

## How the personal remains political in photography today, by Camilla Brown.

There are a startling number of women artists making themselves the subject of their own work today. Many will make it a recurrent theme of their practice; others seem to go through a phase, either early or late on in their careers, where they feature themselves in their work. This might be an inevitable bi-product of feminist studies, a subject covered in most art schools. Women artists grapple with theories about the engendered male gaze and attempt to position themselves within it. For young women artists it can almost be a rite of passage through which they must pass to find their own artistic voice. It could simply be due to the resurgence of interest in Performance Art in contemporary practice that leads so many female artists to use their own bodies as a tool for their work.

This paper, sparked by the *Evidence* conference, will consider the political implications of this use of the self. Four women artists using photography, all working in the UK, have been selected: Trish Morrissey; Sian Bonnell; E J Major and Melanie Manchot. Their work is taken as a starting point for some thinking around this subject. Each of the artists has been asked to respond to a series of questions and their comments punctuate this text; and I would like to thank them for contributing in this way.

### Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> March 1914

At 11am a woman, described as small and wearing a tight-fitting grey coat and skirt, stood in front of a painting at the National Gallery, London. The painting was *The Rokeby Venus* by Diego Velázquez. She seemed to contemplate the image for a while. In the room there were two attendant policeman. The woman looked at the painting and went into another room, she later came back. At lunch time one of the policemen went off for his lunch, the other opened his newspaper. He then heard the smashing of glass, assuming it was the skylight above his head he looked up, but saw nothing. Eventually he noticed the woman furiously hacking at the painting with a butcher's chopper she had concealed in her clothes. The glass broken had been the protective glass placed over the painting to prevent any damage. The lady was stopped and taken away to London's Holloway Prison.

The woman was called Mary Richardson and she was a political activist who had decided to do this act of art vandalism as a way to capture media attention. Her aim was not only to push for women to be given the vote, but also to highlight the inhumane treatment of the imprisoned Mrs Pankhurst, one of the leaders of the suffragette movement. The suffragettes used their bodies as a tool in their political movement. Without the power to vote they had no other artillery. They chained themselves to prominently situated railings and threw themselves in front of horses. Those that survived these acts were then imprisoned and exercised their human right to refuse to eat. Often barbarically, they were force fed, with rubber tubes rammed down their throats. This was what was something imposed upon Emmeline Pankhurst, the figurehead - and for many the heroine - of the suffragette movement, when Richardson was moved to act.

*The Rokeby Venus* was a painting depicting a beautiful nude woman reclining in front of a mirror, the object of the male artistic gaze. The painting was very valuable and had been bought by the British Government for a significant amount of money. Richardson was enraged at how differently two women could be treated, and that a painting of a woman seemed to have more value assigned to it than a real woman. For Richardson this disparity of fates was too much to bear. Her act of vandalism

certainly caused a stir and was covered in the media, and she was sent to prison. She used each opportunity she was granted to make her case and explain her cause. It took another four years for women to get the right to vote in parliamentary elections in the UK.

The contemporary artist E J Major has been moved to reconstruct and revisit this act in her work *Shoulder to Shoulder* (2009-2012). It is through Major's work that we have a pseudo photographic record of this event. Talking about why she was drawn to the subject the artist states:

"When Mary Richardson took an axe to *The Rokeby Venus* in 1914 it was not just the destruction of property; it was the destruction of a particular kind of property, art. Such an act unnerves me even in a context in which I believe in the struggle ie the suffragette movement. It raises complicated questions regarding the making of art in relation to values, both economic and moral. It's these contradictory responses that interest me and that inform my work."

[Major E J *Email interview with author* 7th July 2015]

So, performing as Richardson, Major explores and reinterprets the events that led to the destruction of a work of art. Being an artist lends this another layer of reading and interpretation. Although not mentioned as a reason by Richardson or Major for targeting this particular painting, it is hard to ignore that the subject of the painting was a naked woman's body. We are so familiar with this as a subject of traditional and classical art that it can become invisible. Although much time has elapsed since 1914, it is still more common to see women depicted as nudes in paintings than to see women artists' work in our major galleries and art institutions. This is a point that has been repeatedly made by the political feminist activists The Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group of artists and art professionals who wear gorilla masks and take on the names of great women artists from the past. They have been holding demonstrations outside major galleries in the United States. They produce posters and banners to highlight the lack of equality in the art world. Their aim is to name and shame art institutions to improve the quota of women's art not only that they collect but also that they put on display.

In 1985 they published a poster about the Metropolitan Museum of Art which read;

Do women have to be naked to get into the Met?

Less than 5% of the art in the modern section is by women,

but 85% of the nudes are female.

[Guerrilla Girls website]

Depressingly, the statistics they have produced over the years suggest very little progress on this front. Still the representation of women as objects and muses reigns in our visual culture and in art galleries.

