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The 'woman artist' as curatorial effect

Alexandra M. Kokoli

In Spring 2008 at the Pompidou Centre, I came across the following panel at the entrance of the room devoted to Minimal painting:

[...] The paintings of Martin Barré belong to a last series of 1992, the culmination of his work on colour, which he subjected to serial procedures. For Agnes Martin, her painting – **essentially** horizontal lines painted on canvases of uniform size (6ft x 6ft, reduced to 5ft x 5ft around 1995) – had **rather to do with expression or emotion**. Robert Ryman for his part exploits the pictorial possibilities of a few basic elements: the square, the colour white, with variations of technique and support. White, omnipresent in his work without it ever being subject or essence, is employed simply as a vehicle, having no ideological or symbolic connotation.¹

My immediate reaction was anger and exasperation. Sandwiched between two eminent male contemporaries, Agnes Martin's practice is first reduced to its form, which is not afforded the Modernist autonomy that it seems to have in Robert Ryman's case, only to be then explained away through a vague reference to psychological and, by extension, biographical content

¹English version of information panel in Room 8: Minimal Painting, Pompidou Centre, Paris; emphasis added.

supposedly conveyed through – and thus actually subjugating – her art. In a single sentence and in carefully chosen company whose (sexual) difference throws her own into relief, the curators produce a convenient postfeminist entity: the **woman** artist.

My aim in this chapter is to nuance, reflect on and test this first reaction without altogether abandoning it. The 'woman artist' has already had a long and contested presence in feminist art historical, critical and theoretical discussions and it is against this background that the contribution of mainstream curating (affiliated with major galleries and museums) will be discussed. (Auto-)biographism holds particular dangers for the reception of artists who are women, especially when the channels through which audiences encounter their work are not shaped by feminist critique. And yet, rather than deliberately ignoring feminist interventions in art history and theory, I argue that such curatorial practice often attempts to take on board feminist insights but sometimes falls short as the result of different pressures, not least that of reaching – and pleasing – as wide an audience as possible. The prominence of (auto-)biographism in the representation of artists who are women is a symptom of an ongoing dialogue as well as its breakdowns between feminist aesthetic-political thought and mainstream curatorial practice. A close reading of the retrospective *Tracey Emin: 20 years* will illustrate the outcomes of one such representative dialogue.

While it is now a truism that the history of modern and postmodern art is a history of exhibitions, the impact of curatorial practice on the

dissemination, reception and interpretation of the work of specifically women artists has also begun to be examined. Alongside art historical discourses, Ruth Hemus examines the role of structural layout, information panels and audio guides in the large-scale 'Dada' exhibition (National Gallery of Art, Washington, and travelling, 2005-2006) in challenging and confirming the long-established exclusion of women from the Dada canon. Hemus discovers how even minor variations in layout and the translation of the panel texts change the gender politics of this travelling show. The exhibition's greatest breakthrough comes in the content of the commentaries: 'Rather than focusing only on biographical details or thematic concerns – as so often happens in reductive accounts of women's work – they consistently encompass formal concerns too. In two cases, [they] explicitly tackle gender'.² Through a close reading of the 'blockbuster retrospectives' of Tamara de Lempicka and Frida Kahlo, hosted by the Royal Academy of Arts (2004) and Tate Modern (2005) respectively, Joanne Heath explores a persistent paradox: while the stated aim of both shows was to restore these two women artists to the canon, they both fail to make a break with the monographic, chronological model and nearly exclusive emphasis on (*a priori* defined) aesthetic qualities that have been responsible for their exclusion in the first place. In Kahlo's case, the proliferation of 'Frida'-inspired merchandise combined with the release of a Hollywood biopic starring Salma Hayek in 2002 also

² Ruth Hemus, 'Why have there been no great women Dadaists?', in Alexandra Kokoli (ed.), *Feminism Reframed: Reflections on Art and Difference* (Newcastle, 2008) 56. See also R. Hemus, *Dada's Women* (New Haven, 2010).

contributed towards the derailment of curatorial good intentions into an often salacious and always overwhelming emphasis on the artist's eventful life in the critical reception of the show. I personally recall that upon exiting the exhibition, visitors were invited to take part in a competition to win a trip to 'Frida's' Mexico. This may have been a concession to a sponsor, seemingly unobtrusive and innocuous, yet it made a particularly problematic conflation between woman, land, national symbols and myths, while also commodifying Kahlo's oeuvre by implicating it in tourist fantasies of exotic destinations (Kahlo of course isn't Mexico, just like Tracey Emin cannot possibly '[be] pure Margate'³). Heath concludes that despite a commendable attempt to acknowledge the contributions of two worthy artists, neglected by major public art institutions if not the public, 'it would [...] seem that their inclusion in the museum has been contingent upon a more or less explicit exclusion of feminism.'⁴ The category of the 'woman artist' is always risky and open to misinterpretation and misuse, liable to reproduce the very gender biases that the work of women artists aims to challenge. With the exclusion of feminism's contribution, this risk becomes a certainty.

