

**EXPOSE YOURSELF TO ART**  
**Towards a Critical Epistemology of Embarrassment**

**Gwyneth Siobhan Jones**  
**Goldsmiths**  
**University of London**

**PhD Thesis**  
**2013**

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

.....

Gwyneth Siobhan Jones

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis investigates the negative affect of 'spectatorial embarrassment', a feeling of exposure and discomfort sometimes experienced when looking at art. Two particular characteristics of embarrassment figure in the methodology and the outcome of this enquiry; firstly that embarrassment is marginal, of little orthodox value, and secondly, it is a personal experience of aversive self-consciousness. The experiential nature of embarrassment has been adopted throughout as a methodology and the embarrassments analysed are, for the most part, my own and based on 'true' experience. Precedent for this is drawn from 'anecdotal theory', which uses event and occasion in the origination of a counter-theory that values minor narratives of personal experience in place of the generalising and abstract tendencies of theory-proper.

The context is a series of encounters with artworks by Gilbert & George, Jemima Stehli, Franko B, Adrian Howells, and Sarah Lucas. They are connected by their contemporaneity, their 'British-ness', and that they allow the spectator no comfortable position to look from. This enquiry engages with theories of 'the gaze' (as both aesthetic disinterest and a dubious sign of cultural competence) and the challenge to aesthetic disinterest made by 'transgressive art' which may provoke a more engaged, even embodied response.

Each encounter sparks consideration of differing causes and outcomes of embarrassment that resonate beyond art to broader sociocultural territories particularly in terms of gender and class. The approach taken is inherently interdisciplinary, situated within the affective turn, and engaging with feminist and queer discourses. Moments of embarrassment as 'thinking-feeling' are finally configured as a critical epistemology, or a 'body of knowledge' offering the opportunity to value the singular truth of embarrassment as an embodied criticality that is critical of coercive patterns of social 'okayness' and belonging.

## CONTENTS:

<b>Abstract:</b>	p 3
<b>Introduction:</b> An Introduction to Embarrassment	p 5
<b>Chapter 1:</b> In The Gallery: Gilbert & George 'Major Exhibition' at Tate Modern	p 74
<b>Chapter 2:</b> Interface: On using anecdote and theory to account for the embarrassment of Jemima Stehli's <i>Strip</i>	p 116
<b>Chapter 3:</b> Face to Face: The ethics and the cost of looking for Franko B	p 153
<b>Chapter 4:</b> Inside Out: Confessions of sentimentality in the performance art of Adrian Howells	p 184
<b>Chapter 5:</b> Singled Out: On being interpellated by indecency and intimacy in Gilbert & George's <i>Sodom</i>	p 217
<b>Chapter 6:</b> Face Value: The discrediting of self-image in Sarah Lucas's self-portraiture	p 254
<b>Chapter 7:</b> Outcome: Towards a critical epistemology of embarrassment . . . (Conclusion)	p 293
<b>Bibliography</b>	p 320

## An Introduction to Embarrassment

This project was sparked by a chance encounter with a curious quotation;

We wanted to do art to be embarrassed. Art that embarrasses ourselves.

I think we still do that. We are very embarrassed sometimes at what we are doing, and that's a good feeling. When it hurts then its true for us.<sup>1</sup>

The sentiment expressed by Gilbert & George made me pause, for I too sometimes feel embarrassed by art. As a spectator, I am sometimes embarrassed by an encounter with an image which can hurt, like a *punctum*, and I find I am drawn to images that have this capacity; images that unsettle, unnerve, that undo my sense of self. I am not speaking of a strong emotional response; of the impact of the sublime, of shock, or disgust, but a more minor affect; an awkwardness, a sense of the inappropriate, accompanied perhaps by a double-take, a look-and-look-away.

These small but dysphoric feelings are at odds with accepted notions of aesthetic appreciation, or indeed any kind of appreciation. In what way is this 'a good feeling'? Gilbert and George's claim that embarrassment is a productive artistic strategy that they link to creativity (and to love) has prompted me to reconsider embarrassment, both as a spectatorial experience and as a critical device.<sup>2</sup> The questions I want to consider are; within the context of spectatorship, how does

---

<sup>1</sup> The comment on embarrassment was originally made to Anthony d'Offay and recalled by Gilbert in 'London's Living Sculpture: Interview with Robert Becker 1982' Gilbert&George, *The Words of Gilbert & George* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997). p136.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Lawson interviewed G&G in 2011 and asked them to comment on the embarrassment quote, they replied that it is still very relevant to their creative processes: George: 'The only thing we can compare it with is when one's deeply attracted to a new person, then everything else is different not just that person, but the house and the garden, and the air, the atmosphere, everything is exalted because of that feeling.'

Gilbert: 'It is embarrassing, it is difficult . . . you would like to run away from it.'

George: Its exciting.

Gilbert: And it's exciting because it is that edge, it must be like being on the front no? It is all exciting and nervous making, and at the same time that's the best thing that you can do. Louise Bourner, "Mark Lawson Talks to Gilbert and George," (BBC, 2011).

embarrassment figure as part of the experience of art? And, does this minor and negative feeling tender a possible outcome that is in any way worthwhile?

## OUTLINING A CONTEXT

Despite the current increased interest in emotions of ‘the affective turn’, a growing cultural and critical attention to emotion; what it is, and what it does, embarrassment is underrepresented. It has received some attention from psychological perspectives, notably in the works of Robert J. Edelman (1987), W. Ray Crozier (1990), Michael Lewis (1995), and Rowland S. Miller (1996), but this is much less consideration than other emotions such as grief, shame or anger have received.<sup>3</sup> Embarrassment is a minority subject of self-help books that present it as a wholly negative experience that can, with courage, be avoided or overcome.<sup>4</sup> For the sociological view of embarrassment, the seminal text is (still) Erving Goffman’s mid twentieth-century essay ‘Embarrassment and Social Organization’ which interprets embarrassment as a temporary failure of self which acts to moderate behaviour, enforcing and reinforcing social norms.<sup>5</sup>

Two notable texts consider embarrassment within a cultural context; firstly *Keats and Embarrassment* by Christopher Ricks, who argues that Keats’ poetry and private correspondence show evidence of a remarkable sensitivity to embarrassment, and that this is indicative of emotional and indeed moral

---

<sup>3</sup> A search on Amazon for books on single emotions within the category of ‘Society, Politics and Philosophy’ generated the following numbers of published titles: Happiness; 2109, Grief; 2066, Fear; 1550, Anxiety; 912, Pride; 630, Anger; 592, Shame; 386, Envy; 140, Jealousy; 121, Disgust; 48, Embarrassment; 39.

<sup>4</sup> Such as; Allyn, D. *I Can’t Believe I Just Did That: How Embarrassment Can Wreak Havoc in Your Life – and What You Can Do to Conquer It* (2004), and, Markaway, B. G. Carmin, C.N., Pollard, C.A., and Flynn, T. *Dying of Embarrassment: Help for Social Anxiety & Phobia* (1992)

<sup>5</sup> ‘Embarrassment and Social Organization’ in Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967).

intelligence.<sup>6</sup> And in *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, Nicholas Ridout theorises embarrassment as the ‘predicament of the audience’; a situation in which the audience is ‘caught looking’ and this is figured as a form of exposure, almost an indecent exposure, that in its difficulty is a cause of both pleasure and pain. But beyond these texts, embarrassment is without a critical discourse. It figures in fiction, but academically has been largely ignored. Ridout notes that embarrassment ‘does not make theoretical claims, but subsists in the empirical.’<sup>7</sup> Can there be a theory of embarrassment, or are the two terms quite irreconcilable? Embarrassment as an academic subject is small and self-effacing, it is anxious to be overlooked and complicit in its own marginalisation. In fact, the problem seems to be one of tautology; embarrassment is embarrassing.

The lack of interest in embarrassment cannot be fully explained by its negativity; other dysphoric emotions have their discourses. This seems to be particularly the case in queer theory, where there is a rich vein of enquiry into the dynamic between negative affect and critical thinking. In *Queer Optimism* Michael Snediker discusses this, noting queer theory’s ‘habitation of this pessimistic field’ and proposing that this reflects a concern with ‘ontological instabilities’.<sup>8</sup> Queer work of this stripe might include the following writers and texts: Judith Butler cites melancholy as constitutive of gender strategies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick inhabits shame, writing from within on its queer and critical potential and she is followed by others writing on shame as *the* queer emotion. In *No Future*, Lee Edelman mines the death drive to think almost unthinkable opposites to futurity. Leo Bersani advocates the potential of self-shattering as a disintegration of self through sexuality, and replicated in art and

---

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). p1.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). p84.

<sup>8</sup> Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). p4.

criticism. Judith Halberstam writes about *The Queer Art of Failure* which runs counter to what she terms 'the toxic positivity of contemporary life' asking instead, what reward does failure offer? Lauren Berlant writes about the disappointment of *Cruel Optimism* as an endlessly self-defeating desire. Jane Gallop has edited an edition of *Women's Studies Quarterly* on *Envy*, another disprised and disavowed feeling. Sianne Ngai has produced a 'bestiary' of *Ugly Feelings*, which includes irritation and anxiety, arguing for the critical potential of 'the aesthetics of negative emotions'.

A sizeable number of writers and theorists then have attended to the critical 'value' of other disagreeable feelings, and largely, they are *not* works of rehabilitation or revalorisation. There is a (sometimes) tacit understanding that the project of these various texts is not to promote the qualities of negative feelings as neatly reversed to constitute positivity, but to explore a negative value on its own terms. Edelman makes this point explicitly, describing his work as; ' . . . the impossible project of queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such, which is also to say, that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition.'<sup>9</sup>

In 'opposing the logic of opposition' Edelman, and other theorists working in the field of negative affect have opened up a critical space in which it is possible to sidestep the usual prescriptive binaries, attending instead to areas of ambivalence and ambiguity, and so to ascribe some value to the worthless, and to look at the overlooked without converting it. This thesis, conceived within that space, and without an agenda of revalorisation, proposes embarrassment as a significant addition to the existent and emergent negative bestiary. What I believe embarrassment has to offer is a singular mode of embodied thinking, and this thesis

---

<sup>9</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). p4.

aims to investigate that and to develop a critical epistemology of embarrassment that can offer some understanding of the apparent perversity of describing embarrassment as ‘a good feeling’.

