, but it also gives the viewer the reality, behind the media frenzy, that enveloped the series. Trisha’s comment, *‘It’s OK to talk about emotions now’* (Walsh, M. 2006: 26), provides a useful entry point into thinking about the constellation of then and now that Wearing configures in “Family History” (2006) and about her autobiographical investment in this piece. Firstly, there is Wearing’s identification with Heather. Secondly, there is the child actor representing Wearing in the piece. Finally, perhaps not immediately obvious, there is Gillian Wearing the filmmaker, who becomes apparent when the young actress, who substitutes Wearing as

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<sup>275</sup> It is worth looking at Catherine Elwes’ work about the deconstruction of televisual signifying practices with references to feminist art practices. See please: Elwes, C. (2005) Video Art, A Guided Tour, I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, London, New York, in particular chapter 3 and 5

a child, clearly misinterprets the content of the TV show she is watching. She has obviously been asked a question, by an invisible interlocutor and has been invited to give an answer, indicating once again the acknowledgment of documentary's own artifice.

In "Family History" (2006), Gillian Wearing provides the viewer with different layers and levels of authenticity, reflects on the artificiality of representation and once again poses the question, what is real and what is fake. She argues the point, that what one sees in the world is not necessarily what one gets. Firstly, by juxtaposing two different methods of "reality" documentation. The little girl, being filmed in an apparently original 1970s setting and the interview between Trisha and Heather, which is similar to Trisha's usual daytime chat show are both in fact, highly staged productions made for the art world. Secondly, according to Heather, actual interview parts, that were shown in the original documentary screening "The Family" (1974) completely distorted reality and showed events and personalities in a light that were far removed from veracity. As Maria Walsh concludes, Wearing repeats in "Family History" (2006), '*...the externalisation of subjectivity performed in and by the media.*' (Walsh, M. 2006: 27) Therefore, all three documentary pieces that make up "Family History" (2006), the clips of the original "The Family" (1974), the filming of the young "Wearing" and the interview between Trisha and Heather have to be taken on board with a certain vigilance regarding their authenticity. The exposure of inaccuracies and distortions of representations was a target for some feminist artists and is a thread that can be found throughout Wearing's works.



### **6.3. Narrativity<sup>276</sup> and the Concept of Boredom**

*'I'm more interested in how other people put things together, how people can say something far more interesting than I can. ... Also I don't believe in patronizing viewers. If you give people everything, you're doubting their ability to make up their own minds.'* (Interview: De Salvo, D. 1999: 11/12)

Gillian Wearing's work could possibly be summarised by its exploration of human stories and the inadequacies of language in relation to *really* telling their story. Her approach, by incorporating a wide variety of people in her work, could be explained as a kind of democracy, in which she hands over certain decisions and control mechanisms to her subjects. Wearing both acts out and parodies the idea of the artist as anthropologist, a pervasive metaphor in art, of the 1990s. The expressionless recording of her subject's appearances, fantasies, and opinions *'...demonstrates a kind of scientific indifference to content, absorbing with equanimity both the utterly banal and the utterly bizarre.'* (Ferguson, R. 1999: 42)

Gillian Wearing introduces with each new setting, a new wave of dislocation and her seemingly anthropological activities are in the end, less directed at making sense of foreign cultures, than at breaking down the sense of what one thought one already knew. The narrative of her stories is at times largely influenced by the subject's performance and subsequently the viewers reading of it, with Wearing just setting the situation and framework. At other times, she transforms the chance performances into something else through the use of editing processes. Rarely, does she present the viewer with a piece, which was contrived, solely through her own contribution. She uses masks, lip-synching and signs as disjunctive elements, as well as others, to deal directly with all the confessional and inward-looking attributes of the authentic and to get beyond the doubtful distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity.

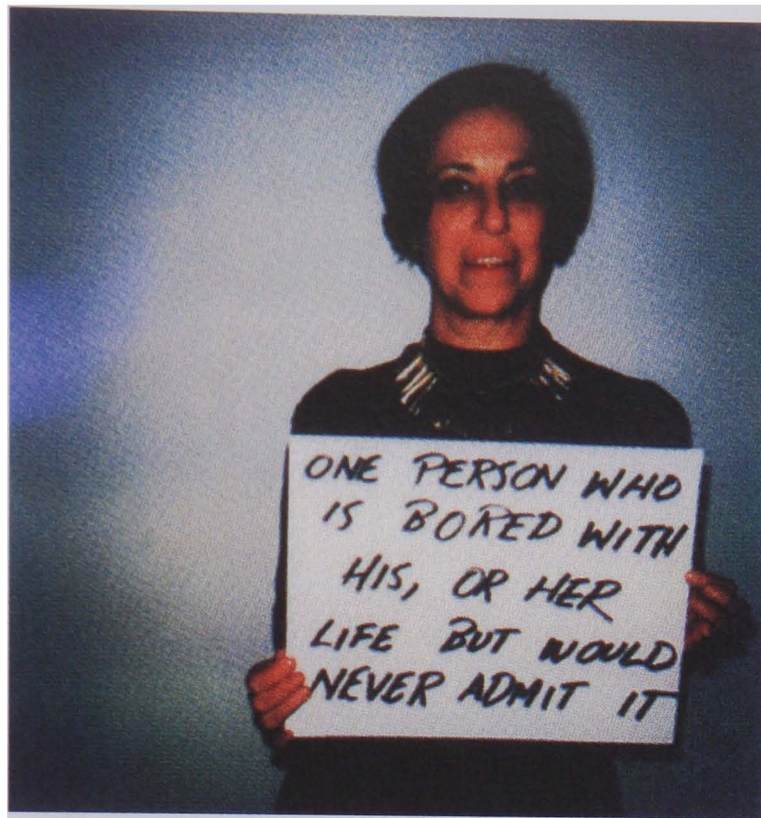
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<sup>276</sup> For a definition of narrativity please refer back to chapter 5 footnote 223  
Stefanie Kappel Chapter 6: Subjectivity and Feminism in Gillian Wearing's Work



“Signs...” (1992-93) for instance, offers a kind of survey with over six hundred photographs, with an abundance of messages, featuring a raw, firsthand account of everyday people. This work is regularly compared, in formal terms, with Walker Evan’s survey about the historical, sociological, and economic aspects of the government’s relief programs and their accomplishments for “The Farm Security Administration”. Others link “Signs...” (1992-93) to August Sander’s documentary survey photographs of the 1930s, or to the pre-World War II British social documentary project “Mass-Observation”. However, what distinguishes Wearing’s project from the others’ is its exploratory character. (Molon, D. 2002: 12) While there appears to be no shortage of specific class and sub-cultural information, the “anthropological” element of the information, we might draw from these “Signs...” (1992-93), is constantly disrupted by the intrusion of the subjects’ own version of direct address, as already discussed above. As Wearing says, *‘When you are working with strangers there’s that chance element which is a way of finding things that you don’t think are there. It dislodges the perception of what is in front of your eyes.’* (Gillian Wearing quoted in Ferguson, R. 1999: 45) In that sense, one could argue, that the viewer is denied the freedom to impose his or her own interpretations and fantasies onto the subjects depicted, or more accurately, these readings are contested, or at least partially influenced and directed by the subjects themselves.

The whole process in “Signs...” (1992-93) becomes more dialogic than the conventional models of anthropological, or portrait photography. The attempted confusion of roles between artist, subject and viewer is certainly not new. Douglas Huebler (1924-97), as an art-related precursor to Wearing’s “Signs...” (1992-93), photographed a number of people holding up cards bearing texts (such as the one below) with the slightly differing approach, that he himself wrote the cards (eighty in total), but his subjects were allowed to chose. Rather, than presenting the thoughts of his subjects, his work set up a contradiction between the apparent relevance of the label being held by the person and the information provided, by Huebler, that the connection is arbitrary.



Douglas Huebler "Variable Piece No.70 (In Process) Global" (1971)

Exhibited together with following artist's statement: "Throughout the remainder of the artist's lifetime he will photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive presentation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner. Editions of this work will be periodically issued in a variety of topical modes: "100,000 people", "1,000,000 people", "10,000,000 people", "people personally known by the artist", "look-alikes", "overlaps", etc. Douglas Huebler, November 1971"<sup>277</sup>

Both pieces, Wearing and Huebler's, can be seen as questioning the whole concept of authenticity itself. Wearing's subjects might be lying after all, while Huebler's might have chosen the labels that are actually relevant to them. Therefore, deciding whose work is "more" authentic, in the sense of representing the subject's "real" thoughts, remains for the viewer to attempt. At least both pieces probably manage to raise doubts in the viewer, regarding their authenticity and might at the same time push him or her to question the validity of certain other representations in imagery.

Arguably, in opposition to "Signs..." (1992-93), there are other works that distinguish themselves through their scarcity of palpable connotations. "Sixty Minutes Silence" (1996) for instance, is marked by its silence and primary suggestion of still imagery,

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<sup>277</sup> For more information on Douglas Huebler and images please see: Tate Website: <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ArtistWorks?cgroupid=999999961&artistid=1320&page=1>, also: Lange, C. (2005) "Bound to Fail", in: : TATE ETC., Issue 4, Summer, see <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue4/boundtofail.htm>

while in fact it is a video taken over the period of sixty minutes. In this piece, the artist films a group of dressed-up actors representing a group of British police officers, sitting and standing motionless for an almost impossible length of long time. (The British Council 1997: 105) Wearing touches here on two major issues. The first one deals with the question of power relationships, while the second one deals with the concept of silence.