For the purposes of this chapter, curating is considered as a cluster of practices that include not only the management of art collections and the selection and hang of exhibitions but also all textual and

³WaldemarJanuszczak, 'We've seen her drunk and shouting the odds. But Tracey Emin's new work is the biggest shock of all: it shows vision'. *The Sunday Times Culture Magazine*, 6 May (2001): 10–11.

⁴ Joanne Heath, 'Women Artists, Feminism and the Museum: Beyond the Blockbuster Retrospective', *Feminism Reframed*, p. 33.

audiovisual accompaniments and commentaries on collections and shows, from exhibition panels and pamphlets to audio guides and catalogues. In this sense, curating might exceed the role of the curator to include the contributions of a variety of other art professionals as well as artists, their representatives or their estates. In any case, the remit and occupation of (especially) contemporary curators has been famously difficult to define: interestingly, Anne d'Harnoncourt's suggestion that aspiring curators should endeavour to simply 'be with art'⁵ evokes an unmediated communion between curator and artwork, free from contextual considerations, theoretical debates and critical practice, in which working curators are inevitably deeply embroiled. Fundraising and sponsorship are also in the mix, not least thanks to the sponsors' visual presence in exhibition spaces, on websites and printed materials, and the connotations they carry for visitors. In the present discussion, the complexity and impurity of curating is restored, or rather accepted. To quote feminist curator and writer Lucy Lippard, 'I never liked the either/or part'.⁶ This simple yet deep pronouncement infuses every aspect of my argument: even the most established and perhaps constitutionally conservative of art institutions can no longer afford to (be seen to) completely disregard feminist art history and theorisations of the visual. Nevertheless, the uptake of feminist insights has been partial at best, with sometimes confused and confusing or even altogether counterproductive results.

⁵Quoted in Christophe Cherix, 'Preface', Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich and Dijon, 2008) 4.

⁶'Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist with Lucy Lippard', in Obrist, *A Brief History*, 222.

Whether and how this situation can be rectified is the question that this chapter culminates in; addressing it is the responsibility of future curatorial practice.

The Gendered Dangers of (Auto)biographism

What is so wrong with the Pompidou introductory panel to Minimalist painting? It does, after all, attempt to acknowledge Agnes Martin's difference from her male contemporaries, a difference that has been repeatedly noted and whose importance has been defended by feminist art historians. The problem here is that this difference is cast in the most gender stereotypical terms. It merely comes across as feminine, as opposed to drawing on the feminist construct of *le féminin*, which encompasses a positional liminality as well as the potential for revolutionary change.⁷ Anna Chave articulates Martin's difference in terms of both gender and sexuality: her grids, she claims, represent 'an excess of conformity amounting to non-conformity', achieving an inscription of feminine lesbian identity.⁸ For Rosalind Krauss, Martin's works are not 'crypto-landscapes', despite their titles (*Flower in the Wind; The Beach; Earth; Happy Valley*), but an exploration/experimentation through drawing of the possibility of landscape, 'an attempt to grasp the logical

⁷Toril Moi, 'Feminist, Female, Feminine', in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds.), *The Feminist Reader*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: 1997), 104-116.

⁸Anna C. Chave, *Agnes Martin: On and Off the Grid* (Ann Arbor: 2004), cited in Brendan Prendeville, 'The Meanings of Acts: Agnes Martin and the Making of Americans', *Oxford Art Journal*, 31.1 (2008) 51-52.

conditions of vision [...] infected by the tactile.⁹ Griselda Pollock approaches Martin's 'shimmering' grids ('I cannot keep paint and ground from merging and dissolving') as platforms for trans-subjective encounters that 'make us see seeing'.¹⁰ What is at stake for Pollock is to 'give this work a relation to sexual difference at a level far removed from reference and deeply related to structure'.¹¹ The stereotypical subtext of the Pompidou information panel could not be further removed from this ambition. It does not simply come across as sexist but impoverishes the range of Martin's possible interpretations, compromising the richness of her work and Minimalist painting alike.

The 'woman artist' is obviously not the exclusive postfeminist product of contemporary curating, nor even the invention of second-wave feminist thought. It has a long and intricate history that should not be plucked away from existing accounts of the history of art, as this would obscure 'the dialectical relationship of women artists to the dominant definitions of the artist.' This changing relationship has historically involved the casting of women artists as homebound amateurs, the conflation of their artistic merit with their personal attractiveness and their perception as creative exceptions to the procreative inclinations of their gender.¹² Assumptions about the 'feminine nature' and individual lives of

⁹ Rosalind Krauss, 'Agnes Martin: The / Cloud /', *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA: 1999) 88-89.