Mostly, as I shall argue, embarrassment longs for the sameness of ‘normal’ of composure, harmony, evenness, equanimity, or as Lauren Berlant in *The Female Complaint*, says, ‘okayness’.<sup>10</sup> But instead, embarrassment is experienced as unsettled, disquieted, out of kilter, standing out and disadvantageously differenced. One shade of ‘okayness’ that is particularly relevant to the context of art spectatorship explored here, is a ‘cultural competence’, a feeling of legitimacy that intersects with the lived experience of class. Alongside this, the difference that I have focussed on in this thesis is that of gender, rich in connotations of trouble, inescapably vexed and sexed. Certainly, other differences are grounds for embarrassment; age, and race for instance have their own particular embarrassments both within and without the context of art. And there are of course many other non-art embarrassments that might occur from time to time; the social *faux pas*, or the failure to suppress a fart: but they are not considered here. Within the scope of this enquiry it is impossible to do justice to all potential embarrassments, and so I am committed to a narrow, perhaps even parochial scope delineated by a small number of encounters with art. The embarrassments they have thrown up revolve around my own experience of being female, feminist, curious, single, and sentimental. Rather than gloss over the broad extent of all embarrassments, these few are my parish.

---

<sup>10</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). p9.

## DEFINING EMBARRASSMENT

The Oxford English Dictionary gives a potential origin of ‘embarrass’ as the Portuguese *embaraçar* from *baraço* a halter, and I imagine myself wearing one when I have made an ass of myself.

My working definition of embarrassment for this thesis builds on studies of emotion written from the perspectives of sociology and psychology which at its most succinct, would be that embarrassment is ‘an aversive self-consciousness’. That definition is however further inflected and informed by supplementary interpretations from etymology, linguistics, queer theory, gender studies, literature, and philosophy. I am particularly concerned with embarrassment as a ‘loss of face’, or ‘the discrediting of one’s own image’, as a discredit that works to endorse social norms of being and belonging. And as I am *writing* about embarrassment, I feel bound to pay attention to words as both cause and effect. I take embarrassment to be an awkwardness, perhaps even an awkwardness *of* language.

Dictionary definitions of embarrassment give a number of different strands of meaning not strictly pertaining to emotion but suggestive of feeling. Embarrassment is a blockage that impedes progress derived from ‘embaras’, an accumulation of driftwood blocking a waterway. The concept of a blockage is explored in thesis both thematically and in the methodology as a moment of pause . . . when thought is interrupted by emotion. As I shall discuss, a framework for thinking through the blockage of embarrassment and harnessing the pause it creates as a moment of cathartic intensity is offered by the somewhat outdated resources of anecdotal theory and reader-response criticism. The concept of a blockage also resonates

with Erving Goffman's account of embarrassment in the social context as a moment when the self is present but 'not "in play"'.<sup>11</sup>

Embarrassment is also defined as a difficulty, and as a difficulty, embarrassment is often financial, and can be a difficulty of either too much or too little. Difficulty as lack is a 'financial embarrassment' or 'pecuniary difficulties', and as Ridout observes, the wordiness of 'being unable to meet one's obligations' seems to euphemistically avoid speaking plainly of debt, and only makes matters worse. In contradiction to the inferred lack stands the description of excess as 'an embarrassment of riches' which is more than one knows what to do with. Whilst an explicitly financial embarrassment is considered in Chapter Three, more broadly, instances of both lack and excess are explored throughout as elemental to embarrassment.

Furthermore, embarrassment is defined as a state of doubt; it is a complication, perhaps the self-inflicted convolution of a predicament of our own making. The doubtfulness of embarrassment is manifested in this thesis as an instability of knowledge and of claims to knowledge, in fact, on the important critical position of confusion or doubtfulness that embarrassment can produce. When so much of the meaning and indeed value of contemporary art is predicated on spectatorial response, the spectator may feel burdened by a duty of care towards the artwork, to have the right response, the right sort of response, to know what we are expected know and feel what we are expected to feel. At times however, spectatorial response may be quite insubstantial or awkward to articulate.

From the viewpoint of the social and psychological sciences, embarrassment is generally defined as an 'unpleasant *self*-consciousness'. And that turn towards the self is used here first and foremost to focus attention, within the parameters of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* p101.

spectator-text relationship, on the spectatorial self rather than on the text. It also authorises a personal approach to *myself* as subject and to subjectivity *per se*.

Embarrassment, is a complex, self-conscious emotion, and shares some characteristics with shame, guilt and pride in that it requires awareness of self/other and of social expectations. It is defined in both somatic and cognitive terms; as a physiological condition, of blushing, or clamminess, of increased blood pressure, averted gaze, nervous and ineffectual gestures; and also as having a strong intellectual element of self-reflexiveness as an estimation of impaired worth or value. There has been little agreement on the question of whether or not embarrassment is sufficiently innate to qualify as a 'basic emotion', and this remains in dispute.<sup>12</sup> One proposal is that embarrassment is a 'derived emotional state' that builds on a basic emotion that we have no word for in English but involves 'unwelcome attention from others' which causes an aversive self-consciousness.<sup>13</sup> A detailed sociological account of embarrassment, its signs, causes and development is given by Miller in *Embarrassment: Poise and Peril in Everyday Life*. He provides both theoretical and methodological comparison of differing concepts of embarrassment, and of the various empirical studies that have been carried out. His own view is that embarrassment *is* a basic emotion but has 'fuzzy boundaries' with other emotional states such as anxiety and shame. The differences and similarities that exist between embarrassment and its near neighbours, anxiety and shame will be discussed later in this introduction.

---

<sup>12</sup> A 'basic emotion' is generally agreed to be both psychologically and biologically innate, and not to contain any other emotions as sub-divisional parts. The basic emotions are thought to be irreducible; their occurrence is automatic and non-cognitive. They are experienced in common throughout diverse cultures and produce distinctive physiological responses that differentiate them from the more complex and compound emotions and emotional states. Prinz lists 'the big six' as happiness, sadness, fear, surprise, anger, and disgust. Some theorists have proposed the inclusion of other emotions, including embarrassment (Miller 1996 and Ekman 1999) but there is no widespread agreement on this and it is not unusual for theorists to revise previous lists of basic emotions.

<sup>13</sup> Jesse J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). 'Wierzbicka (1999) provides linguistic evidence for the claim that embarrassment builds on a basic emotion with no exact name in English'. p156.

There are two further aspects of embarrassment that emerge from social and scientific studies of emotion which prove to be significant; firstly, that embarrassment always assumes the presence, either real or imagined, of an 'other', and secondly, that there are two strands to embarrassment in which the 'other' is elemental. The two parts of embarrassment involve exposure and evaluation and it is 'the other' to whom we are exposed, and by whom we are evaluated. The other sees and judges, and, presumably, finds (me) wanting. The existence of two separate (but almost inseparable) strands is theorised by Michael Lewis who establishes that the capacity to experience the two parts of embarrassment develops sequentially during childhood.<sup>14</sup> First comes the self-conscious 'exposure embarrassment' dependant on cognitive skills and self-referential capacities requiring the maturity to know the difference between self and other. The child is seen by one that he knows is not he, and he also knows that the 'he' that is seen is *his* self.

The second stage adds that 'self' and 'other' are not only different, but that differences are value laden, and so the relation between the seer and the seen is hierarchical. In this second stage, the development of the capacity for 'evaluation embarrassment' requires additional knowledge of social norms, and an aspiration to conform, to excel, or to please. This time, embarrassment causes the child to realise that he has failed to do, or be, what was expected of him *and* that his failure has been seen by the other. Lewis defines evaluation embarrassment as 'the discrediting of one's own image', and the discredit, like the other may be either real or imagined. Embarrassment then, lies in the perceived attention of the other, and the failure of the self, in this very moment, to be, and to be seen to be, as good as it should be, or could be.

---

<sup>14</sup> Michael Lewis, "Embarrassment: The Emotion of Self-Exposure and Evaluation," in *Self Conscious Emotions: The Psychology of Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment, and Pride*, ed. June Price Tangney and Kurt W. Fischer (New York: The Guildford Press, 1995).

Turning towards the humanities, I want to add two further accounts of embarrassment that have contributed to my understanding, and have shaped both the context and methodology of my research. Jean-Paul Sartre's account in both theory and fiction of embarrassment as an agonising, obsessive self-consciousness has highlighted the limitations of 'theory', but also encouraged me to be ruthless in my introspection, and Roland Barthes, who frequently mentions embarrassment lightly, in passing, as a minor but noteworthy experience provides a paradigm for paying attention to the embodied and situated self as a way of thinking. From Sartre, I take embarrassment as an intense exposure that is a threat to my subjectivity, a slavery that denies my mastery. But it is from Barthes that I take embarrassment as a *discomfort* to be lived.

Sartre's existentialist philosophy, particularly *Being and Nothingness*, is often invoked in relation to shame, and this will be considered later in this thesis, but in Sartre's works of fiction it is embarrassment rather than shame that figures frequently and vividly as an acute self-consciousness over the sometimes trivial matters of existence. Those of his characters, who exist for the reader from the inside out, suffer the exposure and evaluation of embarrassment; they feel disappointment in their appearance, their behaviour, their thoughts and motivations. They are pitilessly analytical of their own smallest feelings. In *The Age of Reason*, for example, there is the following encounter in a bookshop between Daniel Sereno and Boris Serguine. They are discussing philosophy.

'I suppose you like it,' said Sereno.

'Yes' said Boris who felt himself blushing for the second time. He hated talking about what he liked: it was indecent. He had the impression that Sereno guessed as much, and was being deliberately tactless. Sereno eyed him with an air of penetrating intentness.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *The Age of Reason*, trans., Eric Sutton (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979 (first published 1945)). p145.

For Sartre the exposure of 'being seen' is always an adverse condition, giving 'the other' an advantage, even in the abstract; from *The Reprieve*; 'A look. A vast look, an empty sky: she struggled in that look, like an insect in a shaft of light.'<sup>16</sup> What Sartre captures is the *idea* of embarrassment. The self he imagines caught like an insect, is the conscious, thinking self; its corporeal body is an inconvenience, carried around like an embarrassing parcel.