First of all, the presence of police gives many people, including the artist herself, feelings of guilt and dread: *'I still cannot meet the gaze of a policeman and normally bow my head even though I've never done anything to be arrested for in my life.'* (Gillian Wearing quoted in Molon, D. 2002: 14) "Sixty Minutes Silence" (1996) turns the power relationship between the viewers and the viewed upside down, as the officers are stripped of their authority by being held in confinement, initially through her camera and later by the gaze of her audience. Wearing's approach in this work is somehow reminiscent of Michel Foucault's "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison", the celebrated study of power and control and its relationship to the human body. Foucault wrote, *'The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible.'* (Foucault, M. 1976/1995: 170)

In Wearing's case, this mechanism of control can be found in her film camera, which allows her and her audience to see everything constantly and at once, as she confines her subjects within the parameters of the camera's angle of view. The effects of this confinement and control can be deduced when, over the period of filming, the original sense of group identity slowly begins to disintegrate and the ordinary individuality of each sitter starts to assert itself. This inability to remain a coherent collective subject, the breaking down of control and discipline, as not expected from police officers, reverses the power relationship usually associated with such official bodies.





“Sixty Minutes Silence” (1996)

Furthermore, the idea of a power relationship in this work can also be seen as mirrored in the fact that Wearing uses *her* power as an artist to confound gender expectations. It is she, the female artist, who enforces silence not only on the female participants in this portrait sitting, but also on their male colleagues.<sup>278</sup> Is it not usually the duty of girls to sit quietly, to be seen and not heard? One might wonder looking at the well behaved group of gender mix. Wearing told Marcelo Spinelly, ‘*A lot of people have wanted a male sort of dominance. This is what an artist was.*’ (Gillian Wearing quoted in Ferguson, R. 1999: 55) Russell Ferguson argues that Gillian Wearing’s response to this burden is not ‘*...to assert an alternative kind of dominance, but rather to explore the very nature of self-silencing, suppression, and the attempt to speak.*’ (Ibid.)

To summarise, beneath “Sixty Minutes Silence” (1996) lurks not only the structuring element of power relationships between authorities such as government officials and “normal” human beings, but also the traditional relationship between who has and has

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<sup>278</sup> Very similar to “Boytime 1-3” (1996-98), where she enforces silence on adolescent boys who become increasingly agitated. For more information on this piece please see: Ferguson, R. 1999: 55  
Stefanie Kappel Chapter 6: Subjectivity and Feminism in Gillian Wearing’s Work

not power in art and society, something already discussed in connection with feminist art. (Chapter 2)

Secondly, referring back to the concept of silence, it possibly becomes clear when looking at this work in connection to others such as “Dancing in Peckham” (1994), “Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road” (1995) or “Boytime 1-3” (1996-98) that for Wearing silence is also a form of speech and of language. This reminds one of artists, with similar approaches, such as Andy Warhol and his “Screen tests” of the 1960s<sup>279</sup>. The silence in her works can be understood as an unarticulated form of counter-speech. All works in which Gillian Wearing compels silence are nevertheless closely linked to the ones where she appeals for speech. In both she tends to experiment with a self-conscious surrender of the power of an artist to control content, opposing arguably male traditions. She very rarely asks leading questions in her work, which according to Helene Cixous are in linguistic terms again. male territory. *‘As soon as the question is put, as soon as a reply is sought, we are already caught up in masculine interrogation.’* (Helene Cixous quoted in Sullivan, P., A./ Turner, L.,H. 1996: 6)

The video format itself in “Sixty Minutes Silence” (1996) leads the viewer to expect some kind of action, or at least a narrative, which are both denied, and therefore, the overall stasis might at some point become overwhelming. By not offering any kind of passage from one state to another this stasis can be understood as an overt rejection of development, or as provocatively leading the viewer to a certain limbo, where he or she might, after frantically trying to create a story line, resign themselves to a state of boredom. However, as Sophie Howarth very interestingly argues, boredom in itself has been the subject, object and inspiration of many artists.

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<sup>279</sup> Warhol was interested, similar to Wearing, in issues of control and the lack of it. His film practice with unrehearsed performances, the attention to personalities far outside mainstream limits and the strategy of simply setting up situations, form also part of Wearing’s practice. For more information please see: Livingstone, M. (2000) *Pop Art: A Continuing History*, Thames & Hudson, London



The investigation into the possibility of expressing nothing, for instance non-performative performances such as “Sixty Minutes Silence” (1996), opens up the possibility of boredom as the grounding for presence. Referring to the relationship between leisure and boredom, Siegfried Kracauer suggested already in 1924, that the numbing excesses of modernity had made boredom ‘...*the only proper occupation, since it provides a kind of guarantee that one is, so to speak, still in control of one’s existence. If one were never bored, one would presumably not really be present at all and would thus be merely one more object of boredom. ...But if indeed one is present, one would have no choice but to be bored by the ubiquitous abstract racket that does not allow one to exist, and, at the same time, to find oneself boring for existing in it.*’ (Siegfried Kracauer quoted in: Howarth, S. 2001: 61)

In other words, the concept of boredom allows an experience of objects, i.e. art works, through which one could rise above the “ubiquitous abstract racket” of modern life. In some sense, it might be possible for the viewer to once again reacquaint with his or her inner self. The spectator in this process may find work like “Sixty Minutes Silence” (1996) dull, then impossibly dull, until surprisingly he ‘...*breaks out on the other side of boredom into an area that can be called contemplation or simply aesthetic enjoyment, and the work becomes increasingly interesting.*’ (Lucy Lippard quoted in Howarth, S. 2001: 62) Similar to Bruce Nauman’s works such as “Bouncing in the Corner No. 1” (1968), or “Bouncing Two Balls between the Floor and the Ceiling with Changing Rhythms” (1968), “Sixty Minutes Silence” (1996) then could be understood, as conveying an experience rather than telling a story. It can be seen as an inquiry into the experience of monotony and duration, as well as into the negative correlation between intense mental activity and the lack of adequate impulses. Ultimately, one could argue that “Sixty Minutes Silence” (1996) and its exercise in endurance and duration subvert the idea of sensationalist art, at a time, when it seems that no amount of shock is beyond absorption by the art world. The notion that a work of art might be boring, possibly remains then, in a sense, the only taboo left, and working with taboos was a means for many feminist artists to subvert the status quo. (Chapter 2)

It is perhaps high time, in our fast moving world that is flooded with information through “new” technologies, e.g. mobile phones and the internet, to step away from “sensationalist” and “fast food” art and to turn our attention once again to issues that are, or at least *should* be, of concern to us, such as, our environment, terrorism and the effects of globalisation. Hereby, the feminist art movement can be taken as an example of how artists, from the 1960s onwards, who were not driven by the promise of economical rewards, (as the YBAs were considered to be), but who were greatly unified, by their belief in the possibility of change, started to produce social change art, an art that is still valid - even today.

#### **6.4. Summary**

As has been argued throughout this thesis, feminist artists were mainly concerned, in the first stage of the feminist art movement, with consciousness raising activities and the validation of female experience, as exemplified in Tracey Emin’s work. This, in simple terms, was followed by the exploration of gender issues, i.e. what it means to incorporate a female or male body, as shown in Sam Taylor-Wood’s work. Gillian Wearing’s work then can be seen as exemplifying the next step of feminist art debates, namely the consideration of multiple identities and plural subjectivities. She uses photography, film and video to explore the intimacies and complexities of human relationships, searching for something that might be called a “core” identity of the individual and at the same time she demonstrates that such an exercise is far from straightforward. We human beings, as she shows repeatedly, adapt our behaviour according to our surroundings, with performance and performativity being strongly related to the question of plural subjectivities.

Furthermore, she highlights the limitation of media, such as cameras, to capture “truth”, rejecting the alleged impartiality of any representational means. The person behind the camera, as well as the subject depicted, will always manipulate and interpret what has been represented. She underlines this fact by using manipulation techniques, either in

the capture, or during the editing processes. She uses props such as masks and techniques such as lip-synching, to create an added layer of meaning and in doing so she emphasises the artificiality and superficiality of documentary means, as well as raising questions about the validity of handed-down truths and the possibility of capturing genuinely intimate revelations.

She regularly uses subjects that might be considered as living on the outskirts of society. By deliberately entering their physical and mental spaces in order to empathise with their experiences and to better understand the cultural pathology surrounding them, she unmasks not only her participants to varying degrees, but also the society, which seeks to judge them by common traditional standards. In Wearing's work self-exposure can be understood as an act of self-representation where people, who are rarely heard, are given a voice, to express their inner selves, similar to the feminist idea of expressing women's experiences through art. (Chapter 2)

Gillian Wearing explores certain concepts that were important for some feminist artists, such as performance versus performativity. In works such as "Take your Top Off" (1993), "Dancing in Peckham" (1994) and "Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road" (1995) she raises taboo subjects, such as transsexuality and she questions the internalisation and naturalisation processes of so-called female and male "characteristics". She also deals with subjects such as gender positioning and role expectations in public, including the '*...presence of inappropriate bodies in public spaces...*', or more precisely '*...bodies inappropriately placed...*' in the public domain. (Grenville, B. 2005: 10) Finally, she explores the idea of voyeurism, not only from the side of the viewer, but also from the performing artist. Topics like madness and hysteria, which are traditionally associated with women in society, are touched on and questioned in some of the above works, as e.g. in "I Love You" (1999). The idealisation of the mother-child relationship is turned upside down in works, such as "Sascha and Mum" (1996) and "2 into 1", linking ideas of performance versus performativity and once again, raising doubts about loving and caring family bonds and

questioning power relationships within family structures. All these topics have been explored to some extent by a previous generation of feminist artists.