¹⁰ Griselda Pollock, 'Agnes Dreaming: Dreaming Agnes', in Catherine de Zegher and HendelTeicher (eds.), *3 x An Abstraction* (New York: 2005), 172.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹² Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses* (London: 1981), esp. chapters 2 and 3.

artists who are women have been instrumental in the development of the 'woman artist':

Whereas Vasari used the device of biography to individualise and mythify the works of artistic men, the same device has a profoundly different effect when applied to women. The details of a man's biography are conveyed as the measure of the 'universal', applicable to all mankind; in the male genius, they are simply heightened and intensified. In contrast, the details of a woman's biography are used to underscore the idea that she is an exception; they apply only to make her an interesting case. Her art is reduced to a visual record of her personal and psychological make up.¹³

This isn't the worst case scenario: biographism can and has also been used to trivialise the work of women artists or simply divert attention away from it. In the case of feminist heroine Artemisia Gentileschi, whose life story (or rather sensationalised versions thereof) have captivated the public imagination in the past few decades, autobiographical interpretations have more often than not overwhelmed, obfuscated and hollowed out her considerable oeuvre, both in terms of quantity and significance. MiekeBal suspends 'Gentileschi' in quotation marks to distinguish between the inflated fabrication of the last few decades and the painter who lived and worked in 17th century Italy.¹⁴ An art historical emphasis on biography, Pollock maintains, binds art 'on to the Western bourgeois notion of the individual [...] Biography, moreover, can never be a substitute for history.' Personal experience and self-perception are

¹³ Nanette Salomon, 'The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission', in Joan Hartmann and Ellen Messer-Davidow (eds.), *(En)gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe* (Knoxville:1991), p. 229. See also Salomon, 'Judging Artemisia: A Baroque Woman in Modern Art History', in MiekeBal ed., *The ArtemisiaFiles* (Chicago: 2005), 33-61.

¹⁴Bal, 'Introduction', *The Artemisia Files*, p. ix.

always mediated by wider social forces.¹⁵ In misrecognising this, even feminist attempts to validate and celebrate female artists miss the major feminist insight that the personal is – and must be shown to be – cultural and political. Thus, Gentileschi's numerous variations on the Biblical scene of Judith slaying Holofernes should not be read as code for her personal feelings of revenge against the fellow painter who raped her. Instead:

'Judith' could become a means to structure a desire for a certain kind of artistic identity, that of an active woman who can make art, make herself in that action of entering representation [...], a castrating representation that is not a representation of castration.¹⁶

Anne Wagner's *Three Artists [Three Women]*, a decisive feminist intervention in the historiography of modernism, makes a clear case for the retention of the concept of the 'woman artist', despite the obvious dangers of ghettoisation and special pleading, at least for as long as gender continues to register as a shaping condition in private and public life. The social and professional identities of the three women artists under consideration, Georgia O'Keeffe, Lee Krasner and Eva Hesse, have been inextricably entwined in the production and reception of their art and have had a shaping influence on their careers. Despite Wagner's assertive defence of the term 'woman artist', especially in the mid-1990s when feminism seemed 'so well established, maybe even old hat' (let alone now),¹⁷ it is imperative to stress that, in this sober account, the marker of

¹⁵Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon* (London:1999), p. 107.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 123.

¹⁷ Anne Wagner, *Three Artists [Three Women]* (Berkeley: 1996) 4.

gender is not offered as a platform for celebratory identity politics, not even as the material, real-world tether for a revolutionary poetics in the name of the feminine. The 'woman artist' remains a useful category due to necessity, because in social and cultural contexts gender matters, as in art, whether it is a claimed, avoided or imposed identification. And yet Wagner's three case studies:

may be representative, yes – but they do not mirror anything much. Nor does their art. Least of all do they reflect 'Woman' – or even 'women'. My treatment of them, by contrast, demonstrates the conviction that just as images are not transparent to social identity (or anything else), neither are people.¹⁸

The assumption of transparency of artworks and their makers (to identity or anything else) could prove the ultimate form of symbolic violence against – usually women – artists. Both the oeuvre and person of Tracey Emin have widely been assumed to be transparent, even though 'her work both mimics and questions the notion of autobiography's authenticity'.¹⁹ The installation *My Bed* (1998) originally provoked reactions of disgust at the personal habits and indiscretions of Emin the woman, as if it weren't art at all. For this reason, a recent Emin exhibition has been chosen as a case study for how curatorial practice makes and loses its way in the minefield of definitions, debates and desires sketched out above.