Barthes, on the other hand thinks *with* his body; hunger, itching, apathy are experienced, and described, from the point of view of an *embodied* intellect.

Barthes' view of embarrassment may be gleaned from this account of a shortage of money.

This art subsisted, incorruptible, amid every financial crisis; not misery as a family experience, but embarrassment; . . . This *endurable* privation (as embarrassment always is) may account for a little philosophy of free compensation, of the overdetermination of pleasures, of ease (which is the exact antonym of embarrassment).<sup>17</sup>

Barthes attends to the embodiment of the idea. For him, embarrassment is a personal *discomfort* of both mind and body. Barthes, particularly in his later works is a significant resource, running like a thread throughout this thesis. This is clearly visible in the use of specifically Barthesian concepts such as the *punctum*, an almost unspeakable spectatorial disruption, and the *biographeme*, a momentary flicker of 'self' that interrupts the narrative structure of biography. This thread also underwrites themes of marginalism, individualism, corporealism, and the flawed nature of the writing self. Furthermore, Barthesian thinking is embedded in the work of other writers whose work I engage with, particularly Nancy Miller and Jane Gallop

---

<sup>16</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *The Reprieve*, trans., Gerard Hopkins (London: Penguin Books, 2001 (first published 1949)). p321.

<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans., Richard Howard (USA: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989). p45.

who developed the discursive potential of the gendered, embodied, situated, and contingent self as a catalyst for critical thought.

The last piece in my composite definition is descriptive; an attempt to capture the unruly, feeling-ness of experience in language. Embarrassment, as an 'aversive self-consciousness' is, for the narcissistic self, a two-edged sword. To be looked at, to look bad, to imagine that I am looking foolish, is seductively appalling.

Embarrassment acts as a catalyst for Alice in Wonderland sensations; of being oversized and clumsy, the most vast and visible thing on the horizon. Everybody is staring. I am a large object of ridicule. This makes me want to shrink, to disappear; I would drink from the little poison bottle with the 'drink me' label, in the hope of shrinking to some vanishing point. I wish I could fall through a crack in the floor; I want the earth to swallow me up. And yet, just as embarrassment enlarges, it also belittles. I am so small, so despicably insignificant, the smallest and most overlooked beetle on the planet. I crave the 'eat me' cake, to regain stature and restore equilibrium. Sometimes, but not always, the feeling of embarrassment is manifested in a blush, at the very moment I most desire composure, the confusion advertises itself on my face, a bright glowing, drawing attention to itself in a stupid act of self-sabotage. When I most wish to go unnoticed, my face becomes more noticeable. The contradiction of large and small, of visibility and invisibility is described by Nicholas Ridout as 'the action of a body that knows itself to be both everything and nothing'.<sup>18</sup> This contradiction is, for me, a source of continuing fascination. Embarrassment as I experience it is a pulsating hyper-aliveness, of *being* flawed.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ridout, p91.

## **EMBARRASSMENT AND ITS NEIGHBOURS:**

Embarrassment may be imagined as situated within a continuum of feeling and according to Miller cited above, shares 'fuzzy boundaries' with its near neighbours. On one side are the milder feelings of modesty and self-consciousness, followed by anxiety and then embarrassment, and on the other, the weightier and darker feelings of shame and guilt. In defining embarrassment it might be helpful to consider two of the feelings that it is sometimes likened to, but different from.

### **(i) ANXIETY- EMBARRASSMENT**

Whilst there are some similarities between anxiety and embarrassment they are relatively superficial and result largely from proximity and overlap. A person in an unfamiliar or stressful situation might be anxious about the possibility of embarrassment, or alternatively, might be embarrassed about displaying anxiety when they would have preferred to appear confident. Furthermore, an anxious person might be prone to a high degree of embarrassability or an easily embarrassed person may be frequently anxious about being ambushed by embarrassment. Whilst some somatic similarities are evident, the significant difference between the two feelings is one of timing; anxiety is forward looking and anticipatory whilst embarrassment is reactive and contingent on event, incident, or scenario and so is a feeling of a present moment. Even when embarrassment is remembered, and of a past moment, it tends to make us re-live the moment, the feeling, and so becomes again insistently present tense.

### **(ii) EMBARRASSMENT - SHAME**

The difference between these two is often characterised as nothing more than intensity, but that is an over-simplification. Additionally, the moral valence of embarrassment is much weaker than that of shame; although embarrassment

diminishes the kudos of the self, its causes are usually inadvertent and innocent, but shame, in contrast, generally indicates wrong-doing and dishonour. Miller argues that besides intensity and moral valence, a third difference between embarrassment and shame is levity; embarrassment is often ridiculous whilst shame is no laughing matter. For an entertaining account of the difference between embarrassment and shame it is hard to better Ridout. He characterises shame as deep and significant, worthy of the attention of philosophers, whilst embarrassment is an insignificant interloper. Of embarrassment he writes;

In its mildness, in its minority, lies its impropriety. It is improper shame, shame in the wrong place, shame that ought to be ashamed of itself for manifesting itself at all and laying claim to the name of shame.<sup>19</sup>

The impropriety that Ridout claims for embarrassment, I think lies partly in its effrontery in being too self-interested. The self is a proper (and popular) subject of study providing it remains abstract, but when it is real and personal, it is immoderate and immodest. Also, embarrassment can be a concern for appearance, rather than reality. It bothers itself over how things seem. It is a silly concern for the self, a vanity over self-image. But what could be more important than how things seem?

The fact that embarrassment is frequently suggested to be a minor shame, or shame about something of only minor importance may account for its relegation within the spectrum of emotions, to a very humble status, and often mentioned in studies of emotion only in a footnote. Contrastingly, shame is extensively analysed and theorised and there are a number of writers, whose work on 'shame' is relevant to embarrassment, and I feel obliged to provide some justification for (shamelessly) using them.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ridout, p84.

In *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness, and Exploring Affect* Tomkins extensively uses the term 'shame' to describe feelings that are certainly, to my English sensibility, more properly understood as embarrassment. Tomkins (an American) uses 'shame' to name the whole axis of feelings that range from shyness and mild exposure embarrassment to the self-contempt of deep and lasting proper shame. This is Tomkins' account of the arousal of 'shame'.

. . . because one is suddenly looked at by one who is strange, or because one wishes to look at or commune with another person but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar, or one started to smile but found one was smiling at a stranger.<sup>20</sup>

This, for me, describes not shame but embarrassment with a remarkable degree of precision. It accurately accounts for the foolishness, the inadvertency, and the mildness; it is relational and conflates image and imaginary in visual terms of strangeness.

Elsbeth Probyn's work on shame, makes some similar claims to those I will make for embarrassment, for example, that shame can be self-evaluative. Following Tomkins, she argues that shame is connected to interest. Shame happens when interest is almost, but not completely eradicated. For Probyn, the potential of shame is crystallized in the following quote from Tomkins; ' . . . the pulsations of cathexis around shame, of all things, are what either enable or disenable so basic a function as the ability to be interested in the world.'<sup>21</sup> This serves to highlight the difference between her work on shame and mine on embarrassment. Probyn moves outward from shame to consider collective shame in 'national and cultural narratives' as an interest 'in the world' whereas for me, embarrassment persists in returning to the

---

<sup>20</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995). p135.

<sup>21</sup> Tomkins cited in Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). p14.

very much smaller sphere of the self, so that when she writes of a politics of shame, it is a national and cultural politics, but my politics of embarrassment is tethered to a more inward looking identity politics. As Ridout comments; 'Where shame can define a culture, embarrassment wouldn't presume'.<sup>22</sup>

Jean-Paul Sartre writes of shame *and* embarrassment with embarrassment pertaining specifically to the embodied self and shame used more widely and more abstractly as an affect experienced in contexts of 'being-in-itself'. The interesting differentiation between the two in Sartre's work is that shame occurs most frequently in his theoretical philosophy, and embarrassment is more prevalent in his fiction. This bears out Ridout's observation quoted earlier that embarrassment makes no theoretical claims but 'subsists in the empirical.' Shame is effective as a philosophical proposition; embarrassment is no more than a feeling. For Sartre, the experience of shame carries a moral weight that seems not to be predicated on any actual wrongdoing, but merely on being objectified and that this is in itself 'shameful'. Sartre contends that there is such a thing as 'original shame', which like 'original sin' is an inescapable problem of being.

Modesty and in particular the fear of being surprised in a state of nakedness are only a symbolic specification of original shame; the body symbolises here our defenceless state as objects. To put on clothes is to hide one's object state; it is to claim the right of seeing without being seen; that is to be pure subject.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst I doubt the state of nakedness could or should be claimed as intrinsically shameful, I do believe it can, in some situations, be embarrassing, and furthermore, I would suggest that nakedness can stand symbolically for the exposure of embarrassment; for the self as object. In the artworks considered here, nakedness is a recurring theme, each time raising issues of exposure and object-ness.

---

<sup>22</sup> Ridout, p84.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans., Hazel E. Barnes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008 (first published 1943)). p312.

On trying to reconcile Sartre's shame with my embarrassment there might be some cultural differences worth considering.<sup>24</sup> Christopher Ricks notes;

Much as God may move men to shame but not, apparently to embarrassment, so the French tradition, or certainly the existentialist one, always seeks to assimilate all embarrassment to shame, guilt, and unworthiness, and not at all to shyness, modesty, and innocence.<sup>25</sup>

Ricks suggests that there is perhaps something about the English sensibility that might enjoy or suffer a high degree of embarrassability. This seems to belong to the shallow end of embarrassment, close to modesty and shyness, and is also marked by a tendency towards being overly concerned with appearances, respectability, and with the opinions of others. Ricks discusses the difference between English and 'foreign', particularly French sensibilities in the literature of Dickens and Laclos. He argues that whilst the English show a great degree of embarrassability, the French are characterised by *unembarrassability*. Ridout, perhaps betraying a preference for *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* over *Our Mutual Friend*, paraphrases Ricks' distinction; 'embarrassment is an English thing, a sort of shifty Protestant, wet climate pseudo effect, a pasty substitute for the red-blooded, continental, fleshy, silk-knickered, sensation that is shame.'<sup>26</sup> The marginality of embarrassment that is quite important to this project is manifested in a polite self-effacement rooted in the idea of Ridout's 'English thing', and also as an apologetic, second-best-ness of a feeble feeling. Embarrassment is not the stuff of passion; it would rather not make a scene. However, Ricks' tongue-in-cheek characterisation of the French as brazen and *unembarrassable* belongs to the context of his work on Keats and so to a nineteenth-century sensibility. Whilst embarrassment as shyness and excessive modesty, might be an exclusively 'English thing', the pitiless dissection of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Emotion theorists such as Russell and Ekman agree that 'English emotion labels may not correspond perfectly to emotions in other cultures. Instead, we find *similar* emotions across cultures.' Prinz, p113.