Philosophical ideas, such as the discovery of truths in our surroundings, a typical male aspiration, which was questioned by feminists, are reflected in Wearing's interrogation of preconceived ideas in society and her denial of providing the viewer with ultimate realities, therefore putting their existence into question. Making the "personal political", a leitmotif of feminist artists, can repeatedly be found in her work, as she blurs the boundaries between public and private, by representing apparently private moments of her subjects in public spaces.

Following in the footsteps of feminist artists, Gillian Wearing acknowledges the power of language, as not only a spoken or written tool in communication processes, but also as a structural element in the dichotomy of male and female and in other representational strategies, such as imagery or silence. She questions the interchangeability of speech and image, i.e. "10-16" (1997), in the process, playing with ideas, such as "the child is father to the man", interrogating once more the development of identity.

Her work initially appears to follow methods that promise the deduction of certain realities, only to turn this concept upside down, as the work unravels. Wearing also awakens subject matters, such as what can and what cannot be represented in art? Feminist artists primarily criticised objectifications of the female body, power relationships in society, ideas of exploitation and voyeurism and the reaffirmation of ideologies with representational strategies such as imagery.<sup>280</sup> Wearing once more raises these points in "Drunk" (1997-99) for example, by deliberately staging her subjects in order to represent them in a new way. This approach can be situated somewhere between Rosler's non-representational forms and other ways of representation, that contextualise their subjects within their environments.

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<sup>280</sup> David Campany points out that historically, photography has been a '*...a way of fixing identity controlled by those in power.*' (Campany, D. 2003: 86)

The problems surrounding the mass media with their influence on the representation of individuals and the viewer; their portrayal of truth, reality and the existence of unified identities, as well as their distortion of these, the transmutation of fly-on-the-wall documentaries and the question of authenticity are raised in works such as “Family History” (2006). Narrativity takes form in its exploration of human stories and in the demonstration of the inadequacies of language and visual representations to *really* tell a story: the aim being to break down the viewer’s reliance on handed-down truths. The concept of boredom in Gillian Wearing’s work, as in “Sixty Minutes Silence” (1996), can be considered as not only a subversion of the sensationalist art, as exemplified by many of her YBA peers, but also as a way of encouraging a contemplative experience for the viewer and perhaps even an encounter or reunification with her or his inner self, if there is such a thing.



## **7. The Importance of a Feminist Critical Reading of the work of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing**

*'It's not just nostalgia that keeps calling me back to the pioneering feminist art of the 1970s, but the ever more obvious affinities with what's going on in the 1990s. It seems politically and aesthetically crucial that the work done then not be forgotten now and that its connections to the succeeding decades be clarified.'* (Lippard, L. 1993: 4)

*'Contemporary art and art criticism are unimaginable without feminism.'* (Nochlin, L. 2003: 141)

*'Feminism has so thoroughly permeated the art world and art discourse that a lot of artists don't even realize that that's what they are doing.'* (Jones, A. 2006: 58)

Analysing the works of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing from a feminist perspective reveals not only the possible connection between their concerns and ways of working, to those of a previous generation of feminist artists, but it also permits a direct link to the historical lineage of the feminist art movement itself. Tracey Emin's art, with her focus predominantly on her own female experiences, can be associated with the beginnings of the feminist art movement, where the consciousness raising activities by feminist artists not only allowed women to consider their own experiences, but also validated them as worth exploring. Most of Sam Taylor-Wood's work fits into the subsequent stage of the feminist art movement, concerned with the exploration of gender, in particular what it means to incorporate female and male positions in a given society. Finally, Gillian Wearing's concerns can be seen as reflections of the later stage of the feminist art movement, which interrogated the possibility of a multitude of plural subjectivities, occupied by each individual, in combination with certain role expectations and the compliance or non-conformity to those.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> The idea of how superficial some of our male and female role understanding is in our society, how certain role expectations traditionally associated with the male and female positions in society are treated  
Stefanie Kappel Chapter 7: The Importance of a Feminist Critical Reading of the work of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing 293

This vast simplification certainly does not do justice to the extent of discussions in this thesis about their works, for example the important link of Tracey Emin's work to *l'Ecriture feminine*. Nevertheless, this "genealogy" fulfils more than a single purpose. First of all, by interpreting the art works of the three artists in question from a feminist perspective and by contextualising them within the legacy of the feminist art movement, one can give feminist art retrospective meaning and acknowledge its importance. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the significant concerns of a previous generation of feminist artists are still valid for contemporary artists, such as the three in question. In other words, by interpreting their work from a feminist perspective one can retroactively bring an entire feminist subject into the focus of contemporary art history and not incidentally, several women artists with it. Secondly, by reframing the works of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing within this undoubtedly important movement, one also might enrich their own position in art history, a position that lacks establishment from art historians and art critical writers. (Deepwell, K., personal interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2007)

Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing are without doubt established and famous contemporary women artists. They are frequently at the centre of media attention and certainly well known in the circles of young, aspiring wannabe artists and future art critical writers. The amount of websites dedicated to them, their works and the huge fan clubs turning up regularly to book signings and openings of their shows, just to

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as handed down "truths", the conformity or con-compliance to those expectations, as discussed in the last chapters, is brought to the extreme in the work of Ben Speck "Sworn Virgins", which depicts portraits of "Virgijneshe". This is an old tradition in the northern highlands of rural Albania and refers to a social role whereby a woman adopts a male identity and is from then on not only treated as a man, but also gains the respect traditionally associated with the male sex in these villages. This practice dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century where a high number of men were killed during prolonged and bitter blood feuds. At times, the number of men affected by vendettas was so high that it created a need for women to substitute men in the communities. To undertake life as a "Sworn Virgin", the woman must vow to lifelong celibacy and become a surrogate son to her father. She is given not only a male name, male clothes and a male haircut, but with the new status, she obtains all male privileges, such as decision making in the community and socialising freely with other men. They are completely accepted and addressed as men by their fellow villagers and have in contrary to the women in the village the right to speak. This shows how these roles can be bend and adapted depending on the needs of certain societies and how superficial certain ideas about women's weakness and non-rationality, as discussed in chapter 2 really are. For some of Ben Speck's portraits please see: Speck, B. (2007) "Sworn Virgins", in: London Independent Photography, No. 6, Spring, pp.4-9

get a glimpse of their idols, give testimony to their success. The amount of BA and MA dissertations that concern themselves with the three artists' works is another indication of the extensive interest in Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing. (Kent, S. 2004b) On the other hand, there is not much critical writing about them, if one disregards the usual tabloids and the exhibition catalogues, which are usually commissioned by the artists' galleries themselves. (Robinson, H. 2006: 1) As Katy Deepwell put it, '*...critical writers have better things to do with their time...*' (Deepwell, K., personal interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2007)

Therefore, a thesis about their works has at least two further functions, beside the purpose of relating them to the feminist art movement and acknowledging its achievements. Firstly, it addresses the lack of critical writing about the works of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing. Secondly and much more importantly, it makes more accessible the key issues that historically were important to feminist artists, with the hope that these "young, aspiring wannabe artists and future art critical writers" will get in touch with these issues and realise that they are still significant today.

This is especially important in these days, as feminist art debates are in a very precarious situation. Work that helps to give to its historical legacy well-deserved recognition, such as this thesis, is vital for the continuation of feminist art debates. Most current BA courses and even MA courses, have given up teaching feminist art, as the subject matter is now so complicated that there is no easy way to (a) teach it and (b) understand it. Gone are the days when it was possible to get a fairly good understanding of feminist art issues by consulting a couple of books and gone also are the days when an identification with certain feminist art movement strands was easier. In the current climate we could be facing questions like, '*Are you a liberal humanist feminist; a socialist feminist; a Marxist feminist; a post-Marxist feminist ; a radical feminist; a lesbian separatist feminist; a right-wing or a reactionary feminist; a post-feminist feminist; a postmodern feminist; a feminist postmodernist; or a modernist feminist postmodernist...?*' (Deepwell, K. 1999)

The rise of theory in the last few decades and the extraordinary proliferation of competing critical discourses have regularly redefined the boundaries of feminism unfortunately to such an extent, that it has become hard to keep track of where the central ideas are. Furthermore, the number of feminist publications that deal with women issues in art has diminished and the term “feminism” is now rarely found among book titles, even in art libraries and bookshops. As Carol Armstrong suggest, we are now at a moment in time, ‘...when it might be felt that feminist art and art history had either entrenched themselves in worn-out positions or simply lost their political momentum.’ (Carol Armstrong quoted in Zegher de, C. 2006: xx) Feminism has become, according to Amelia Jones, a ‘...vacuous concept’ and discussions about race, ethnicity, or class, to give but a few examples, by their inclusion into feminist art debates have ‘...overwhelmed’ them and she warns, ‘After all feminism is a very fragile concept today, and we have to be very careful about diluting it with other discourses.’ (Jones, A. 2006: 60)

As this quote demonstrates, feminist art debates have diversified so much that a simplistic approach to feminism in art appears not to be viable and therefore, one either has to have a profound interest in the subject matter in order to explore it further, or one does not tackle it at all. However, the question remains, how can this interest be awakened and teased out in the first place? Is it perhaps by writing about artists that are of interest to a younger generation of potential writers, that one might be able to gently introduce various feminist ideas and concepts in the hope that these trigger a desire for further interest and exploration? At the end of the day, these young people are the academicians of tomorrow. They are the ones whose attention should be sought in order to secure the future of feminist art debates. Rather than a mere contribution to the intelligentsia of academic research into specific feminist art issues, the exploration of the three artists in question must be understood as an address to a generation of readers who might otherwise not be confronted with feminist art debates at all. Rather than “preaching to the converted”, it is perhaps more important to address the generations of students and other “art interested beings” who have grown up with artists like the

YBAs, especially in times of postmodernism and anti-theorisation, where feminist art debates are no longer widely disseminated.