¹⁸Ibid., 26.

¹⁹ Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, 'Introduction: Mapping Women's Self-Representation as Visual/Textual Interfaces', in Smith and Watson (eds.), *Interfaces* (Ann Arbor: 2002), p. 4.

Tracey Emin's second major retrospective

Tracey Emin's career is riddled with contradictions. One of the few contemporary artists to have become a household name, Emin has achieved considerable success and recognition in both commercial and institutional terms. Her growing success, however, does not appear to have tempered a trend of casual derision for both the woman artist and her art, usually making no distinction between the two, in public discourses in and beyond the art world. Even most of her art critic fans have been inclined to collapse Emin's art and life, attributing any attraction her work holds for the public to the latter's perverse curiosity and voyeurism, honed by reality television. Branded by Julian Stallabrass as a 'postmodern primitive',²⁰ Emin cannot be taken to represent 'women artists' in general, let alone 'Woman', not least because the intersectional specificity of her identity has been too widely signposted to be missed: she is the child of a Turkish Cypriot businessman and an English mother, conceived while both her parents were married to other people; she is not bashful about her sexual appetite and has a sexual history that involves abuse, rape and botched abortions; she is working-class with an interrupted educational career and persistently refuses to put on airs and graces, sometimes even playing down her knowledge and intellectual ability, in a world where image-consciousness and style matter

²⁰ Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, revised and expanded edition (London: 2006), p. 39. See also Alexandra Kokoli, 'On Probation: "Tracey Emin" as Sign', *Wasafiri*, 25.1 (March 2010): 33-40.

enormously. It has been suggested that her simulation of naivety constitutes an exemplary case of purposeful self-presentation but, if this is so, it's not one that has always served her well:

Like last week in a newspaper, I was accused of being intellectually inept. I know I'm not. [...] Sometimes I imagine I'll be an old lady, surrounded by all my newspaper clippings pasted up on the walls like wallpaper, and when I die that's what I'll leave behind.²¹

Albeit far from 'Everywoman', as David Littleton described her in 1993,²² the meanings and connotations that 'Tracey Emin' has acquired in public discourse are heavily contingent on her gender. In contrast and as an antidote to her popular art critical reception, a body of mainly feminist art historical and theoretical writing has been in development over the past decade. This does not simply reclaim Emin as an artist (as opposed to a canny self-promoter, an eccentric, an exhibitionist) but works through and makes sense of the 'Emin' files as documents of cultural significance about the place of the 'woman artist' but also of art itself in contemporary British culture.²³

In name at least, *Tracey Emin: 20 years* (Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 2008) was not the artist's first retrospective. Her first ever

²¹ 'Quite a Performance', conversation with Carl Freedman, in T. Emin, *Tracey Emin: Works, 1963-2006* (New York: 2006), 167.

²² David Littleton, 'Private View', *Time Out*, 1-8 December 1993, cited in Patrick Elliott, 'Becoming Tracey Emin', *Tracey Emin: 20 years* (Edinburgh: 2008), 25.

²³ See the whole of the collection Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (eds.), *The Art of Tracey Emin* (London: 2002) and Christine Fanthome, 'The influence and treatment of autobiography in confessional art: Observations on Tracey Emin's feature film *Top Spot Biography* 29.1 (Winter 2006): 30-42; and Fanthome, 'Articulating authenticity through artifice: The contemporary relevance of Tracey Emin's confessional art', *Social Semiotics* 18.2 (June 2008): 223-236.

one-person show, held at the White Cube gallery in 1993 at Jay Jopling's invitation, was provocatively titled 'My Major Retrospective 1963-1993'. Simultaneously betraying ego (a major retrospective at the age of 30 being a tall order for an artist who had yet to find her way) and diffidence (Emin believed at the time that this would be her only ever show), the title of the exhibition introduces a duality that has informed the rest of Emin's career. The show also launched the persistent trend in art critical interpretation of her work that collapses her art and life (1963 being the year of Emin's birth), and casts her as an unlikely woman artist at best, if one at all. In his catalogue essay for *20 Years*, curator Patrick Elliott notes that even by the time that Jopling reserved a slot for her White Cube show, 'it appears that [he] was unaware that Emin had been to art college or made art: she was still known as [Sarah] Lucas's crazy sidekick who wrote weird letters.'²⁴ Writing on Emin's first 'retrospective' and its reception, Rosemary Betterton notes how the '*faux-naif* rhetoric' of its reviewers, dazzled by the 'rawness' of the content and the perceived honesty of its outsider maker, served to conceal the show's formal sophistication, neglecting how its media and processes laid the foundations for a poetics of memory.