<sup>25</sup> Ricks, pp56,57.

<sup>26</sup> Ridout, p83.

embarrassment of being not good-enough, and experienced as aversive self-consciousness, is not.<sup>27</sup>

## SPECTATORIAL EMBARRASSMENT

When I look at art, sometimes, it looks back. It sees me, and it judges me and I feel very uncomfortable about that, and *that* situation and *that* discomfort, broadly outlines the scope of my research. Occasionally, in the context of art spectatorship a moment of confrontation between the artwork and its spectator might be experienced as 'spectatorial embarrassment'. In this singular experience the spectator who is defined by the act of looking is self-reflexively aware of looking. It is her embarrassment and her moment. The spectator sees herself seeing and *imagines* how she appears to 'the other' (the artwork) and so in effect sees from a perspective of *otherness*. As this confrontation is figured as an incidence of both seeing and being seen, subject and object positions are open to interpretation, even confusion, and so the self, momentarily, may be objectified, may feel diminished. The subjectivity of the self is compromised and she suspects she may look foolish or be inadequate and feels embarrassed. The feeling is not of inferiority *to* the artwork, which might also be inadequate, but of being foolish, inferior or inadequate before it.

---

<sup>27</sup> Lionel Trilling gives an interesting account of the differences between English and French concepts of sincerity that covers similar ground. Drawing on the work of Professor Henri Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity*, Trilling suggests that the French are overly preoccupied with sincerity, understood as an obligation towards truth; being truthful about one's self, to one's self and to others, especially where 'one's traits or actions are morally or socially discreditable'. This 'truth' is of course, elemental to Sartre's existentialist notion of 'good faith'. Trilling states that English sincerity feels no obligation to confront, and in fact to flaunt 'what is base or shameful in oneself' but that it is sufficient to undertake one's tasks dutifully and without duplicity. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1972). pp57,58.

So often, when looking at art, the spectator aspires to possess, or affects to possess some degree of critical distance; the critic, the historian, the connoisseur particularly so. But even the civilian, the consumer, the ordinary person frequently assumes a position of having/claiming to have, if not knowledge, then at least taste; they claim to know what they like. What if, instead of trying to maintain a 'critical distance' we got right up close; we exposed ourselves to art? The exposure that I am proposing is neither a grand gesture nor a furtive indecency, but an openness or permeability that would expose differences, desires, ignorance, ambivalence, identifications and identities. What if, ignoring the protocols of critique or taste, we admitted how this felt? The embarrassment that we might risk in an exposure *to* art is about difference *from* normative standards of competence and composure that we understand to be expected, and indeed, that we expect of ourselves.

## BEING NORMAL

Embarrassment is situated within a continuum of feeling that begins in modesty, shyness, and self-consciousness, and finally plunges through self-contempt into the abyss of shame. At the level of intensity that we might situate embarrassment, Silvan Tomkins states that; 'it refers more to feeling of inferiority than feelings of guilt, and therefore more to responses of proving oneself 'good' (in the sense of being superior) than to 'good' in the moral sense.'<sup>28</sup> But in our anxieties about difference, we will often settle for less. We are anxious not to be 'good', but to be '*good-enough*'.<sup>29</sup> Our modest aspiration is very often to be 'normal'. According to

---

<sup>28</sup> Silvan S. Tomkins, *Exploring Affect*, ed. E. Virginia Demos (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). p397.

<sup>29</sup> Not quite as in Winnicott's 'good-enough mother', but in the vernacular sense of being adequate, of being as good as we can be, with a quality of goodness that is not idealized but realistic and sufficient. See Winnicott, D. *The Child, the Family and the Outside World* first published 1957.

Michael Warner, 'nearly everyone, it seems, wants to be normal.' He writes; 'Of course people want individuality as well, but they want their individuality to be the normal kind, and given the choice between the two they will take normal.'<sup>30</sup>

Embarrassment is a discomfort that punishes us for not being normal, for standing out when we should have been fitting in. It is a sign that we have somehow failed, and we know we are not good-enough, without any need to debate what 'good' looks like; it looks normal.

Goffman's work on embarrassment within the social context posits embarrassment as symptomatic of non-conformance with the standards we are expected to meet and he states; 'In the popular view it is only natural to be at ease during interaction, embarrassment being a regrettable deviation from the *normal* state.'<sup>31</sup> Because embarrassment is experienced as a negative, slightly unpleasant sensation, and also, because it is socially disprised it is *normal* to avoid it where at all possible. Even though embarrassment can be valued as a sign of proper modesty, it is still, in most instances, experienced as an 'ugly feeling'. Ngai's work on dysphoric emotions defines them as 'semantically and syntactically negative', that is; 'saturated with socially stigmatised meanings', and 'organised by trajectories of repulsion'.<sup>32</sup> Goffman describes the stigma of embarrassment; ' . . . to appear flustered, in our society at least, is considered evidence of weakness, inferiority, low status, moral guilt, defeat, and other unenviable attributes'<sup>33</sup> So when I am embarrassed, my attention is centred on a self that is socially discredited, weak, inferior, low, or perhaps overly sensitive, or prudish, or narrow minded, or perhaps ill-informed, or unfashionable, or foolish. At the very least, I am not 'good'.

---

<sup>30</sup> Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge Ma: Harvard University Press, 1999). p3.

<sup>31</sup> Goffman, p97 my italics.

<sup>32</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge Ma: Harvard University Press, 2005).(p11)

<sup>33</sup> Goffman, pp101,102.

The standard expected of us in any given situation, as Goffman succinctly puts it, of being 'at ease', stems from competence and is experienced as a mastery of the situation, and a feeling of legitimacy. In the specific situation examined here, that of looking at art, the desirable state of competence or legitimacy, may be effectively explained by borrowing from Bourdieu, the phrase 'cultural capital'.<sup>34</sup> This is a resource that will tend towards protecting the spectator from making a fool of herself, from feeling foolish and from the foolish-feeling that is embarrassment. Bourdieu's defines how 'cultural capital' and our access to it are central to the experience of class structure. Access to capital, he argues, is a matter of *habitus*, of facticity, and education. These things determine our levels of competence and confidence to *be* in social and cultural spaces. Cultural capital is what gives us a feeling of legitimacy in the midst of a capacity crowd watching a football match, in a gallery in front of a masterpiece or in front of a perplexing contemporary artwork, or in a betting shop, at the opera, polo match, PTA meeting, dog fight. To doubt our legitimacy in any given situation, to feel like a fish out of water, is certainly a possible precondition for embarrassability.

How 'cultural capital' (and its acquisition), as markers of 'class' may be determining factors in situations of spectatorial embarrassment is considered in this thesis, but to only a limited extent. To survey and analyse the full extent of the class dynamics of embarrassment would undoubtedly be an interesting project, but is beyond the scope of this enquiry. Instead, what is incorporated here is a very partial account that is rooted in the experience of *middle-class-ness*.

---

<sup>34</sup> Bourdieu considers both the 'restricted' culture of art, literature etc and the more general anthropological culture and enumerates various types of 'capital' that a person may possess; educational, financial, cultural, social will impact on that person's taste, and on class-based distinctions of taste. Cultural capital may be acquired through upbringing, education, and through legitimate and illegitimate extra-curricular learning. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans., Richard Nice (New York: Routledge & Kegan and Paul Ltd, 2007).

Being middle-class, though materially comfortable is not always ideologically a matter of pride. Those who belong to this social division are notoriously apologetic or defensive about their belonging, to the extent that it might be possible that they are socially predisposed towards embarrassment. To be told; 'you are so middle-class' is to be subjected to an intended-insult. It is to be accused (perhaps quite unfairly) of being small-minded, materialistic, conventional, complacent, provincial, middle-brow in taste, and not just average, but mediocre. Where our grandparents and parents worked hard, striving for social mobility, *working to become* middle-class, later generations now sometimes, belittle their achievements, indulging in sentimental and quite spurious claims to be salt-of-the-earth working-class. There is self-evidently no one such thing as 'middle-class', but rather a plurality of middle-classes. In my own family, one set of grandparents aspired to material comfort, social status and respectability, the other set valued advancement through education, culture and entrepreneurship. To a large extent I am a product of their values and aspirations and I have learned to appreciate the legacy.

Middle-class-ness in all its plurality is a state of flux. It is about change, dynamics, aspirations, and perhaps above all, taste as Bourdieu underlined with the subtitle of his paradigmatic text; *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. As we become less defined by occupation and money, so we become more divided into tribes by the choices we make. How does a person develop taste, and how does she come to judge a cultural artefact or experience as 'good' – or not? And most significantly what drives the concern that she should be able to demonstrate such judgement. Perhaps it is that very *concern* that defines middle-class-ness. It is also that *concern* that figures in spectatorial embarrassment. If the artwork and our response to it did not matter, did not matter *at all*, then there would be no embarrassment. But if we are somehow invested in the situation and in our capacity for competence, that is competence to judge, and by extension we care about the competence of

others to judge us, to judge *our* competence, then we are subject to embarrassability.

Because embarrassment is unpleasant and discredited, we don't (normally) want to feel it, and so embarrassment acts as a moderating influence and is in fact a conservative mechanism reinforcing dominant ideologies, reinforcing prevailing standards of 'normal'. Whilst Goffman holds that embarrassment is a discredit to the individual, yet also he defends its value to society. He argues that embarrassment regulates conduct and is very much a part of orderly social behaviour, so the outcome of embarrassment is that; 'Social structure gains elasticity; the individual merely loses composure.'<sup>35</sup> But what if, perversely, we were to value embarrassment as 'a good feeling', as Gilbert and George do? What if we were able to redefine embarrassment as radical and individuating rather than conservative, could this outcome be turned on its head? What if the individual were to gain elasticity?