Furthermore, one could say that not only feminist art debates show definite signs of decline, or at least are so diversified here in Great Britain that a common denominator becomes more and more difficult to detect. In addition, the whole generation of YBAs is under threat of obsolescence, due to changes in the political, economical and environmental circumstances we live in today. The trouble is, the more its associated artists used the market forces to push their art into the mainstream, the more they became dependent on taste. The fine art industry, in line with the wider market forces governing fashion, music and entertainment, trades on the new and is therefore, subject to cyclical changes, as Catherine Elwes points out, which themselves '*...depend on a certain cultural amnesia as well as the circulation and constant renewal of consumer desire. .... It becomes clear that the culture industry needs to be fed with something new.*' (Elwes, C. 2005: 173)

It appears that after the shock art of the YBAs, which mainly relied on sensationalism, there is a re-awakening of political awareness in art these days. This is perhaps due to a sense of humanitarian horror at the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and at the decisions made by the political leaders of countries such as the United States and Great Britain. In times of energetic globalisation protests the work of artists like Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing, with their more "trivial" issues, could be seen as losing their impact. Who cares whether Emin suffers, whether Taylor-Wood contemplates who to frame next and expose, crying from large scale, high gloss prints, when there actually is real suffering going on out there in the world, transmitted to us on a daily basis through television and radio and reminding us perhaps of our global responsibilities. Can we really concern ourselves with the confessing adults in Wearing's work, when out there in real life, soldiers confess to having accidentally killed their own in combat? (Newsnight BBC 1, 6.2.2007, 10:30pm) Consequently, one might expect to see a decline in not only the production of sensationalist art, but also in the interest in it. Therefore, if the three artists discussed here want to secure their place



within a critical art historical context, it is high time that their work be critiqued from new perspectives in order to demonstrate its value within a wider art history context. It is imperative that this is carried out before interest in their work wanes and critical writers move on to new territories, perhaps to young, up and coming new artists.

This new generation of artists, have already shown a change in their motivations, displaying more social instead of economic orientations. As Catherine Elwes states: *'The young invariably desecrate what was sacred to the old. Where the 1990s were largely dedicated to lifestyle tribalism, aesthetic cynicism and commercial success, so we might expect the new kids on the block to embrace a wider sense of community and cultural diversity and also reject the profit-driven structures of the art market. I may be wrong but, ironically, market forces could well thrust socially connected artists in the cultural limelight.'* (Elwes, C. 2005: 173) As this quote shows, some of the younger generation of art students might in the future be more interested in art practitioners, similar to feminist artists, who show some kind of social concern, rather than the intimidating success stories of artists like those typically associated with the YBAs.

Emin et al., with their celebrity status, are by no means encouraging to all young aspiring artists, who already wonder how they will ever be able to compete with such clamouring art practices and overwhelming media attention as these artistic predecessors. (Hughes, V. 2007) Some newcomers to the art world seem to be more interested in reverting to ideas such as the notion of a collective, i.e. engaging themselves in communal art, which was important for some feminist artist and distancing themselves from the individualistic approach of the YBAs. (Elwes, C., personal interview, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2007) Collaborative or collective work has grown in popularity again in the United States and Europe in the past few years. This has been noted by some feminists, such as Lucy Lippard, the Guerrilla Girls and Catherine de Zegher, as an *'...alternative to the saleable lone-genius model...'* and as a chance for art to avoid being *'...devoured and devitalised by an omnivorous art market.'* (Cotter, H. 2007: 1). Hopefully such a commitment, as the use of collaborative and collective work, might ultimately lead to issues being tackled that concern and are for the benefit of the

wider society - be it specifically for women, or more generally for consciousness raising about the seemingly overpowering social issues, such as terrorism, environmental pollution, or the effects of globalisation.

In short, feminist art and the three artists in question could both benefit from a critical analysis of their work. In the case of feminist art, this could be seen as an acknowledgement of the achievements of feminist artists and the heritage they have provided contemporary female artists with. (Even artists that officially distance themselves from any kind of influence, as if their work developed simply out of thin air, or those that acknowledge influence only from art associated with the traditional male genius.) As far as the three artists in question are concerned, the analysis should contribute to redressing the deficiency of critical writings about them.

The link between the arguably, unconscious use of feminist heritage and the production of some of the contemporary women's art, exemplified in the above discussions of the three artists' work, is for some art historians beyond doubt. It is not only on account of postmodernism's tendencies to reject any canonisation and normativity in the art world, as noted in chapter 3, that women artists today have easier access to the art world, but according to Linda Nochlin, it is also because of the groundwork provided by feminist artists, from the 1960s onwards. This generation of female artists developed their art as political activism, raised consciousness and began to change the discourses of art and art history itself. (Nochlin, L. 2006b: 15/16) Feminism, one could argue, brought vibrant activism to a cultural aesthetic and established some of the touchstones of postmodernism, i.e. fragmentation, diversity, subjectivity and pluralism, all themes that can be found in the works of the three artists in question. (Smyth, C. 2006: 151)

The appropriation of artists for feminist concerns, sometimes against their intentions, as exemplified in this thesis, has a long history of approval and disapproval. Francis Borzello for instance argues, that women throughout the centuries were not only "appreciate muses", but also female artists, whose careers were not always considered in a positive light, by feminist art historians. She further criticises the research into the

conditions these women artists faced, which quite regularly turned them into victims, for the benefit of feminist issues, instead of '*...the survivors they so clearly were.*' (Borzello, F. 2000: 9) Finally, disapproving of the appropriation of women artists against their will for the purposes of feminism, she concludes, '*One of the dangers of applying feminist assumptions to artists... is that it makes us feel we know better than the artists themselves.*' (Borzello, F. 2000: 210) Nevertheless, the end justifies the means and all of these arguments are rendered obsolete, when one considers the position for women in the art world not only in the 1960s and 70s, but also *today*.

For instance, Bridget Riley, an artist who declined an appropriation of herself for feminist purposes, pointed out more than three decades ago: '*For the artist who is also a woman, I would not deny that society presents particular circumstantial problems. But in my opinion these are on the wane and, in any case, few male artists have avoided analogous physical and sociological problems of one sort or another: for example, poverty, illness, unsympathetic marriages, alcoholism, geographical isolation etc.*' (Riley, B. 1971: 83) There is certainly no question that many male artists did face difficulties throughout the centuries similar to women artists. Nevertheless, it is the issue of "particular circumstantial problems" that were and are of interest to feminist art debates and whether they are "on the wane" or not, varies according to differing viewpoints. However, it has to be said that by raising consciousness about the particular situation of *women* artists, feminist artists from the 1960s onwards most certainly brought about changes that were not necessarily predictable at that particular point in time. Yet, their activities have positively influenced how a younger generation of women artists, such as Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing, can operate within the art system today.

One has to be reminded here that in the last forty years or so, there has been a profound change in the relation of women to public space, especially as understood in terms of social relations. As demonstrated in chapter 2, this relationship has been a problematic one since the beginning of modern times. Men, active in the public domain, were traditionally considered as admirable, politically active, socially engaged, known and

ultimately respected, whereas '*...a public woman, on the contrary, is the lowest form of prostitute.*' (Nochlin, L. 2006a: 25) And it was not until the late 1960s early 1970s that women as a group and as activists, took over the public space for themselves, in order to voice their own issues and to start '*...marching for a woman's right to control her own body...*' (Nochlin, L. 2006a: 25) It is within the context of the libratory culture of that period in time that the role of women changed from being merely visibly present in the public space, to a '*...highly visible and original shaper and constructor...*' of the public domain, not only of the social and political structures, but also literally as public sculptresses and artists<sup>282</sup>. (Nochlin, L. 2006a: 26)

It is also important to keep in mind that not only has woman's position in society changed dramatically over the last decades, but so has the whole discourse about art. What constitutes art and what does not, including issues such as beauty and aesthetic, who can be an artist and who can not, the answers to all these questions underwent drastic changes. For instance theory of art, in particular feminist or gender based debates, hardly existed for art historians before the postmodernist and the feminist art movements. As Linda Nochlin puts it: '*...Lacan and French feminism were little dots on the horizon...*' (Nochlin, L. 2006a: 23) Within academia and in the art world the perception of art and gender has changed and thankfully we now have '*...some extraordinary, large-scale, and long lasting careers...in the work of women artists in recent years.*' (Nochlin, L. 2006a: 23)

However, the groundbreaking work of feminist artists has not yet fully changed the iniquitous dynamics of sexual discrimination in the art world and elsewhere. Therefore, the work started by feminist artists must be continued and the legacy of the feminist art movement needs to be perpetually commemorated, as it is without doubt, too early to celebrate the completion of its primary mission. Statements such as that made by Carolee Schneeman in 1975, foretelling what she perceived at the time as a possible scenario for the situation of women, a quarter of a century later:

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<sup>282</sup> In that respect please look at the work of Rachel Whiteread or Jenny Holzer as discussed before.  
Stefanie Kappel Chapter 7: The Importance of a Feminist Critical Reading of the work of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing

*'By the year 2000...our future student will be in touch with a continuous feminine creative history - often produced against impossible odds - ... In the year 2000 books and courses will only be called "Man and His Image", "Man and his Symbols", "Art History of Man"...By the year 2000 feminist archaeologists, etymologists, Egyptologists, biologists, sociologists will have established beyond question...that women determined the forms of the sacred and the functional...evolved property: sculpture, fresco, architecture, astronomy and the laws of agriculture- all of which belonged to the female realms of transformation and production'. (Schneemann, C. 1979: 198/199) - need to be responded to "...probably to a certain extent - but perhaps not quite..."*

While the social impact of the feminist movement received wide recognition, the extraordinary contributions of feminism in art, as Jeremy Strick so rightly points out, are considerably less understood and appreciated. (Strick, J. 2007: 7) However, the feminist art movement has without doubt raised many important issues, especially for women. Most importantly, it made women aware of their situation in society in general and in the art world in particular and it laid the foundation for fundamental changes in the production, distribution and reception of art works, something that might be easily taken for granted these days.