Emin's monoprints, such as *Beautiful Child* (1999) are drawn directly onto the plate so that they have both the vivid immediacy of the direct trace of her hand and, through the technical procedure of reversal in the printing process, also articulate a sense of otherness,

²⁴Elliott, 'Becoming Tracey Emin', p. 24. Gregor Muir's anecdotal history of the 'young British artists', *Lucky Kunst* (London: 2009), confirms this perception of Emin in the early 1990s, 62-67.

of that which is familiar having become strange. The vulnerability of the child's naked body, threatened by the enormous penis that leans towards her, is rendered with a slight delicacy that both touches and distances, like fragile traces of memory.²⁵

Other than some financial support from the Henry Moore Foundation, *Tracey Emin: 20 years* failed to secure a business sponsor, to the astonishment of Simon Groom, director of Modern and Contemporary Art, National Galleries of Scotland.²⁶ Although no official interpretation of this disappointment has been offered to my knowledge, it would be safe to assume that the widespread associations of Emin's art with sex, debauchery and a specifically feminine bodily abjection, signposted but not limited to her works on abortion which were heavily represented in the show, scared off potential sponsors, even though *20 years* formed part of the Edinburgh Festival, which isn't known for its wholesomeness. While the hang of the show appears to confirm wilfully naïve interpretations of Emin that see little more in her art than the earnest outpourings of a troubled soul, the catalogue seeks to restore some critical credibility in the artist herself and her work and make a pivotal intervention in its reception. As with most retrospectives, this mid-career one aspires to be a turning point for 'Tracey Emin' by lifting its confining quotation marks and stimulating a renewal of interest in the artist as artist. I would argue that it self-consciously reprises the first 'retrospective', even if it doesn't

²⁵ Rosemary Betterton, 'Why is my art not as good as me? Femininity, Feminism and "Life Drawing" in Tracey Emin's Art', *The Art of Tracey Emin*, p. 27.

²⁶ 'No Sponsor for Emin Art Show', *The Edinburgh Evening News*, 22 April 2008, <http://edinburghnews.scotsman.com/edinburgh/No-sponsor-for-Emin-art.4005917.jp#comment2746522>, last accessed January 12 2012.

reference it directly – the word ‘retrospective’ doesn’t appear in its title: returning to where it all began to take stock but also, to a degree, to correct misunderstandings, or even injustices. Reviewers were divided, not just between positive and negative but within themselves. Faced with the long-avoided task of providing a serious evaluation of Emin’s oeuvre, newspaper critics dithered, some retreated to the familiar – recounting yet again the artist’s past ‘antics’, with Alastair Sooke concluding that ‘Emin’ is ‘her most successful work of art’,²⁷ while Jonathan Jones’s mixed feelings culminated in a more complex assessment that refused to take the work’s famous directness at face value:

Emin presents herself as an emotional artist, but her real strength is intellectual: she confuses art and life in a way that is profound, philosophical and has a core of greatness.²⁸

In parts, at least, the hang of the exhibition did not encourage a similar complexity. The visitor was ushered through a corridor lined with a series of 80 Polaroid self-portraits commissioned by *Parkett* in 2001. Forced to lean into the small frames, many of which are overexposed and most of which capture the artist’s body in fragments and at odd angles, a consequence of the camera being held at arm’s length by the artist herself, the visitor was given an intimate introduction not simply to the

²⁷Alastair Sooke, ‘Tracey Emin, Dirty Sheets and All’, telegraph.co.uk, 5 August 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2008/08/05/baemin105.xml>, last accessed January 12 2012.

²⁸ Jonathan Jones, ‘Tracey was here’, The Guardian, 5 August 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2008/aug/05/edinburghfestival.art>, last accessed January 12 2012

show's author but to its main attraction. The visitor was also instructed into a mode of looking that is prying, voyeuristic, content-driven, and that created the illusion of a one-to-one encounter: in order to see clearly, each viewer had to approach each frame one by one, so closely as to momentarily lose their peripheral vision and, with it, any awareness of the busy gallery around them. Grouped together on the page, originally in *Parkett* and reproduced in the catalogue, the Polaroids acquired a different meaning. Showing the artist (un)dressed in a black lacy bra and gold jewellery with her eyes closed tight, this series of framed body fragments placed side by side bring to mind film stills and evoke classical feminist critiques of the gendered gaze. In these Polaroids, however, artist and model become one again, as in the performance *Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made* and *Naked Photos: Life Model Goes Mad* (both 1996). This reprise of a second-wave feminist analysis of the visual retains some of the latter's polemic but is also transformed into a slightly eerie meditation on broader questions about the ontological and psychical (or psychic?) function of the field of vision and its implications for the subject. There is a suggestion here of 'the pre-existence of a gaze', as Lacan put it, or the separation between the eye and the gaze: it is the power of the camera to capture rather than see, compiled by the subject's refusal to look, that highlights the subject's fundamental condition: although 'I [may] see only from one point [...] in my existence I am looked at from all sides.'²⁹ But there is no need to over-intellectualise a work whose intricacy

²⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan

is only lost in this particular installation. Rather than exposing the artist/model, the *Parkett* Polaroids explore (over)exposure in a knowing way.