## **SOME AREAS OF DIFFICULTY**

In undertaking this research project, I have encountered a number of difficulties that are intrinsic to the subject matter and the methodology. Firstly, this thesis has developed within the purview of numerous on-going and overlapping discourses including visual culture, feminist theory, and queer theory, each making its own contribution, either explicitly or implicitly to what has become known as 'the affective turn'. And the difficulty arising from this is that because the affective turn is inherently pandisciplinary there is a risk of appearing superficial, a dilettante, a

---

<sup>35</sup> Goffman, p112.

dabbler in discourse, with no real mastery, or intellectual depth. Sedgwick makes the comment; ‘ . . . one of the cumulative stories told by *Touching Feeling* may be of a writer’s decreasing sense of having a strong centre of gravity in a particular intellectual field.’<sup>36</sup> Whilst she writes of a problem with gravity, I am concerned that in my case the problem may be perceived as a lack of gravitas, and I am exposed to a perhaps appropriate risk of being intellectually embarrassed.

The difficulty that stems from being between discourses is supplemented by two further aspects of my work on embarrassment; that the subject matter is slight, amounting to little more than a piece of marginalia, and also that this research is personally predicated. Embarrassment is a minor feeling; its causes and effects can be next-to-nothing. Privately we might agonise over embarrassment, but publicly we dismiss the unwanted feeling, and we trivialise and diminish it; we brush it aside, or under the carpet. The insubstantiality of embarrassment as a minor, negative affect also applies to the marginality of embarrassment as my subject matter, as a matter that hardly matters, and by further extension to *myself*, as the subject whose embarrassment is so subjective. The personal is conventionally construed as resistant to the orthodoxy of theory; and because it lacks intellectual weight, it is vulnerable to indictments of self-indulgence. The two difficulties, of the personal and the marginal each bear upon the other; marginalising the personal, restricting the scope of minor affect to personal experience.

These difficulties; the lack of disciplinary foundation, lack of academic gravitas ascribed to the personal, and the awkwardness of sustained attention to this

---

<sup>36</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).p2. See also Sara Ahmed; ‘Doing interdisciplinary work on emotions means accepting that we will fail to do justice to all of the intellectual histories drawn upon by the texts we read. It means accepting the possibility of error, or simply getting some things wrong. For me this is a necessary risk;’ pp18,19 and note19 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

slightest of fleeting foolish-feelings all have a tendency to surface in the writing of this thesis as a performative dismantling of critical authority. It is a difficult thing to insist on the doubtful and marginal status of a subject without compromising its legitimacy as *the* subject. The self-effacing qualities of embarrassment are undoubtedly at odds with some conventional aspects of an academic text, embarrassment is not for instance confident or authoritative. However, the diffidence of embarrassment does not here correlate with a lack of sustained critical focus or scantiness of research. What is most important in the overarching scope of this thesis on embarrassment is the significance of the trivial detail and the tentative argument; one in which the outcome is *undecided*. This is an attitude of awkwardness or difficulty, an uncertainty, a position of doubtfulness that ascribes to the question, that is, to the *asking* of the question a greater 'value' than to the answer, or indeed answerability of any question. At the very moment, perhaps a fleeting moment of embarrassment, confidence and certainty are undermined; other possibilities are manifest. This doubtful position is explored throughout this thesis as a critical resource that is counter to the more usual 'critical authority'. The following two sections of this introduction; on marginalia, and on the personal, stake out my argument for persevering with a subject and methodology that might, according to precept, be dismissed as academically lightweight.

## **MARGINALIA**

In approaching the subject of embarrassment, I am anxious about the potential difficulty of bringing academic weight to bear on something so slight, of submitting such a woolly subject to the incisive strongholds of theory. Silvan Tomkins, whose work predates 'the affective turn' by several decades, provides a solution as if in

anticipation of this. Tomkins investigated the role of emotion in human experience and social interaction, producing an overarching psychological theory of affect. His work has more recently been reprised and critiqued by Sedgwick and Frank in *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, bringing his work to a new audience. Tomkins reconciled the inequality of the 'touchy-feely-ness' of emotion and the abstract power of ideology by envisaging the relation not as a contest, but as a romance between the looseness of affect and the organisation of ideological theory.

Ideoaffective resonance to ideology is a love affair of a loosely organized set of feelings and ideas about feelings with a highly organized and articulate set of ideas about anything. As in the case of a love affair the fit need not at the outset be perfect.<sup>37</sup>

This thesis is comprised of a series of studies on the affective experience of embarrassment figured as brief but amorous encounters with theories and discourses that are perhaps out of embarrassment's league, but leave a residue of wishful thinking (a critical 'if only . . .'). Each exposure to art is the ground for critical enquiry and cumulatively builds what Tomkins would describe as a 'weak theory', that is, a theory that gives an account of, or description of event and makes only tentative claims for connexion between events. Whilst a weak theory might be successful, insightful and valuable, it is 'weak' in terms of 'the size and topology of its domain'. Tomkins' weak theory is described by Sedgwick; 'A weak theory's domain can be thought of as pockets of terrains each in analogic relation to the others and expandable only by textured analogy'.<sup>38</sup> A theory of embarrassment is perhaps necessarily weak due to its marginality; unwanted, unspoken, dismissed and ousted to the margins even of the affective turn.

---

<sup>37</sup> Tomkins, p111.

<sup>38</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp120,121.

The underlying truth of the affective turn is of course, that it champions an underdog. Culturally we still endorse a dualism that privileges thinking over feeling, the rational over the emotional. Emotion takes its value position from its alignment with nature (nearer to beasts), and as female (further from God). When someone says 'you're just being emotional' this is criticism of letting emotion cloud judgement, not using your head. Reason is acquired, we work at it and this gives it a value, and we link it to discipline and purpose. Emotions on the other hand are fallaciously supposed to just 'happen' and so serve to remind us of our humanity in the sense of a weakness, a flaw that we should strive to keep in check. Excessive or inappropriate emotion gets bad press. Too much sadness is depression and needs therapy, anger requires management, too much pride is a deadly sin.<sup>39</sup>

Emotion is undervalued through its links to the feminine, not because women experience emotion more frequently or more deeply, but in the sense that there is a cultural imperative to control emotion and men are popularly regarded as better than women at exercising this control, whilst women, being supposedly weaker, let their emotions get the better of them.<sup>40</sup> Unsurprisingly, the emotional currency promoted

---

<sup>39</sup> A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY: The terms 'affect', 'emotion' and 'feeling', used throughout the texts of the affective turn are not always used consistently. Some writers use them as interchangeable equivalents, but others describe a difference. In *Blush: Faces of Shame*, for instance, Elspeth Probyn (p66) offers the distinction that affect is biological, and emotion is cultural. Lisa Blackman writing on the affective turn for the *International Journal of Critical Psychology* says that emotions are culturally recognisable patterned responses, and affect is a more abstract force or intensity. 'Feeling' is perhaps the slipperiest of the three terms. It pairs well and oppositionally with 'thinking', but sounds vague and disorganised. 'Feeling' also has the advantage and the disadvantage of meaning 'touching' and that is both a tactile touching and a sentimental touching (and sentimentality can be an embarrassment in its own right). These factors of slipperiness, vagueness, and tactility, I think, make 'feeling' the most appropriate term for this project. Although I use all three terms liberally, I would say that embarrassment is perhaps best understood, or grasped, as a feeling. Lisa Blackman and John Cromby, eds., *Affect and Feeling*, Critical Psychology: The International Journal of Critical Psychology, vol. 21 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> See also Berlant on emotion being 'women's work'. She writes; Women's emotional expertise . . . emerges as a scene of affective and emotional experience, expertise and ethics. Women are not only expected to be compassionate and understanding, but to act both as teachers of compassion and surrogates for other's refusals or incapacities to feel appropriately and intelligently. She also suggests that there is a widespread expectation that women will take 'emotional responsibility' *The Female Complaint*, p171.

by the affective turn has tended to emerge from, and is most visible in spheres of feminine influence; families, relationships, caring professions. Witness such phenomena as the now acknowledged value of affective labour, and the popularity of eponymous television shows, 'Jerry Springer', 'Trisha', 'Oprah', that facilitate the vicarious consumption of emotion. As a form of entertainment these shows originated on daytime television; the province of housewives, mothers, the sick, and the economically ineffective. Now they are ubiquitous. The newly found economic value of these programmes has increased the potential for emotion to be 'taken seriously'.

## **TAKING IT PERSONALLY & WRITING IT PERSONALLY**

One of the risks taken in this thesis stems from the conviction that embarrassment is personal; and so to speak in a neutral way of 'one's embarrassment' would defeat the object. Consequently, it follows that to uncover the truth that embarrassment may tell demands a personal investment, and so, in search of what is 'true', in the sense that Gilbert & George equate embarrassment and truth, *I* must account for *my* embarrassment, and also write personally.<sup>41</sup> In fact, there is a circularity about embarrassment and the personal noted by Nancy Miller. She asks; 'Is it personal only if it's embarrassing?' suggesting that if a 'personal account' doesn't embarrass either the writer or the reader perhaps it wasn't personal at all. Without the little feeling of excoriation that comes with exposing the truly personal, as the writer, or

---

<sup>41</sup> Throughout this thesis, the notion of 'true' will always be inflected by Gilbert & George's analysis of the hurtfulness of embarrassment; 'when it hurts then its true', invoking a very personal and embodied truth.

witnessing someone else's exposure, as the reader, Miller suggests that 'writing personally' is no more than a rhetorical ploy.<sup>42</sup>

One of the most embarrassing things about embarrassment then, is that it *is* personal, sometimes excruciatingly personal. It is a narcissistic emotion, always returning attention to the self in a public manifestation of privacy. And embarrassment is particular and subjective, so that what embarrasses one person may not embarrass another, and vice versa. Faced with the prospect of disclosing what is embarrassing to me, I am afraid that I will be judged by *you*. That you will think me a prude, a pedant, a snob, a sophist, a narcissist, a nincompoop, a fusspot, a milksop, and you will think that I should get out more, get over myself, get a grip. I am afraid you will dismiss my embarrassments as trivial. And they are.