However, what has changed dramatically is how the depiction of women in art is interpreted. During the feminist art movement in the 1970s a new wave of feminist art historians started to question the way in which women's bodies had been predominantly depicted in art. Feminist art historians began to use film theory, which itself relied upon a new analysis of Freud and other psychoanalysts' work, to reveal the inherently male patriarchal notion of the gaze. Professor Griselda Pollock has spent time explaining the process by which the view of women has been constructed in art and in the media as an object. She states:

“Woman was central to mid-nineteenth-century visual representation in a puzzling and new formation. So powerful has this regime been in its various manifestations (latterly in photographic and cinematic forms) that we no longer recognize it as representation at all. The ideological construction of an absolute category of women has been effaced and this regime of representation has naturalized woman as image, beautiful to look at, defined by her ‘looks’. This is best exemplified in those twentieth-century photographic images manufactured to sell the commodities, cosmetics, by which the supposed nature of our sex can be attained by donning the ‘mask of beauty’.”

Pollock, G (1988) *Vision and Difference Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* London, Routledge P121

In this text she sees this process beginning at around the point that Richardson carried out her attack on *The Rokeby Venus*. It would also seem that photography as a medium, especially due to its use in a commercial context in advertising and in magazines, has in fact done much to assist the subjugation and objectification of women’s bodies. In part due to its ubiquitous nature one could argue photography as a medium has done much more damage to the way women are viewed than painting. Paintings we know are fictions, constructs. The danger is that photography is seen as real, truthful and honest, despite the fact that from the outset it has been manipulated and shaped. We are surrounded by manipulated photographic images, often of very young women’s bodies.

The feminist art movement needed to prevent this being seen as natural or normal. Pollock calls a generation to action, stating:

“Feminist art history should see itself as part of the political initiative of the women’s movement.. feminist art history must engage in a politics of knowledge.”

Pollock, G (1988) *Vision and Difference Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* London, Routledge p23

One way feminist artists were to do this was to reclaim their own bodies in the form of Performance Art. This time the nude bodies shown were the authors of the work, the women themselves. They were the artists and models simultaneously and as such were shifting the tables of power. When discussing feminist art practice in the 1960s and 1970s onwards in her work looking at women and self-portraiture, Frances Borzello states:

“a major concern of the period was to reclaim the female body from its imprisonment in art as a beautiful, voiceless object to be judged by male spectators. One strategy was for women artists to use their own bodies in their performance, photo and video works, on the principle that as they were in control they could direct the viewer’s response.”

Borzello, F (1998) *Seeing ourselves women’s self-portraits* London, Thames and Hudson P167

It is this side of Performance Art and the use of the self that draws women artists today to this area, informed and influenced by the early pioneers from the Feminist art movement: Carole Schneeman; Yoko Ono; Adrian Piper; Marina Abramovich, Yayoi Kusama to name but a few. Melanie Manchot’s series of work *Gestures of Demarcation* (2001) exemplifies a contemporary artist revisiting this terrain. It is the fact that the artist herself has been willing to have her body exposed to us which is key. She is the author and has chosen this action. She becomes subject to the strangers who

participate and are asked to pull her flesh as far as they can. They decide which part of her body they touch. The fact they pull and tug at her flesh gives the work a real sense of power and humiliation. It transgresses polite social protocols of how we should interact. Here we, as the viewer, are not allowed the voyeuristic pleasure of looking at a body.

Manchot's work muddies the water here in a complex way. As she states:

"... the gesture enacted upon one body may seem aggressive, transgressive, invasive yet once it becomes clear that the impetus for the gesture is the request of the artist, made of the other person, the seeming relation of active/passive and of power is turned on its head. In fact maybe the act of asking another to pull one's skin as far as they possibly can is perhaps the real act of aggression."

[Manchot M *Email interview with the author* 14th July 2015]

This process of making the viewer uncomfortable with what they see is a way of transgressing the male gaze. It disrupts its power and prevents us looking with ease at an object, as we all become self conscious of our status as voyeurs on this scene.

Art historically artists have used the masquerade as a way of usurping the power of the viewer and subverting the male gaze. By portraying a character or acting a role, artists can force us to question our position as viewers and consumers of the images they create. An artist who has over the years made this a subtext to her practice is Trish Morrissey. In her series *Front* (2005-07) she takes on the role of a female character on the beach. Approaching groups of families and friends whom she does not know, Morrissey picks a woman in the group to become her subject. She asks to borrow an item of her clothing and then on the last minute asks that woman to come to take the photograph. She then literally takes her place in the shot and the title of the work is the name of the person she impersonates or stands in for. When brought together as a series a moment of revelation occurs for the viewer as they see that it is the same person - the artist - who appears in each of these different groups.