Curated by Patrick Elliott, the retrospective brings together most of Emin's better known works, such as the appliqué armchair (*There's a Lot of Money in Chairs*, 1994), which was also used in her tour of America to perform readings from her first ever volume of autobiographical writing, *Exploration of the Soul*; the notorious *My Bed* (1998); appliqué blankets, including *Mad Tracey from Margate: Everyone's Been There* (1997); assemblages of memorabilia, like *Uncle Colin* (1963-93); neon signs; some recent paintings made for her Venice Biennale show in 2007; sculptural works, like *It's Not the Way I Want to Die* (2005), a rickety rollercoaster, reportedly inspired by a dream about the one in Margate. Numerous works in different media around the theme of the artist's real-life abortions are included. Many monoprints are also here, old and recent, with the latter marking a departure from the thematic emphasis on the female body in bliss and disease:

The neo-Expressionist angst-woman with her legs spread open isn't what I want on my wall at the moment. But maybe sweet little birds drawn in my style would be really, really nice for the living room.³⁰

Sheridan (London:1998), 72.

³⁰Emin, interview with Matthew Sweet, *The Independent Magazine*, 2 November 2002; cited in Elliott, 'Becoming Tracey Emin', p. 31 and the information panel in Gallery 10: Bird Drawings, 'Tracey Emin: 20 years'.

Birds might not present as much of a radical shift away from woman as is suggested, nor are they necessarily a benevolent or more palatable alternative to her previous thematic concerns. Not only have they been a recurring theme in Emin's work but also resonate with the artist's own pre-history, the time of *The Shop* she kept with Sarah Lucas, when they took to calling themselves 'the birds'.³¹ One of their hand-made works was a pale green suit decorated with menacing appliquéd red birds and named 'TippiHedren' in honour of Alfred Hitchcock, illustrated in the catalogue.³² The video work *Conversation with My Mum* (2001), an uncomfortably in-depth exchange about motherhood dominated by ambivalence on both sides, is shown on a tiny monitor placed on top of a side-table that looks as if it were put together out of scrap wood. Only two sets of headphones and two children's chairs were provided, so that visitors had to wait their turn at busy times and watch crouched over, their physical discomfort mirroring the unease of the recorded conversation. The exhibition ends on a Neo-expressionist note with *Homage to Edvard Munch and All My Dead Children* (1998), a short looped film in which the image of a young woman coiled in fetal position, shot from above, is set against the soundtrack of an unbroken scream. Not a particularly strong work in itself, placed at the exit, next to the gift shop, *Homage* is not simply anticlimactic but also encourages a revisionist, biographical and sentimental re-reading of the whole exhibition, from which the visitor is led to pinpoint and privilege the most traumatic and confessional elements above all else.

³¹ Muir, *Lucky Kunst*, 65

³² Elliott, 'Becoming Tracey Emin', 24.

The curator's catalogue essay ends on a rather different note: '*I've got it all* shows Emin with her legs splayed open, shovelling money into her crotch (or maybe the cash is spewing out of her like a jackpot win)'.³³ The work, a four-feet by three-feet ink-jet photographic print is illustrated in the first pages of the catalogue, immediately after the artist's acknowledgements, as a thoroughly ironic celebration of female artistic success, challenging the assumption that Emin's work is 'lacking in irony'.³⁴ The picture references Emin's monoprints of fragile female figures with streaming orifices, not only in pose but, disturbingly, through the deep red colour of the floor. Yet it is also a reversal of them: loss turns into gain and grief becomes greed, or at least indulgence. Although also autobiographical, Peter Osborne argues that the work is best read as an exploration of 'the representational means and symbolic forms available to women in our society for self-fashioning'; *I've got it all* functions 'at the level of a cultural unconscious, rather than through any explicit system of art-historical or pop-cultural references.'³⁵

Elliott's catalogue contribution is thoroughly informed, informative, and from the perspective set out in this chapter, not free from contradictions. Predictably, it is biography-led, but also attempts to place Emin's output in art historical contexts, noting her interest in not just the Expressionists but also Byzantine and outsider art. More importantly, it includes some critical commentary not only on Emin's work but also its

³³ Elliott, 'Becoming Tracey Emin', 33.