A further problematic of my methodology is that in giving a personal account I must negotiate a culturally systemic privileging of 'objectivity' as being synonymous with 'truth' and the unsaid correlation that 'subjectivity', of personal experience, of our feelings, has, at best, only a weak claim on being 'true'. The neutrality of the object as impartial, detached, and most significantly as *dispassionate* is privileged over the subject as partisan, one-sided, and particular. In this privileging of objectivity, reason again trumps feeling and the personal is marginalised. It is my contention that in the context of a study of emotion there is a need for a moratorium on the absolute equation of objectivity and truth. For my purposes in this thesis 'objective' is deployed to mean 'like an object', that is, as Sartre's 'being-in-itself', and also as a reasonable version of 'true' that might be general and transferable. 'Objective' is additionally used to denote the viewpoint of the self *imagining* itself seen by the

---

<sup>42</sup> Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991).p19.

other (as an object), and whilst that is a version that claims the truth of 'objectivity', in truth, it might be less than 'true'. 'Subjective' relates to the qualities of a 'being-for-itself', and is used here to express how it feels *for me*, from the inside; in fact an embodied truth. Subjectivity does not denote a lesser truth, but a particularly personal truth which although it may not be widely applicable, is in its particular context, particularly 'true'. Like a weak theory that applies only to limited domains, the truth of embarrassment might also be thought to be 'weak', but in context, it is nonetheless 'true'. Subjective truth of this kind is evident in this enquiry in the veracity of anecdotal accounts, confession, admission and disclosure.

Using personal experience as the basis of a PhD thesis might be considered a somewhat risky strategy, but I believe that in this particular context it is appropriate. A wider survey of other people's embarrassment would not I think serve my project of reconsidering embarrassment as a source of criticality that offers a way of thinking through feeling. This thesis centres on a series of studies of embarrassment sparked by brief encounters with art. And rather than speculating on someone else's feelings, the embarrassments I write about are mostly *my* embarrassments and so I know them intimately. In using my own embarrassments as the starting point for investigation I am able to describe the warmth of feelings, analyse them in detail, dissect them in cold blood. This level of individualism is, as I shall argue, integral to the embodied criticality that embarrassment promises to bring to the spectator-text relationship.

An alternative approach was taken by James Elkins in the research for *Pictures and Tears*. There is an obvious parallel with this thesis; Elkins wrote of his project;

Almost no one wanted to talk about it; it was not well defined or well documented; I may not be qualified to write it; it is unprofessional,

embarrassing, 'feminine', unreliable, incoherent, private, and largely inexplicable; and it is philosophically dubious and historically outdated.<sup>43</sup>

Although Elkins has cared deeply about certain paintings, none have moved him to tears but he knew, and knew of, others who had cried. To expand this knowledge base, he wrote to art historians asking if they ever cried in front of art, and placed advertisements asking total strangers about art that has made them cry, and why. Some of the academics and art historians ignored him; so few admitted crying that it lead him to surmise that 'tearlessness is a criterion of good scholarship.'<sup>44</sup> Some replied but declined to contribute. One wrote; 'I would rather not participate, even at the risk of confessing to a stony, unfeeling nature.'<sup>45</sup> Whilst some of the respondents generously shared their feelings, Elkins admits that others were marked by an 'emotional distance'. Ultimately, Elkins fictionalises some encounters between the weeper and the painting and frequently falls back on his own experience and feelings, writing in the first person, and concludes that some tears 'just don't make sense' and also, that some things felt in front of paintings are 'not fit to share with other people'.

A conventionally 'objective' study of the cause of other people's tears proved difficult. Whilst the replies Elkins received provided some rich material, the conclusions he draws are 'subjective'. Embarrassment is even less suited to this method of information gathering. There is a certain nobility in tears, embarrassment on the other hand, is risible, making it less likely that others would be willing to expose their feelings. Exactly *what* embarrasses us reveals too much; it is embarrassing. Further, it is an uglification that discredits, so generally, people are likely to disown it and unless the embarrassment manifests as a furious blushing,

---

<sup>43</sup> James Elkins, *Pictures & Tears* (New York: Routledge, 2004).p95.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*p95.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*p230.

the feeling may be so easily side-lined. Also, the embarrassments that interest me are slight, and so are not good subjects of stored memory or confession. To ask directly; 'Does art embarrass you?' is to miss the mark. Embarrassment is a subject best approached obliquely.

Besides submitting my embarrassment to scrutiny, I have supplemented my own experiences with 'found embarrassments', mentioned in passing and discovered in texts I have read, and in discussion, and sometimes in the artworks themselves. Some of the most interesting 'found embarrassments' in other people's writing are quite incidental to the subject; they are not writing about embarrassment, but 'about'; in the looser sense of being in proximity to embarrassment. The embarrassment of the text is oblique, an allusion that hovers around the margins of the (more weighty) subject matter. For example, the comments of Elkins' correspondent, who would rather be thought unfeeling than show the 'weakness' of a soft underbelly, can be read as symptomatic of an underlying embarrassment about the unruly feeling-ness of emotion as incommensurate with the dignity of scholarship.

In trying to remain true to the principle that in theorising embarrassment, I must take it personally, there is also the need to *write* it personally. As a PhD thesis, this work is subject to a considerable amount of precedent; there is a respected convention of an academically accepted language and an intellectually dispassionate tone. This conveys reasonableness, seriousness; rigour, *objectivity*. Academic language and tone does not readily convey the *subjectivity* of embarrassment. It does not capture embarrassment's flimsy, foolish-feeling, of being hardly worth mentioning, nor embarrassment's all-consuming, self-centred sensationalism. Academic language, in its anatomically correct, politically inclusive terminology does not (usually) blush and squirm. Academic tone, comfortable in its abstract neutrality (usually) eschews

the confessional taint of first-person and the immediacy of present tense. Academic argot will not account for embarrassment, and so at times, in an attempt to capture the slight and unruly feeling-ness of embarrassment, there is no option but to *write* it personally. Sometimes the effects of emotive language or a non-academic turn of phrase, and hesitation, and circumlocution, and repetition that are characteristic of 'feeling' jar in the context of an academic text. Sometimes the personal is just 'difficult', and this at least is a well-documented difficulty, particularly from a feminist perspective as generations of feminist writers have struggled against the patriarchal tone of 'theory'. Jane Tompkins, for example, exclaimed;

I say to hell with it. The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That's all there is to it.<sup>46</sup>

But still the difficulty remains. Sometimes the personal is slated as a poor substitute for originality, or merely self-indulgent, and sometimes this is true and the criticism is deserved. And perhaps there is a *need* for the difficulty, perhaps if the personal were thoroughly and acceptably integrated into theory, there would be no opportunistic space 'outside', no way to say something else. So the difficulty remains, we preserve it, and to speak frankly of what is embarrassing, *because* it is personal, and *because* it is marginal, is frankly, embarrassing.

And in fact, it seems that pinning this insubstantial subject matter down and subjecting it to language can be, in itself, embarrassing. If I try to mitigate the damage by choosing my words carefully so as to establish my un-embarrassment, I find my efforts are counterproductive. The use of euphemism can cause more

---

<sup>46</sup> Jane Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow" (1987) cited in Miller, *Getting Personal* p5. Miller, writing about 'personal writing' uses Tomkins's essay to exemplify the way that such texts are not only self-reflexive but also self-conscious.

embarrassment than it spares; its words are usually clichéd and coy or cheese-paring, and draw attention to the embarrassment they were meant hide and I am caught out in the act of avoidance which compounds the problem. It is difficult to skirt round embarrassment. Language outs the speaker, but to say nothing at all may produce an embarrassing silence. Denise Riley gives a great account of language and embarrassment, and language as embarrassment in her essay 'All Mouth and No Trousers' in which she discusses the embarrassment of finding the right words to discuss sex:

The awkwardness of naming is embroiled with the awkwardness of demurring. A compounded verbal-emotional mortification appears in my secret hesitation in the face of some expected utterance I might have been able to use, were I not so hopelessly and culpably self-conscious. This embarrassment stops me on the verge of utterance to fish up a circumlocution, makes me quietly scan for a substitute for what I want *not to have to say*.<sup>47</sup>

One of the notable things about embarrassment is the awkward pause it creates. It is like an Althussarean hailing that stops us in our tracks; momentarily, we freeze, and this relates to its etymology; from *embaras*, which is a blockage.

Embarrassment very often is cause *and* effect of a blockage of language leaving us tongue-tied, lost for words. It seems to be an unspeakable feeling.<sup>48</sup> But to take embarrassment as the subject of research demands that the words are found. So in order to write about embarrassment, it seems desirable, necessary even, to adopt a tongue that is capable of speaking feeling. Slipping from feeling as emotion to feeling as touching Roland Barthes writes; 'Language is a skin: I rub my language

---

<sup>47</sup> Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). p103.

<sup>48</sup> When it comes to expressing the complexity of emotion, we are hamstrung by the poverty of language. As Corradi Fiumara comments; 'we are often mute and dependent on prosthetic supports: the emotional language sold to us by the emissaries of the ruling epistemologies.' Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Mind's Affective Life: A Psychoanalytic and Philosophical Inquiry* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2001).p108.

against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words.<sup>49</sup> Sometimes language only works if it makes contact.

One potential approach that might capture the feeling of feeling *and* be capable of being critical is the somewhat out-dated and awkwardly feminist ‘anecdotal theory’ which mined the personal account of event for theoretical insight. During the 1980s and 1990s feminist writers such as Jane Gallop, Jane Tompkins, and Nancy Miller experimented with forms of writing, which used personal experience, event and occasion as the catalysts to develop theory as ‘an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism.’<sup>50</sup> Writing the personal is not of course radically new, nor was it radically new when Miller, Gallop and Tompkins began writing personally. Montaigne, for example wrote personally, but about four hundred years earlier. Barthes, who is cited as influential by both Miller and Gallop wrote personally and eponymously in his strange, fragmentary self-narrative *Roland Barthes*, going beyond the ‘metonymic marks’ of what he termed the *biographeme*.<sup>51</sup> Writing personally might involve a certain amount of thick description, scene setting detail, or confession, but not necessarily so. As Berlant points out; autobiographical is not the same as personal, although the two are proximate. What the personal seems to depend on is being ‘true’. It needs to be born of experience; that is, embodied, lived; real. And in being ‘true’ and as a

---

<sup>49</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans., Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002). p73.