Today, as Catherine de Zegher points out, echoing Amelia Jones' quote from the beginning of this chapter, the work produced by a younger generation of artists *'...can be considered as soundly inspired by, among other factors, the legacies of feminist practice and critical theory.'* (Zegher de, C. 2006: xv) Generally speaking, one could divide contemporary women artists into the following categories: Feminist artists, who consciously produce art in order to change women's situation in society. Women artists who do not want to be associated with feminist art, for whatever reason, but who nevertheless produce art works that can be discussed in feminist terms (Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing as examples). Female artists who are indifferent to a feminist position, but who consciously or unconsciously, produce work that could



be subsumed under a certain feminist concept (i.e. Jenny Saville until lately). Finally, there are women artists that produce art outside an apparent feminist agenda.

These differentiations are certainly not straightforward. Furthermore, the readability of art works depends not only on the intentions of the artists. The marketing and placing of the art works, the knowledge that the viewer brings to and imposes onto the works and any critical writings that might influence the reception and possible interpretation of certain art works within feminist art terms all influence the interpretation of artworks. From the production side of feminist art, as seen in chapter 2, it was expected that the artist would bring a certain political motivation with her that would target particular feminist issues. However, the political climate has obviously changed in the last forty years. Nowadays, we are facing a much more commercialised art market that follows its own agendas, as discussed in chapter 3. Consequently, political motivations might be of lesser interest these days as it will be argued below and the function of artworks to further women's issues and concerns and perhaps to some extent keep feminist art debates alive, will take precedence over the artists' intentions.<sup>283</sup>

Agreeing with Marcia Tucker's view on the term "political" as referring to "power relations", one can argue that '*...there is no such thing as apolitical art...*'. All art is made by people, who are themselves part of a wider society. Their experiences and socialisation processes within that society as well as their inherent power relationships, are usually reflected in their work - consciously or unconsciously. (Tucker, M. 2006: 120) In other words, even though Emin, Taylor-Wood and Wearing do not identify themselves or their works as feminist, Susan Hiller argues that, '*... art practice with no overt political content may, nevertheless, be able to sensitize us politically.*' (Interview: Kent, S./ Morreau, J. 1990: 151) If it is only in the sense that these artists, intentionally, unintentionally, or due to a lack of language or cultural context with which to support a feminist idiom, contribute to a discussion of feminism in art, by reinforcing two of its

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<sup>283</sup> Katy Deepwell, in a paper given at the panel discussion Historiography/Feminism/Strategy at the College of Art, New York in 2000, stated that her decision to start an international feminist art journal was based on a sense of boredom and that she had the feeling that for Western feminists the topic of feminism was dead. (Deepwell, K. 2000)

central tenets: the personal is political and all representation is political, then the viewer, with a certain feminist awareness, can read the works of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing, as being situated, within the concerns of a previous generation of feminist artists, without postulating that this is the only viable interpretation of them.

The interpretation of an artwork in feminist terms, against any obvious feminist intention, follows the idea of the “death of the author”<sup>284</sup>, as claimed by the French literary critic and theoretician Roland Barthes. Here the incorporation of the intentions and biographical context of an author in an interpretation of his or her work becomes irrelevant. In terms of furthering women’s issues, this idea of the “death of the author” is highly problematic and paradoxical in itself, especially as this concept was inaugurated at a time when women were finally ‘...*enabling themselves to become the authors.*’ (Nochlin, L. 2006b: 17)

Feminist artists, to recap, not only instigated the possibility of female authorship, but they also initiated the analysis of art and the art world in a new way and their research,

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<sup>284</sup> The theory of the death of the author is in postmodernist times a highly problematic one and a discussion of the different viewpoints would lead too far for the purpose of this paper. Questions such as, is there such a thing as *one* author or are human beings not conglomerated of a plurality of subjectivities (as for instance questioned in Gillian Wearing’s work). What intentions are we talking about in the first place: the conscious, or the unconscious ones? Are we determining the meaning of the work by looking at actual intentions, modest actual intentions, or hypothetical ones? What happens if the intentions of the author are not consistent with the artwork or are outside our convention of understanding? The above questions amongst many more is just an indication of what problems arise when one looks at ontological questions of art. For a very good discussion about these topics please see: Irvin, S. (2005) “Appropriation and Authorship in Contemporary Art”, in: *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol.45, Number 2, April, p.123-137/ Livingston, P. (2003) “Intention in Art”, in: Levinson, J. (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 275-290/ Currie, G. (2003) “Interpretation in Art”, in: Levinson, J. (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 291-306/ Margolis, J./ Rockmore, T. (Eds.) (2000) *The Philosophy of Interpretation*, Blackwell Publishers in particular the essay “Interpretation and Intention: The Debate between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism” by Noel Carroll pp.75-95 and also a very good source is Hanflin, O. (1992) *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing in Association with the Open University, specifically the essays “The Evaluation of Art”, pp.349-380 and “Criticism and Interpretation” both by Colin Lyas.

theories and conclusions, for the first time, gave women a clearer understanding of the art world and their position in it. Needless to say, a major part of the feminist art movement's inherent problems lay in its criticism of the existing power mechanisms and sometimes the controversial use of the very same mechanisms to incorporate feminism into the lives of women artists and society. As Lisa Tickner explains, referring to the feminist art movement in the seventies, '*...the idea that there is a veil of fraternity or sisterhood is actually a little naïve because it's made all the more difficult by the fact that the frank admission of certain things is more difficult. So you know under sisterhood there isn't supposed to be ambition and there isn't supposed to be ... there was a lot of difficulty about 'do you show in galleries, do you not show in galleries' so while everyone has a chance at doing those things that's fine. But as soon as some people begin to be able to do this then there is a huge debate about whether they represent a spearhead and a breakthrough and are to be applauded and loved for opening the space or whether they have in fact betrayed the cause.*' (Tickner, L., interview by Kathy Battista, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2000)

This was certainly a problem for previous generations of feminist artists. Especially the question of how to deal with singular success in opposition to the idea of a collective, where the individuality of an artist is subordinated under a more important general cause posed a problem. However, today these concerns are without doubt of no interest to most contemporary women artists such as Emin et al.. One of feminism's greatest and most constructive strengths has been its capacity for self-criticism and self-correction. (Cotter, H. 2007: 1) Therefore, while there are unquestionably many positive achievements that the feminist art movement can be recognised for, it would be neglecting certain facts if its path were described as straightforward. These facts might be seen as being responsible for some of the adversity found these days and some of the feminist views, that not everyone would be in favour of, neither then nor now.

One has to remember that since the late 1960s the relationship between feminist uprisings and the institutionalised art world went through different stages with periods of challenge and confrontation, offence and defence, acceptance and backlash. Some of

these stages need to be reflected upon in order to understand the difficult position of contemporary feminist art debates. To begin with, the feminist scrutiny of identity politics and the exploration of the history of women's options as socially and politically constructed and as culturally mediated, provided a platform from which to rally for the inclusion of not only women artists, but also other so-called "minority" artists. Those artists regularly saw themselves as "Others" to the mainstream, with neither full acceptance and respect, nor political power. Through the efforts of feminist artists, who participated in the social movements and antiwar activities of the 1960s and 1970s, these oppressed voices were finally given a chance to be heard. (Chapter 2)

By the 1980s, politicised practices and discourses were well established in the art world, resulting in a multiplication of formal strategies and a rethinking of aesthetic paradigms. With the help of feminist artists, the '*...artist's exodus from mainstream institutions...*' during the 1960s and 1970s finally found an end with the acceptance of wider practices by institutions and private dealers, practices that were not founded on aestheticism '*...but rather on an array of discursive practices...*'. (Rosler, M. 2006a: 129/130)

During the 1980s, anti-AIDS activism, together with feminism, both based on the idea of collective activity, offered platforms for wider social mobilisation. The beginning of the 1990s, brought not only globalisation and consequently, changes in the geopolitical world order, but also a much more commercialised art market in which artists, increasingly started to compete against each other, in their efforts to develop appropriate identities. As Martha Rosler states, '*Identity was trumped by postcoloniality as the one-idea shibboleth of the art world.*' (Rosler, M. 2006a: 133) She explains that the outcome of this meant a withdrawal from feminism and AIDS activism in the art world. Women artists had already started to distance themselves from feminism by the mid 1980s, as Rosler states and this '*...effectively rendered feminist art into a style, sharing the fate of "political art".*' (Rosler, M. 2006a: 134) She continues '*The lack of agitation by women artists...means that the disappearance from important exhibitions of great many women, and of a robust articulation of a female subjective position, is not greeted by an outcry.*' (Rosler, M. 2006a: 134)