³⁴ Elliott, 'Becoming Tracey Emin', 29.

³⁵ Peter Osborne, 'Greedy Kunst', Merck and Townsend (eds.), *The Art of Tracey Emin*: 48.

reception, noting that the White Cube's press release for the 'retrospective' of 1993 'bordered on the apologetic: "The emotion sometimes overflows with a somewhat smothering sentimentality which can border on the embarrassing for both artist and audience."³⁶

Regarding *My Bed*, he observes that it supercedes 'the purely personal and embraces a much broader, shared experience.'³⁷ His essay concludes with an attempt to solve or at least articulate 'the art/life problem'³⁸ as it applies to Emin, using the ancient symbol of the Ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail in a cycle of perpetual self-destruction and self-renewal: like the mythical snake, 'Emin feeds voraciously upon herself. Her life begets art and her art begets life.'³⁹ The Ouroboros, once again, collapses Emin and 'Emin', art and life, therefore failing to account for a distinct **art practice**, even an autobiographical one. The only other catalogue essay is by American artist Julian Schnabel, who warmly recommends Emin's writing and anthologises excerpts from *Strangeland*, a collection of autobiographical texts. In his essay title, 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner', Schnabel foregrounds Emin's class identity as well as the personal-political role of memory, by referencing Tony Richardson's 1962 film based on Alan Sillitoe's short story about an imprisoned young man who reaches important insights about his place in the world while running a marathon. Emin is compared to a number of contemporary male

³⁶Elliott, 25. The editorial blurb of Emin's *Strangeland* (London: Sceptre, 2005) is similarly apologetic; see Kokoli, 'Strangeland', *The F-Word*, June 2006, <http://www.thefword.org.uk/reviews/2006/06/strangeland>

³⁷Elliott, 'Becoming Tracey Emin', p. 30.

³⁸ Griselda Pollock, 'Feminist Dilemmas with the Art/Life Problem', *The Artemisia Files*, 169-206.

³⁹Elliott, 33.

masters – ‘a teenage Charles Bukowski, a Sam Shepard, giving Margate the distinction that Marty Scorsese gives to Little Italy’ – but the myths of ‘Emin’ prevail: ‘Tracey’s need to be honest supercedes all decisions in her life and art.’⁴⁰

The contradictory tendencies of the hang and the catalogue are condensed in the catalogue’s cover image, a photographic portrait of the artist at work by Scott Douglas, whom Emin thanks for ‘making [her] legs look really nice!’⁴¹ [**Fig. 1**] Emin’s smooth, tanned lower half, the half in which she believes her Turkishness resides,⁴² is exposed but for a pair of black bikini bottoms and a paint-stained apron. Her only visible hand, looking more mature than her legs, is holding a large paintbrush dripping in white. Her traditional gold jewellery slightly clashes with the clear band of her Swatch watch. At first sight, the photograph provocatively presents a fetishised (or at least fetishisable) image of a fragmented female body beautiful, confirming Emin’s reputation as cynical self-promoter who will happily exploit her sexuality for greater media penetration. On the catalogue cover and poster, however, the inscription ‘Tracey Emin 20 years’ in vibrant strawberry red disturbs first impressions by signposting the significant body of work created by the depicted body **at work**, not just visually attractive but active, labouring and capable. Life model and

⁴⁰ Julian Schnabel, ‘The Loneliness of the Long-distance Runner’, *Tracey Emin: 20 years*, 11.

⁴¹ ‘Artist’s Acknowledgements’, *Tracey Emin: 20 years*, p. 9.

⁴² Tracey Emin, ‘A Splash of Milk: Interview by Andrea Rose’, in *Borrowed Light: British Pavilion, Venice Biennale* (London: 2007), np.

artist are one and at it again, but this time she's in control, confidently industrious, in what looks like a designated, spacious studio.

A little known video that was not included in '20 years' helps address a formative duality in Emin's work, which is mirrored in and simultaneously disguised by the sentimentalised amalgamation between her art and her life. In *The Interview* (1999), the artist plays two roles, that of a confrontational interviewer in a sexy black dress, and a defensive interviewee in jeans and a hooded top, sat across each other on a sofa.⁴³ The interviewer relentlessly questions what she perceives as the interviewee's hypocritically high moral standards as well as her comportment ('Can't you say anything without swearing?') and behaviour ('Let's talk about your anger, your jealousy and your violence'). It soon becomes clear that the interviewee is a stand-in for the artist, or rather a woman artist like Emin, pushed to justify her life, her art, their connections but also assert their separation:

Oh yeah, well we all have art.