<sup>50</sup> Miller's term for the autobiographical performance is ‘personal criticism’. *Getting Personal*, p1. The term ‘anecdotal theory’ used by Gallop referenced the work of Joel Fineman; ‘The History of the Anecdote’. Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> For Barthes, the smallest particle, the atom of the biographical subject is the biographeme; ‘were I a writer, and dead, how I would like my life to be reduced [ . . . ] to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say ‘biographemes’’. These fragments of self, he suggests, are dispersed but might eventually touch some other self. Roland Barthes, *Sade Fourier Loyola*, trans., Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977). p9. Nancy Miller (who uses the term ‘metonymic marks’) makes the point that such fragmentary glimpses of the personal are conventionally ‘restricted to the threshold of a book or the opening moves of an essay – after which the personal vanishes.’ *Getting Personal*, p26.

residual fragment of lived experience, of having been there, it brings to mind not only the *biographeme* but also the *punctum* which is not present in all photographs, only a rare few, and this might serve to signal how rarely writing is *really* personal even when it is an account of our private lives.

The product of anecdotal theory might be a discursive backdoor, a way in to theory-proper in the form of an opening or a wedge, or a countertheory, or something that reverses established theory, turning it on its head, or inside out, or an amorous theory, or a perverse theory, one that is knowingly and pleasurably wrong. This line of thought presupposes it as counter to a particular sort of theoretical discourse with an established and pervasive dominance; a patriarchal theory, a hegemonic theory, one that assumes a pedagogical role, and a role of re-production of the conditions of production. Anecdotal theory takes up a position in relation to 'theory-proper' that replicates the relation of emotion to reason. It plays the role of the underdog.

Gallop comments on how the anecdote is in many respects inherently disadvantaged in relation to theory. "Anecdote' and 'theory' carry diametrically opposed connotations: humorous vs. serious, short vs. grand, trivial vs. overarching, specific vs. general."<sup>52</sup> This again replicates the lack of value that emotion suffers in relation to reason. We value the serious over the trivial, the deep over the superficial, and reason trumps feeling. The qualities of the anecdote listed by Gallop; humorous, short, trivial and specific all apply to embarrassment, endorsing anecdotal theory as ideally suited to expressing the subject of embarrassment.

Because anecdotal theory has strong links to feminist writing of a previous generation it is already positioned as both inside and outside established academic

---

<sup>52</sup> Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, p2.

discourse. It is positioned as critical of other discursive standpoints and in search of a less dogmatic attitude. It is also just old enough to be considered slightly unfashionable, and in the true spirit of the confessional nature of such writing I must admit to approaching anecdotal theory with some ambivalence. I am not sure if to use it has the smug achievement of a ready-made, or perhaps the embarrassment and bad fit of wearing someone else's shoes. This trifling awkwardness over allegiance to a methodology and a body of work, *not* currently admired as cutting-edge is axiomatic of the very nature of embarrassment as a conservative force. The way that I feel, the slight reluctance to express how I feel, the reluctance to feel what I feel; these things are symptomatic of embarrassments' role in endorsing hegemonic norms. As Tompkins put it; 'the reason I feel embarrassed . . . is that I have been conditioned to feel that way'. But far from being apologetic about the espousal of anecdotal theory, I feel some quiet satisfaction at a very slight but most appropriate embarrassment.

There is an agreeable degree of disorder about the anecdotal; its allegiance is not to the abstract authority of theory, but to contingency. Emotion, especially embarrassment comes unbidden, often unexpectedly and inconveniently, and insistently in the present. The inconvenient feeling happens, like an event, and it is very hard to defer the feeling to a later moment. And like embarrassment, the anecdote can be disruptive, an interruption to the anticipated narrative. Gallop sees the disruptiveness of event as another potential weakness;

Although I can't say that I like it, I can see that it is precisely this ability to interrupt and divert a project conceived in theory which makes incident a force with which theory must reckon. I can see that anecdotal theory must be, whether or not I like it, this juncture where theory finds itself compelled – against its will, against its projects – to think where it has been forced to think.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, p15.

Gallop's comment demonstrates an ambivalence over what she sees as a conflict between incident and theory; 'I can't say that I like it . . . whether or not I like it', she says. This disruption is not a conflict but a site of compromise, a potential for the emergence of a hybrid necessitated by a compromising situation. It is the disruptiveness of event, and of embarrassment, that can potentially be critically productive. Gallop does, in the end, concede that this is promising. She writes; 'Subjecting theory to incident teaches us to think in precisely those situations which tend to disable thought, forces us to keep thinking even when the dominance of our thought is far from assured.'<sup>54</sup> And for me, this is the whole point of anecdotal theory as a methodology for this thesis; to use the telling of the anecdote as a tactical process to think through the disruptive emotional response - the response to embarrassment - that I find quite disabling. Anecdotal theory pushes the mind into working alongside, or through the embarrassing blockage of feeling to produce something that might otherwise have gone unsaid.

In its valorising of the minor narrative of personal experience, anecdotal theory, besides being old shoes is also very contemporary. The characteristics of personal, real, and trivial are shared with the confessional 'Oprah' culture, with reality TV, with blogging, and Facebook, and the rise of the Twitterati. The theoretical arm of all this universal-singular story telling is autoethnography, and although it is personally predicated, I believe autoethnography makes claims that are too strong for a project of embarrassment. As a growing body of work, autoethnographic texts describe or exemplify the personal to varying degrees, ranging from allowing a subjective authorial voice, to full Springer-style disclosure. Good autoethnography is; ' . . . the examination of how human experience is endowed with meaning; a concern with

---

<sup>54</sup> Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, p15.

moral, ethical, and political consequences<sup>55</sup> The criticisms leveled at autoethnography are of self-indulgence, introspection and irrelevance. As Jackson notes; ‘there is the dismissive sneer of “lifestyle politics,” that reductively fits this kind of autobiography into the polarities of economic/class politics or navel-gazing’.<sup>56</sup> Both Miller and Gallop have commented on the embarrassment of the personal as a subject of academic study, and at its best, autoethnography might dispel that embarrassment by legitimating the self as both a subject and a context of research.

The value of autoethnography should perhaps be recognized as the successful transfer of attention from the singular to the general, and from the personal to the social. Church comments on two important principles of autoethnography that underpin this; ‘The social analysis accomplished by this form is based on two assumptions: first, that it is possible to learn about the general from the particular; second that the self is a social phenomenon.’<sup>57</sup> The relationship between singular and general is always one of metalepsis with each the cause and effect of the other. And whilst this thesis too is invested in the theoretical interest of singular stories, it is somewhat resistant to generalisation. I suspect that any value that might be ascribed to embarrassment is always stuck in the singular, confined to the ‘pockets of terrains’ of weak theory, and making weak truth claims which may not complete autoethnography’s Möbius loop of cause and effect.

So, although autoethnography evidently has much in common with its antecedent, anecdotal theory, and both would appear to offer an effective strategy to describe and analyse emotion, I believe the aims of autoethnography exceed those of this

---

<sup>55</sup> Sparkes, Andrew ‘Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Something More?’ in Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, eds., *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics* (Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press, 2002). p210.

<sup>56</sup> Jackson (1990) cited in *ibid.* p214.

<sup>57</sup> Kathryn Church *Forbidden Narratives* (1995) cited by Andrew C. Sparkes in *ibid.* p216.

project. Although this thesis is, broadly speaking, in an autoethnographic vein, its aim is not social analysis but a critical attention to the marginalisation of dysphoric feelings within a cultural context, and furthermore, it is invested in the potential interest of experience as singular rather than universal, general, or generalizable. And importantly, where autoethnography is certain of its validity, anecdotal theory seemed to accept, even prefer to maintain a degree of marginality that is lost in autoethnography's presumption of legitimacy. This project then, does not claim the legitimisation offered by autoethnography and remains instead, in antithesis to 'theory-proper'. I propose that this study of embarrassment is more suited to the older anecdotal theory; embarrassment does not presume to offer a grand narrative or an overarching theory of critical authority. I think that embarrassment should be content to settle for the marginal status of a counter-theory, of a minor register, and the self-deprecating humour of the anecdote. Also anecdotes are brief.

## **WHEN IT HURTS ITS TRUE: SOME DIVISIONS OF SELF**

One of the questions that this thesis asks is; in what way can we understand embarrassment to be a 'good feeling'? In its persistent return to 'self' it could be claimed that embarrassment is narcissistically satisfying (though not always pleasurable), or the experience might be considered somehow therapeutic. Alternatively, if the causes and outcomes of embarrassment are interrogated they might bring sociocultural knowledge; of *habitus*, or embarrassment might also bring *self*-knowledge. But knowledge cannot be assumed to be unambiguously 'good', and besides, there is a sense in which embarrassment's relation to knowledge must be understood to be both negative and minor; it is a knowledge riddled with not-knowing, or in Sedgwick's term; 'opacities'. Might her observation on the

epistemology of the closet be applied to embarrassment's epistemology? 'Particular insights' she says, 'are lined with, . . . and structured by particular opacities.'<sup>58</sup> The not-knowing or opacities of embarrassment are figured as doubtful situations, doubtful outcomes, and self-doubt (which I shall argue is a kind of embodied criticality) but always, *a/ways* with the promise of a better outcome next time, with the promise of a coherent self that has, just for the moment escaped our grasp. In the midst of this doubtfulness and promise is something embodied, something irrefutably, insistently present, a freeze-frame of now, something *real*. Sartre writes of a 'solidification of self', Barthes of an 'amorous panic' and both of these borrowed fragments come close to expressing the momentary, exquisite discomfort of being, and being seen to be flawed. There is something about this visceral experience that is *real* in the sense of being empirical, derived from experience of life; not conjectured, not theoretical, not abstract. Although this reality is a 'feeling' it is somehow concrete or as Sartre says; a solidification, that makes the self, for a moment, an overwhelming and solid presence to itself. Or, according to Gilbert and George: 'When it hurts then its true for us', they said. Their statement knots together the two concepts; the hurt and the true-ness, and whatever value, or queer value might be ascribed to embarrassment is within that knot.