Generally speaking, feminist artists and critics have had to face many obstacles over the last three decades and their journey has certainly not been an easy one. Moreover, since its dawn, feminism in art was certainly not beyond criticism, be it due to different viewpoints from within the movement itself, as seen in chapter 2, or as a response to it. It is worth reiterating some of its main concerns, namely the traditional, almost entirely male-oriented notion of “greatness” itself, which includes an art history that has been dominated by an explicitly male defined model of interpretation, which largely avoided the canonisation of women artists.<sup>285</sup> Consequently, many women artists were excluded from the art world for a long time. (Chapter 2) These days these issues have ostensibly changed and as Linda Nochlin remarks, ‘...members of the art world are far less ready to worry about what is great and what is not, nor do they assert as often the necessary connection of important art with virility or the phallus. No longer is it the case that the boys are the important artists, the girls positioned as appreciative muses or groupies. There has been a change in what counts - from phallic “greatness” to being innovative, making interesting, provocative work, making an impact, and making one’s voice heard.’ (Nochlin, L. 2006a: 22)

The questions that seethed in the background throughout the research for this paper were, why is an earlier generation of feminist artists and their politics so negatively stereotyped and repressed? Why are these politics seen as so didactic, essentialist and collectivist? Why do female artists today not want to have any relationship to the broader history of over two decades of British and American feminist art practice? The answers to these questions can be found, according to Katy Deepwell, in the categorisation of feminist practices as either: (a) feminism means women with power, (b) feminism is allied with the Women’s Liberation Movement, equalling essentialist separatism or (c) feminism is associated with aggression or monstrous female superiority. (Deepwell, K. 1997a: 155-158)

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<sup>285</sup> This is not to say that many male artists were not neglected as well, but the number of women artists historicised was and is beyond doubt below that of their male counter parts. For an interesting reflection on this problematic see the conversation “Dialogue” between Elaine de Kooning and Rosalyn Drexler in: Hess, T., B./ Baker, E., C. (Eds.) Art and Sexual Politics, Collier Books, London, New York, pp.56-81



Feminism these days, according to Mira Schor, has once again become a dirty word- '*...the ism that dare not speak its name...*' (Schor, M. 2006: 77) and unfortunately many contemporary female artists such as Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing distance themselves consciously from it, even though as shown in the above chapters, their work might be considered as challenging stereotypes related to patriarchal culture and society in similar ways to those of previous generations of feminist artists. This is regrettable in a sense. Firstly, it remains questionable whether the position of women in society in general and in the art market<sup>286</sup> in particular have improved to such an extent that feminist art debates have now become obsolete.<sup>287</sup> Secondly, by not consciously associating themselves with feminist issues or with any other women artists in general, they neither acknowledge the importance and the achievements of their female forbears, nor do they contribute to the affirmation of women artists in art history. The number of works by women artists in collections is still very small. Their market prices are far lower than the prices of male artists' works. Finally, many other aspects of the dominant art apparatus give clear indications that women are still discriminated against, as Tracey Emin researched and presented in her television documentary for Channel 4, in March 2006. (Emin, T. 2006a) With this in mind, it is even more relevant that we are reminded of the concerns raised by previous generations of feminist artists and to point out the relevance of some of their issues for the next generation of contemporary women artists, perhaps through a thesis like this one.

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<sup>286</sup> Looking at the top one hundred contemporary artists, ranked by auction sales turnover 1<sup>st</sup> of January until 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2006, this reveals that women artists are still a small minority when it comes to market sales of their works. The ranking of artists by auction turnover gives also a good indication of market conditions, preferences and trends. Under the top ten artists, there is no woman artist to be found. For more information on this please consult the excellent website <http://www.artprice.com>, accessed 7.3.2007 and <http://web.artprice.com/AMI/AMI.aspx?id=MTA4MTQ4MDMyMTk1OTk=>, accessed 16.3.2007. For general information on art market information and for the ranking of the top hundred artists please see: <http://img1.artprice.com/pdf/top100contemporary.pdf>, accessed 7.3.2007

<sup>287</sup> For an extensive statistical evidence of continued discrimination against women, persons of colour, and non-Euro-American artists please see the excellent essay by Maura Reilly "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms", pp.15-45 in particular pp.17-24 in: Brooklyn Museum (2007) *Global Feminisms; New Directions in Contemporary Art*, Merrell Publishers Limited, London, New York

Adding to the wilful dissociation from feminist art of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing, is probably the fact that contemporary female artists are now part of an increasing professionalisation of the art field. This as Schor points out is more than likely due to the achievements of an earlier women's movements, which produced skills and confidence that earlier generations of women artists were lacking. Yet paradoxically, this "new" sense of power reduces contemporary women's critical potential and political consciousness. For Martha Rosler, the art of the 1990s can be seen as a reprise of the artistic approach of the 1970s but without politics, as she puts it, *'...the 1990s equals the 1970s lite.'* (Rosler, M. 2006b: 107) It appears that contemporary female artists reject the label "feminism" as part of a strategy for getting into the art world without being dismissed as a potential disturbance. As Miriam Schor explains, *'If feminism is a critique of the centre, then to be in the centre naturally diminishes the meaning of feminism. For a young woman, distancing herself from feminism is a good career move, in part because it is a way of saying to the establishment, whether it is a public museum or a private dealer, "Don't worry, I won't question your power".'* (Schor, M. 2006: 77) Finally, as Linda Nochlin concludes, *'...they identify with those in power, and that is always more comfortable.'* (Nochlin, L. 2006b: 16)

Whether one agrees with the last statement or not, it undoubtedly appears to be the case that an association with Andy Warhol, Bruce Nauman, Duchamp et al. is more commercially viable for Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing than a commitment to a feminist agenda. Instead of sympathising with the interpretation of their works as social and political interventions, as feminist art, or in other words as the "other" to traditional art historical interpretations, they insist on having their practices debated as art alone and in doing so defy any feminist political association. *'Avoiding the label of feminism is a strategy, conscious or not, and does not necessarily speak of the content of one's work, character, or attitudes and beliefs.'* (Rosler, M. 2006a: 139) Oddly enough, the association with famous male forbears in art history, exemplified in the attitudes of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing, can be seen in itself as somewhat of an achievement of the feminist art movement. The fact that the

three artists in question “dare” to compare themselves with established male artists, those defined by art history as “geniuses”, was to some extent unthinkable of before the feminist art movement. (Chapter 2) Even though they fit into the category of artists, who mostly distance themselves from any theorisation, nevertheless, when their work is interpreted within an attractive, typically male art historical context then they are quickly receptive to such an approach. Yet when it comes to feminism, they are swift to put their feet down. (Chapter 3)

What further complicates an association of their work with feminist art is the fact that the individualistic presentation and marketing of it contradicts the radically different approach to art making adopted by feminist artists in the 1960s and 1970s. As Catherine Elwes summarises ‘*We were deeply anti-art market. We were basically Marxists in our attitude to the art market. In those days, we would say, “I am selling my labour in the same way that a worker in a factory does. I’m a cultural worker.”*’ (Elwes, C., interview by Kathy Battista, 6<sup>th</sup> April 2001) It appears, especially in Emin and Taylor-Wood’s case and typically for most YBAs, that their work is produced for a certain art market and with a certain clientele in mind, placing it within commercial and not political contexts. In other words, contrary to feminist artists, as seen in chapter 2, who were less interested in the materiality of art and its presentation, but much more concerned with content and political change, all three artists in questions work ultimately for economic purposes, not only for themselves, but also retrospectively for their dealers. They have to regularly produce work that satisfies the expectations of not only their dealers, but also the art market in general. One could argue, that these three artists, amongst others, take the powerful and political legacy of feminist art and then turn it into a product. Nevertheless, even considering this argument, it still remains that their individualistic approach to the production of art, their dealing with concerns that were of highest priority for feminist artists and ultimately their success partly due to means such as self-promotion and alternative exhibition spaces are to a certain extent reminiscent of the feminist art movement.

In spite of all their market orientation, one could agree with Catherine Elwes, that Emin, Taylor-Wood and Wearing are now so economically established that an association with the legacy of feminist art should no longer be seen as endangering their firm market positions. (Elwes, C., personal interview, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2007) In other words, whatever they make will be commercially successful to such an extent, that an interpretation of their art works as feminist will very likely no longer interfere, with the marketability of their works. We are facing an art market, that is still predominately male and the marketing of women's art in general and feminist art in particular, does not sit well with the masculine and sometimes distinctly misogynistic ethos of the City.<sup>288</sup>

Hitherto, the key insistence of Emin, Taylor-Wood and Wearing's works might still be primarily commercially driven. Yet it appears to be difficult for a feminist informed viewer to ignore their overt queries about the role and position of women in society and women artists within art history. Admittedly, the slogan "the personal is political" for them has most certainly changed its original significance. As Kate Walker rightly observes *'If you say the personal is political that is one thing. You might take it in a political way and generalize from that, which is what we tried to do. But it also goes the other way into a kind of introspective personal therapy and then it's just art therapy... And the artist's personal problems become magnified as this awful spectacle...'*, something that can be argued in Tracey Emin's case in particular. (Walker, K., interview by Kathy Battista, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2001) Nevertheless, whatever one might think about the "personal is political" in Emin's, Taylor-Wood's and Wearing's work, all three still work with themes that are relevant to feminism.