You're wrong. We haven't all got art. That's where you're wrong.

Although not an artist, the interviewer is of course also (an) Emin; and yet two Emins don't make a whole. I agree with Carl Freedman that, instead of elucidating the artist's different sides, the work illustrates 'a mirage

⁴³*Tracey Emin: Works, 1993-2006*, 36-41.

multiplied'.⁴⁴ Her multiplicity is also underlined in an earlier work, *Three Degrees* (1993) that includes three simply framed qualifications, a CSE in Drama, her 1st class Hons BA from Maidstone College of Art and her Master's from the Royal College, along with three small faded black and white photographic portraits of the artist at different ages, approximately corresponding to the time when she achieved each degree, and a handwritten text on her and her twin brother's educational history:

[...] And at 13 we both stopped going to school for entirely different reasons – Paul because he had lost the palm of his left hand in an accident at the local bowling ally – And I'd discovered – MEN – SEX and night clubs – When I was 15 I went back to school and sat a few CSEs one of them was DRAMA – surprisingly – I did quite well –

BUT then maybe I'm a natural –⁴⁵

It is never clear whether the narrator is a 'natural' at all of her studies, just drama, men and sex, or all of the above. A superficial reading of the work would uncover a confession – finally! – that Emin is just playing dumb and has only been successful at this life-long simulation thanks to her acting talent. A closer interpretation would pick out a tension between 'drama' and 'natural', even between the three qualifications and the final

⁴⁴ 'Quite a Performance', p. 169.

⁴⁵ *Tracey Emin: Works, 1963-2006*, p. 110.

line of the text. Both formally educated and always 'a natural', the narrator's conditioned in contradiction, in simultaneous more-than-oneness, and her training began at birth, by having a twin. To evoke Luce Irigaray's famous metaphorical formulation of feminine difference, Emin, this artist who is **not** one (not a **proper** one), is precisely not **one** but always (at least) two, split, scattered, self-contradictory, unrepresentable except in fragments and flickers. Her widely-hyped honesty and authenticity is no more than a screen, which is not to say that Emin or her art is dishonest or inauthentic. Rather than being locked in a self-loving/self-devouring embrace, Emin's long-standing project far exceeds the desire to find and claim a voice of her own, to put herself into the picture: it is an exploration/ experimentation through deliberately divergent media into the socio-political and aesthetic conditions of autobiographical practice in the visual arts that lies beyond self-portraiture and that is substantially marked by gender, race and class differences. Being wilfully marked by difference takes courage because it comes with consequences. As much derogatory, dismissive or, worse, trivialising art writing suggests, Emin is not simply marked but weighed down by her difference, which has quite literally become her baggage: suitcases appear in some of the travelling installations of *My Bed*;⁴⁶ in 2004, Emin collaborated with Longchamp to make her *International Woman Suitcase*, a limited edition piece of luggage covered in colourful patchwork and

⁴⁶ Deborah Cherry unpicks the diasporic and postcolonial implications of Emin's *My Bed*, paying special attention to the inclusion of suitcases in some of the installations of this and other of the artist's works, in 'On the Move', *The Art of Tracey Emin*, 151-154. See also A. Kokoli, 'On Probation: "Tracey Emin" as Sign', 39.

inscribed with the phrase 'I love you' in Turkish and other words of affection in English, French and Arabic.

It is always simpler to simplify a body of work that looks complex (and/or that can be classified under a movement that is assumed to be so), or that otherwise bears the markers of the canon. The reverse, namely unearthing the complexity of ostensibly straight-forward, easy-to-read work, is not only more difficult but makes little commercial sense. Nevertheless, more than commercial success is at stake in misreading the work and poetics of women artists as a direct emanation from their lives, with no distance, mediation, skill, labour or thought acknowledged in between. Shoshana Felman's assertion that 'none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography' is not based on any real absence of women's autobiographical practice, but on the observation that women's autobiographies have yet to be received as such.⁴⁷ The casting of Emin's oeuvre as an indivisible art/life amalgam precludes its reception as *autobiographical art*, let alone as a practice with both personal and wider cultural and political significance. Judith Butler posits that any instance of giving an account of oneself has to have an addressee, an audience, in order to be meaningful. Yet 'the structure of address is not a feature of narrative [...] but an interruption' of it. This isn't a shortcoming but an ethical guarantee: 'narrative coherence may foreclose an ethical resource – namely, an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and

⁴⁷Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: 1993) 17.

others'.⁴⁸ In closing, I would repeat Anne Wagner's caveat that neither images not people are, thankfully, transparent. To suggest otherwise is bad practice (journalistic, art historical, curatorial) as well as ethically and politically unsound.

⁴⁸ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: 2005), p. 63.