But it is not always women characters that Morrissey chooses to play, often there is an element of androgyny in her work as she takes on male characteristics. She talks about gender slippage or fluidity here stating:

"Sometimes I swap gender in my work, but I am not a male impersonator. I try to embody my characters fully, to really feel male. I try not to look like I am 'in drag'. I try to be naturalistic, and not to caricature. I bind my breasts, build out my shoulders with padding, and stuff my trousers. But I try to stay understated. My femininity usually peeks through. I think this is not so much a feminist act as trying to picture gender fluidity."

[Morrissey T *Email interview with the author* 24th June 2015]

Using androgyny as a powerful tool is one explored by a range of artists, including Claude Cahun and Catherine Opie. It is a way of questioning our assumptions of the rigid roles women and men play in society. It has also been used to express transgendered and homosexual desire. It essentially undermines the patriarchal male desired gaze, which requires a passive female or feminine subject. Androgyny has powerful political potential for women, not just to pretend to be men, but to do so in a way where the boundaries between male and female qualities are broken down. Gender in some

ways becomes irrelevant in the images. But, as with Manchot's work, it leaves the viewer in an uncomfortable place where they are not able to label or identify the subject.

Certainly this ambiguity in part undermines our romantic belief in the veracity of the photographic portrait. From its origins we have been told the camera never lies and that this scientific apparatus can capture a true and real image of the person depicted. This is not the tainted hand of the artist's impression, prone to exaggeration and muddied by interpretation. We may believe that somehow a photograph will reveal something to us we would not otherwise see or know about a subject; a myth often propagated by photographers keen to suggest their momentary, yet meaningful, connection to their celebrity client. As Melanie Manchot pointed out:

"I am ... deeply suspicious of the idea that a photographic portrait 'reveals' anything about the person photographed, in terms of their inner workings, private subjectivity or essential self."

[Manchot M *Email interview with the author* 14th July 2015]

So even when the subject depicted is the artist themselves, we do not get access to their inner self; it is a mediated or performed self that we see. None of the artists mentioned here see their works as self-portraits. As Sian Bonnell states:

"I see them more as self-images or self-stagings. They are not portraits because they are not about me, they were never about me; they are more about everywoman. When I see these pictures, I don't recognise myself in them at all."

[Bonnell S *Email interview with the author* 1st July 2015]

Yet for some, through the act of performing, like a method actor playing a role, the artist can tap into an element or side of their personality in the performance of themselves. As Trish Morrissey states:

"...while there are sometimes parts of myself in there I always feel I am playing a character, a role, as an actor. Though as any actor would feel there are elements of me in all the characters I am playing. ... So I think, even when I feel that there is nothing of myself in the character, there are some whispers/fragments."

[Morrissey T *Email interview with the author* 24th June 2015]

This suggests that the self is a slippery concept, that there is no singular self. Each of us are many different people at different times and moments. There is no one core self to be depicted. Equally a depiction, whether a film, photograph, painting or sculpture, is just that - a representation. It is a form of fiction, open to interpretation and manipulation, authored by an artist.

*How to be Holy* 2011

In 2011 Sian Bonnell was appointed the Photoworks Senior Research Fellowship at the British School of Rome. Spending time looking at Renaissance masters' paintings and also spending time on the streets and in the markets of Rome, she wondered how she could relate to the depictions of women that surrounded her. Particularly she wanted to know where the more mature women were. Her series of performed works titled *How to be Holy* (2011) was her response to this. Making a halo out of a gold paper plate, and wearing the ubiquitous housecoat women wore in their daily lives, she started to use the studio space to enact poses she had seen in religious paintings around her. Her movements mimic religious genuflection to almost balletic affect. They employ humour in an effective way, as much feminist art practice has. The sublime almost becomes ridiculous as she attempts a convincing expression of piety and yet equally reveals how unrealistic such images of women are. Highly mannered and contrived, the language of Renaissance painting places older women in a symbolic and restricted role of mother, carer, supplicant, devotee.

The work seems a far cry from *The Rokeby Venus* and the more usual depiction of women as nudes and sexualised objects of the male gaze. In part, the work grows from the experience of aging as a woman and seeming, in so many ways, to disappear. In photographs and films women beyond a certain age seem to become significantly marginalised to the point of apparent obsolescence. Yet in some ways these works by Bonnell seem to be a suitable summary of how a contemporary woman artist approaches this subject. Having gained confidence in her artistic voice, Bonnell uses everyday objects to create a new and contemporary visual language. Being both subject and author of the work she has found a way to represent herself and women like her in the world. Unable to find herself represented in art displayed on gallery or church walls her response has been to place herself in the frame. In this work there is the rally cry, the call to political action. If the image of self is not in art or in the images in the world around you, create it for yourself and use yourself as its subject. Bonnell's series can be seen as an inspiration to us all and embodies the spirit of how the personal can be political in contemporary photography. Bonnell's associated series of work *Camera IV: Manners* has made its way into the museum and is now part of the Victoria and Albert Museum's photography collection. It has been included in their display *A History of photography; Series and Sequences* shown at the Museum between February and November 2015.

Mary Richardson would be amazed.

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