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<sup>288</sup> As an analysis of Sothebys' auction catalogues reveals, not only are women artists less presented at auctions but also the prices achieved are directly correlated with the bonuses paid in the City. For more information please see: <http://www.sothebys.com/>, accessed 1.3.2007 Also: Greg Allen investigated for the New York Times auction price differentials between male and female artists over the past few years. Using the spring 2005 contemporary art auctions at Christie's, Sotheby's, and Phillips as his data, he revealed that of the 861 works offered by the houses, a mere 13 percent were by women artists, and that of the 61 pieces assigned an estimated price of \$1 million or more, only 6 were by women. He furthermore exposed, that it does not matter if a woman artist is represented by a blue chip gallery, or shows in prestigious museums, or is sought by prominent collectors, her work will always be priced considerably lower than that of her male colleagues simply, because it was made by a woman. For more information please see: Allen, G. (2005) "X- Factor: Is the Art Market Rational or Biased?", in: *New York Times*, May 1, section 2, p.1

It is interesting to look at the influence that feminist art had and has on male artists. Feminist artists and critics, as Mira Schor explains, invented some kind of “new language” that at a later stage was appropriated by *men* as well. Even though Schor describes feminism in art as a kind of melody that is preferably, but not exclusively a conscious reflection of women’s experiences in the world, she nevertheless, stresses that *‘...this experience cannot be shared by men.’* (Schor, M. 2006: 69) Following in her footsteps, even the New York Times art critic Holland Cotter, referring to curators and critics who have increasingly come to see that feminism has generated the most influential art impulses of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, claims that there is almost no work these days that has not been shaped by it.

*‘When you look at Matthew Barney, you’re basically seeing pilfered elements of feminist art, unacknowledged as such.’* (Cotter, H. 2007: 1) To the contrary, Janis Jeffries notes, *‘Yinka Shonibare for example says he could not make the work he does now without the history of feminist art practice and in this sense he acknowledges this history more than Emin.’* (Jefferies, J., interview via email, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2007) Finally, Linda Nochlin concludes, the recent emphasis on the body, the rejection of phallic control, the exploration of psychosexuality, the refusal of the perfect and the self-expressive, were all issues that were of concern to many feminist artists and that have consequently influenced the work of male artists. (Nochlin, L. 2006a: 28)

Feminist artists from the 1960s onwards, who in their work, curatorial projects and events, addressed the various aspects of femininity, undoubtedly opened up the space for works like those of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood, Gillian Wearing et al. The type of explorations made and initiated by these artists, whilst consistently nominated as marginal, according to Heidi Reitmaier, introduced novel forms of materials and methods of articulation of the body and sexuality to the cultural consciousness. Even more, *‘...it established a visual rhetoric of image-making and a certain form of status for women artists.’* (Reitmaier, H. 1998: 117) Some of the works she explains, *‘...were unnerving to the degree that some people were literally left speechless...’* and some could not even be spoken of in terms of art, only in terms of political intervention.



(Reitmaier, H. 1998: 123) Therefore, by introducing viewers and institutions to art works that to a certain extent had never been seen before, either in form or content, one could propose that feminist artists conditioned and perhaps subdued the resistance of recipients in such a way, that it is possible for a neon sign “Is Anal Sex Legal”, produced by Tracey Emin, to find its place in her own exhibition room in an established institution such as the Tate, without an uproar of its members and visitors.

Nevertheless, some key questions remain. Why are women artists still not more canonised and why do they still face discrimination in the art world? Judy Chicago proposes the answer, *‘I am afraid that the answer is that the continued erasure of women’s art- through neglect, misunderstanding and the absence of a context in which it can be fully understood, as well as outright discrimination - still confines too much of women’s art to the margins rather than the museums of the world.’* (Chicago, J./ Lucie-Smith, E. 1998: 14) In that sense it becomes even more important to contextualise the work of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing within a feminist art historical heritage, even if this only means acknowledging the achievements and the foundations feminist artists have provided contemporary female artists with.

Moreover Judy Chicago, summarising the achievements of feminist artists, stresses the need for further actions: *‘Feminist theory has evolved into a formidable body of intellectual challenges to traditional thought; and women artists all over the world have internalized the freedom that female artists of my generation fought so hard to acquire. As a result, an enormous body of art by women of the past has emerged from the shadows of history through the scholarship of countless feminist art historians. And new and exciting art by women is being created everywhere. Nevertheless, I receive innumerable letters from female students and, when I lecture at universities in various parts of the world, often hear stories that repeat the same complaint. Too many educational and art institutions continue to present women’s work in a token way and, hence, young women are still being deprived of knowledge about what women before them thought, taught and created. Rather than inheriting a world made different by the infusion of oppositional ideas, new generations of women are experiencing the same*

*identity problems that motivated my own search for a female history and for images which affirmed rather than negated my existence.* ' (Chicago, J./ Lucie-Smith, E. 1998: 14)

Accordingly, Amelia Jones rightly adds, that to discuss feminism today as post-feminism, would render it as being exhausted and subsumed under all the other different "posts" with which we live. She further warns that feminism today tends to be somehow conflated within consumerism and runs the risk of being re-appropriated within the male domain of art criticism. (Jones, A. 2006: 60) As Kate Walker argues '*...the male system - a patriarchal system - still interprets history through its own patriarchal light.*' (Walker, K., interview by Kathy Battista, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2001) Consequently, this might lead to feminism in art being discussed once again with the same traditional patriarchal language that was always used to create traditional art historical narratives. Instead of calling these narratives into question, one might end up in the same trap of replacing one system of exclusion with another. As Marcia Tucker puts it '*...substituting women's power for men's.*' (Tucker, M. 2006: 117) Also feminism and its urge to empower women has been appropriated these days not only by the popular culture and advertisement industry, who depict a highly commercial and sexualised idea of women in power, but also by museums and their "token" women. These appropriations elude the fact that the situation for women might not have changed as considerably as often suggested.

In that sense, it might not seem too far-fetched to question the motivation behind the British Council's choice of Tracey Emin to represent Great Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2007, for example. Katy Deepwell suspects "tokenism" and "political correctness". Emin is not only at the end of a very short line of only four female artists since 1950<sup>289</sup> (and it can be considered as high time for finally choosing another *woman* artist), but also she has been chosen only after established artists such as Gilbert & George and works from minority artists such as Chris Ofili, have been exhausted.

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<sup>289</sup> The other ones were Barbara Hepworth, Bridget Riley and Rachel Whiteread. For more information please see: [http://www.britishcouncil.org/biennale/pages/venice\\_biennale.html](http://www.britishcouncil.org/biennale/pages/venice_biennale.html), accessed 3.3.2007

(Deepwell, K., personal interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2007) Furthermore, as Rosa Martinez wonders, why it had to be *two* women (Rosa Martinez and Maria de Corral) instead of *one* male curator who were finally chosen as directors in 2005 - after one hundred and ten years of exclusively single male curators in the history of the Venice Biennale - and the one appointed for 2007 being once again a man?<sup>290</sup> *'Does this mean...'*, as she derisively probes, *'...that two women make the work of one man?'* And she concludes *'Certainly for the institutionalized male power structure this seems to be true.'* (Interview: Deepwell, K. 2006: 8)

Maura Reilly, who together with Linda Nochlin were the curators of "Global Feminisms" at the Brooklyn Museum in New York in spring 2007 (one of two feminist surveys<sup>291</sup>, that focus on the women's art movement), sees the problem of museums not acknowledging women artists/ curators and the feminist art movement, as due to the "hidden" sexism that is still prevailing in art institutions of all sorts. *'Sexism is still so insidiously woven into the institutional fabric, language, and logic of the mainstream art world that it often goes undetected....People are saying "women artists are doing great, we've come so far." My answer to that is: Bullshit. Look at the price differentials between male and female artists, ratios in museums, galleries, and within the thematic and national exhibitions. For instance look at the fourth and fifth floors of MOMA: only 4% of the works on view are by women - and that's after its 2004 reinstallation!'* (Maura Reilly quoted in Reckitt, H. 2006: 40)

Martha Rosler argues that even though there are many young women exploring a career in the art world, once they reach a certain age their appeal to exhibitors drops and they *'...lose their sexual hold but gain a different kind of gendered power, presumably that of the virago.'* (Rosler, M. 2006a: 137) And Connie Butler concurs *'It's almost as if*

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<sup>290</sup> The Biennale is not the only prestigious international exhibition that "rarely" invited women curators: in the fifty-year history of Documenta, the most widely recognised international contemporary exhibition, held every five years in Kassel, Germany, only once has a woman been asked to organise the exhibition. (Catherine David in 1997) For more information please see: Reilly, M. (2007) "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms", in: Brooklyn Museum Global Feminisms; New Directions in Contemporary Art, Merrell Publishers Limited, London, New York, p.19

<sup>291</sup> The other major exhibition this spring (2007) is "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" at LA MOCA, curated by Connie Butler.

*museum people are allergic to feminism ...I can't tell you how many times people asked me: "What are you going to do with all that ugly art?" - by which I am sure they meant sexually explicit material.* ' (Connie Butler quoted in Reckitt, H. 2006: 41) Overall, Rosler summarises that as feminist artists, we '*...have outworn our welcome.*' (Rosler, M. 2006a: 137)

Looking at the above statements, it appears to be the fact, that for the predominantly male chauvinist directors of museums and other leading institutions, the idea of "female only" exhibitions is incomprehensible and the inclusion of male artists somewhat "guarantees" for them a certain level of "excellence", that an exhibition usually requires. Rosler also observes that most women's exhibitions are curated by women. (Rosler, M. 2006a: 137) In Great Britain, in comparison to the States, the situation is even more aggravated and as Kate Walker argues, times appear to be not yet ready for a renewed interest in feminist art, because the society is older '*...and under cover of a surface liberalism is an immensely rigid and conservative society. The establishment witnesses the current art systems, which reinforce each other and make fame. They are of a certain class level and status, and economic level, to create what is in effect a rigid establishment. And the same goes for the art world as for the houses of parliament. It's fairly solid all the way through and immensely resistant to change.*' (Walker, K., interview by Kathy Battista, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2001)

Nevertheless, what the feminist art movement undoubtedly achieved was to raise women's consciousness about their position and role in society. However, it appears that the situation is different when men are taken into account. "Women's art for women" was one of the slogans for feminist artists and men were somehow tolerated but not really targeted. These days men are still not really encouraged to be involved in feminist art debates and for instance "n.paradoxa", one of the last feminist art journals in Great Britain does not even consider articles submitted by men for publishing, should there be any. (Deepwell, K., personal interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2007) Looking at some of the male attitudes in the art environment, it appears that they do not understand the real issues that feminist art was and is concerned with and perhaps they wonder what the

whole “fuss” was about. Maybe, even worse, they never took feminist art seriously and thought “let them rebel a bit- they will eventually get over it and mature”, not seeing how serious most women’s issues really were and are.

Therefore, it is high time to include those men who thought or still think that the concerns raised by a previous generation of feminist artists might only be relevant to women and perhaps start raising *their male* consciousness by pointing out that many of these issues are more than relevant for men as well. This might lead to a new understanding in which men realise that role expectations and role plays in society for instance, or the question of “true” identities and the possibility of plural subjectivities, are not only relevant to women but might be seen as libratory interrogations into the role expectations of male individuals as well. Maybe, it is time to focus a bit more on men and help them understand what feminist art is really about. Maybe they need a different approach to make feminist art accessible to them. Perhaps they should be more confronted with feminist ideas at an early stage of their education, i.e. in schools and universities. Maybe we have to rethink how exhibitions are put together and curated. Perhaps, it is time to step away from the usual chronological approach used in curatorial projects, which are based on timelines and are therefore much more subject to the patriarchal narrative of art history that traditionally privileges male artists? Perhaps we should follow a much more content-based style where differing approaches to the same subject matter by female and male artists, could be collated under one roof, not to dissociate, but to supplement each other?

Yet while pursuing this goal, as already stressed at the end of chapter 3, it is imperative to step away from the traditional polarisation of feminist art as the “exotic” other. The aim should be much more to bring women’s art into the mainstream and to discuss feminist issues comfortably together with other possible viewpoints, without confining them solely within those parameters, as has been traditionally done. Finally, one could argue that, besides keeping feminist art debates alive, another long overdue objective should be, to get more men interested in art by women and in so doing, this might ultimately help to improve their understanding of women and their experiences and



perhaps broaden their views of what constitutes the human experience. A start could possibly be detected in the joint publication of Judy Chicago's and Edward Lucie-Smith's book "Women and Art; Contested Territory" which illuminates issues in art history that have been tackled by men and women alike, with both writers giving their respective views on this. (Chicago, J./ Lucie-Smith, E. 1998)

However negative some of the views above might appear, in all fairness it has to be noted that there have been efforts made by some institutions, even if not exactly on an overall level, to either recognise the achievements of the feminist art movement in major exhibitions such as "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution" and "Global Feminisms"<sup>292</sup>, or to celebrate the success of contemporary women artists as at the annual "Emerging Women Filmmakers" festival "Birds Eye View" (8-14<sup>th</sup> March 2007), for instance.<sup>293</sup> Additionally, it is interesting to note that some colleges once again seem to recognise the importance of gender issues, for instance Goldsmiths College, which will be running a new MA course in Gender and Culture from September 2007 onwards. However, on a broader spectrum this cannot be said for most of the universities, colleges and other art institutions in Great Britain, where women's issues are widely omitted. (Deepwell, K., personal interview, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2007)

Perhaps, next to the important specialised courses on gender studies, feminism, or queer theory, one possible way forward could be to incorporate feminism on a regular basis into other courses and disciplines and in so doing expose women and men alike to some obligatory feminist consciousness raising. This might ultimately lead to a new

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<sup>292</sup> Ironically, from the three artists discussed throughout this thesis, Tracey Emin and Sam Taylor-Wood are both included in "Global Feminisms", while Gillian Wearing is not. This is surprising particularly in Emin's case, as she appears to be the most oppositional one when it comes to linking her work to feminism. Nevertheless, she is the one artist of the three who repeatedly participates in actions that are most obviously linked to feminist issues. To be reminded here once more: Her documentary "Art Shock: What Price Art?", on: Channel 4, Wednesday 15th March 2006, 23.05-00.05, her participation together with the "Guerrilla Girls" in Amnesty International's exhibition "Stop Violence Against Women" at the Oxo tower, London in October 2005 and now her representation in "Global Feminisms" give a strong impression of the extent of her involvement in feminist issues. Therefore, it is difficult to understand where the problem lies for her, as an established artist to answer questions that might want to link her work to a feminist legacy.

<sup>293</sup> For more information on that festival please see: <http://www.birds-eye-view.co.uk>, accessed 6.3.2007

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understanding and reconsideration of perspectives, which have traditionally universalised the concepts and ideas of male art. In reality, these standpoints are based on views shaped and limited by male experiences and grounded in the privilege of being male in a male-dominated world. The zenith might be reached one day when it will be possible to discuss women's and men's art not as oppositional approaches, but from a new point of departure where both sides know and understand each other's differing art historical contexts and experiences and equally start to appreciate one another's work.<sup>294</sup>

By introducing into culture another symbolic signifier, the legibility of the feminine in art works, to stand beside the phallus which is the signifier of difference and division in terms of absence and loss, Griselda Pollock envisions the invisible '*...feminine bodily specificity...*' to be allowed to enter and realign aspects of our consciousness and unconsciousness. She argues that a '*feminist theorization is not an alternative in opposition to the phallus; rather, the opening up of the symbolic field to extended possibilities which, in a nonphallic logic, do not need to displace the other to be.*' (Griselda Pollock quoted in Zegher de, C. 2006: xvii) However, as Molly Nesbit rightly questions, '*Is it not time to consider just how the feminist releases the paternal tradition? Can we, as feminists, see how to acknowledge and use the treasure of men?*' (Nesbit, M. 2006: 126)

In other words, by elevating feminist debates beyond engendered body politics to a level past that of the binary oppositions and counter-positioning engendered in so much feminist discussion, hopefully in future, the understanding of artistic practices will be extended and reshaped in a way that allows men and women equally to understand their mutual artworks in a different way to the historically patriarchal model of interpretation and that, as Catherine de Zegher predicts, '*...it will be possible to "degender" and*

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<sup>294</sup> A notable example here is for instance Jeremy Strick, the director of The Museum of Contemporary Art, in Los Angeles who accommodates the "Wack! Art and The Feminist Revolution" in "his" museum and who acknowledges the importance of the feminist art movement as one of the most important social movements of the last century. For more information, please see his foreword in Butler, C. (2007) Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, pp.7/8

*“deracialize” difference, and to think in positive, nonreifying terms.*’ (Zegher de, C. 2006: xix) At of the day, the aim should be, as Martha Rosler so rightly puts it, *‘...whether we are women or men, problematizing the signifiers in everyday life should remain near the heart of our efforts.*’ (Rosler, M. 2006b: 106)

We are living in times where some might see demise in the achievements of the feminist art movement and a return, as Linda Nochlin fears, to the traditional unspoken masculine dominance in the art world. (Nochlin, L. 2006a: 31) Others live under the fictitious impression that a discrimination against women artists no longer exists and that the position of women artists has improved to such an extent that feminist strategies can be abandoned, which according to Martha Rosler, *‘...would be both preliminary and dangerous.*’ (Rosler, M. 2006b: 107) True equality is still wishful thinking and as Linda Nochlin points out, *‘...this is a critical moment for feminism and women’s place in the art world. Now, more than ever, we need to be aware not only of our achievements but of the dangers and difficulties lying in the future. We still need all our wit and courage to make sure that women’s voices are heard, their work seen and written about. That is our task for the future.*’ (Nochlin, L. 2006a: 31)

The future for feminism in art is certainly difficult to predict. While some, as already debated, raise their hopes that Great Britain might eventually follow into the footsteps of the United States in their great revival and commemoration of feminist art and its history, or so it seems, others have already come to terms with its slow demise. Looking at the Venice Biennale 2005 it becomes clear that feminist art and its development differs greatly, not only in its timeline, but also geographically. Feminists from all over the world, especially from the post-colonial countries might have a vital contribution to make in future, to a more globally orientated feminism in art. Today’s real time news, be it through the internet or other available channels such as mobile phones, make it clear that there is a need for feminism not only here, but also globally. Today, women

are still oppressed in many parts of this world and in some places, their situations are getting worse.<sup>295</sup>

What is different today from the situation in the 1960s and 1970s is that, as Carol Duncan points out, '*...there is a living legacy of feminist thought and practice that is in the process of being accessed by women in scores of languages and cultures...*', as one can readily see for instance in the form of "n.paradoxa", an online feminist art journal that focuses on feminist art beyond borders. (Duncan, C. 2006: 135) It might be our responsibility to keep the whole culture of feminism alive even if it is only to provide aspirations for women's self-determination in countries, where they still face massive adversities from their patriarchal oppressors. While feminism might be seen as nearing an end in some countries, in others feminism has just begun.

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<sup>295</sup> Rape and female war victims in area of conflicts spring to mind here. Alternatively, the horrendous result of the AIDS crisis in Africa is another example.

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