When it hurts, 'it' is experienced bodily, the pain, the stab, the wound, but this is in a minor register so the discomfort is more likely to be superficial; a scratch or a bruise. But also an affect, an emotional experience; feelings are also hurt. And this flags up the paradoxical nature of embarrassment as a problem of depth. Embarrassment is on the one hand, a shallow feeling. Some might say that embarrassment is only skin deep. And indeed, I have presented embarrassment as marginal, slight in its

---

<sup>58</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Penguin Books, 1991). p8.

effects, and easily brushed aside. Ridout comments that embarrassment is ‘a flaring in the face rather than a searing in the soul’.<sup>59</sup> The self that we are keen to protect in this sense is not some deep essence, or essential core, or soul, it is all on the surface, it is about who we are *seen to be*. So *if* embarrassment is all about image then yes it *is* superficial. And yet . . . , and with embarrassment there is always a ‘but’ or a ‘yet’; embarrassment always seems to have a supplementary cause, or meaning, or outcome. It always seems to indicate something else, something latent or liminal, as if it had a *deeper* meaning.

*And yet*, as embarrassment can also involve loss or damage to the self-image which belongs to a private, internal domain, then the hurt it inflicts is deep. So embarrassment is a predicament that compromises insides and outsides, deep and shallow, private and public. The self-image is an intensely personal feeling of deep and private ‘insideness’, but the losses embarrassment entails are right out there in public. We generally dismiss the damage of embarrassment as superficial, but if embarrassment ‘just’ bruises our ego, how deep does that hurt go?

In examining embarrassment’s knot of hurt and ‘true’ one of the theoretical resources used in relation to both subject and context of the self is Freudian psychoanalytic theory, and particularly, the diffuse, and sometimes ambivalent absorption of Freud into the cultural infrastructure as an enduring, but inexact cultural currency. And I would argue that it is in fact, the dispersed and dog-eared ideas of ‘Freudiana’ that are implicated in the experience of embarrassment, rather than the unadulterated Freud of a session on the couch. We are familiar with the lexis of psychoanalysis, with castration anxiety, penis envy and with the Oedipus complex, which have slipped into ordinary and imprecise usage, and we are alert to

---

<sup>59</sup> Ridout, p84.

the equation of knowledge and sex, the interpretation of dreams, sublimated meanings, Freudian slips. Whilst I hold out no hope of a cure for embarrassment, I propose that the 'talking cure' offers a productive framework for submitting subjective and very personal experience to an analytical end.

One of the uses made of psychoanalytic theory in this thesis is as an endorsement of the self as fractured and faceted rather than a seamless whole; a condition of self that is extant in Goffman's definition of embarrassment as a failure to present a 'coherent self'. Psychoanalysis understands the self as divided, theorised as an ego and an *id* with corresponding conscious and unconscious psychic apparatus. Whilst the self exposed by embarrassment might be thought of as a sum of (incoherent) parts, I will argue here that the embarrassed self is divided, but divided differently to the Freudian schematic.

The self that is exposed by embarrassment is not envisaged here as split between conscious and unconscious parts but more simply, between an inside and an outside. Whilst both are largely 'known', the extent to which we can know ourselves inside out is of course not entirely complete as some parts may be repressed, or perhaps unexamined. The division of the self along the axis inside/outside is here theorised as an inner self that is the private self-image, the self we think our self to be which is vulnerable to exposure, and, an outer-facing self that is the public image of the self, perceived by others and is vulnerable to evaluation embarrassment when we 'lose face'.

Barthes refers to an inner self as the 'image-repertoire' and also as the private life; '*le privé*'. He insists that there is something basically detrimental in its exposure; that exposure allows the other an advantage.

It is certainly when I divulge my *private life* that I expose myself most; not by the risk of “scandal”, but because then I present my image-system in its strongest consistency: and the image-system, one’s imaginary life, is the very thing over which others have an advantage: which is protected by no reversal, no dislocation.<sup>60</sup>

He suggests that this inner self is vulnerable, susceptible to damage or hurt, and also that it is perhaps the most fundamentally ‘true’ part of the self. But the public image of self is also vulnerable and this is what is at stake when we ‘lose face’. Although the ‘face’, the outer image is, to some extent, a front we put up, it is no less ‘true’ or truly ours than the private inside.<sup>61</sup> Embarrassment may be caused by exposure and evaluation of *either* the private self *or* the public image; both are important to us and within the context of embarrassment and its epistemology, surface matters, so depth should never be misconstrued as synonymous with importance.

In *Sincerity & Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling ponders on the dictum, ‘to thine own self be true’. The self, for Trilling, is divided differently again; not topographically as an inside and outside, but rather as variable qualities, that of a good self and a less-good or *not* good-enough self that may bring discredit. Trilling asks if the self to which we should be true, or hold as ‘true’ is necessarily our ‘best self’. Instead, he offers another self which is; ‘less good in the public moral way but which, by very reason of its culpability, might be regarded as more peculiarly mine.’<sup>62</sup> And this self with all its less-good qualities is mooted by Trilling as unquestionably ‘true’, as if in our natural pessimism, or modesty or anxiety we are conditioned to believe the worst of our self. Trilling argues that we feel, or should feel, an obligation to accept

---

<sup>60</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, pp82,83.

<sup>61</sup> See Goffman on the presentation of self as a front facing aspect and a less-public rear. Goffman uses the metaphor of a theatre to make his point. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 (first published 1959)).

<sup>62</sup> Trilling, p5.

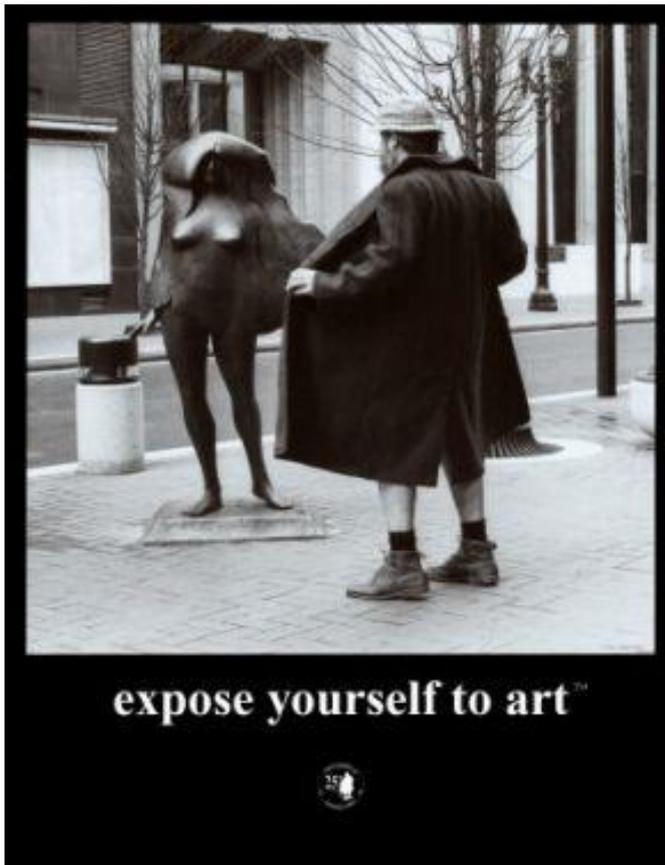
ownership of the less-good, culpable self that is particularly, *peculiarly*, our own. Is it then the truth of this ownership, of 'owning up', that hurts? If this is so, then the counterpart of this would be that it is the hurt we feel that gives provenance to the 'true' self; 'when it hurts then its true'.

But the true-ness is a weak truth claim and must be qualified. Not just 'when it hurts then its true', but (as G&G said) 'when it hurts then its true *for us*'. The truth that this hurt offers to tell is embodied and experiential, but above all personal. It hints at knowledge, it promises some form of knowledge, but what we can know is stitched to its indivisible lining of not-knowing that is doubt. We might also understand this truth that we feel to be intentional in the sense that my aim is true, or amorous in the sense of true-love which may not last but in the moment it is experienced, in *this* moment, it is *true*. It is so true that it hurts, and it is embodied and singular and particular, so that no other person could feel exactly *this*, or as Sedgwick might say, the hurt and the truth are 'localised and nonce'.<sup>63</sup> What embarrassment exposes may be either inside or outside; a best self, or some other less-creditable version, it may be the discrediting of our image or a 'loss of face'; in any case, the skin may blush.

---

<sup>63</sup> In *Touching Feeling* for instance Sedgwick writes of 'local theories and nonce taxonomies', p145.

## 'EXPOSE YOURSELF TO ART'



Ryerson, M. *Expose Yourself to Art* (1978)<sup>64</sup>

The context within which I examine the embarrassment of the exposure and evaluation of the self is that of the spectatorial experience of the visual arts. In situations of spectatorship, the museum, gallery etc. not only *may* we look, but we are *supposed* to look, we have paid to look, and furthermore, we look in public, we are *seen to look* and our response is 'on show'. The spectator-text relationship, that is, the encounter of an individual with a particular artwork is figured here as an experience that is resistant to the universalising of social analysis, but might be thought of as having a critical potential that exists in its singularity. The call to 'expose yourself to art' is not made in anticipation of a major confrontation, or act of indecency, but instead, a minor breach of the boundaries of self as an openness to

---

<sup>64</sup> 'Expose Yourself to Art' is the title of a photograph that found moderate fame as a poster. The photo, by Michael Ryerson shows Bud Clark (later Mayor of Portland) flashing to a statue of a nude woman by Norman J. Taylor, titled *Kvinneakt*.

both feeling and criticality. The self, as subject, looks at the art object, but sometimes, such as in the instance of a perceived, or in fact actual reverse gaze, the object looks back. The self sees itself seeing, it is in fact 'caught looking', and is momentarily, and for itself, objectified. The confusion of subject and object positions is felt, uncomfortably as embarrassment. This is not to say that the effect of exposing one's self to art might be therapeutic in the sense dismissed by Bersani as the 'redemptive aesthetic', the idea that art can repair the damage inflicted by life and give value or meaning to otherwise pointless existence.<sup>65</sup> But rather, that this exposure is damage (but obviously only minor damage; we can't be shamed by looking, but we might be embarrassed).

The feeling of minor or superficial damage is identified here as 'spectatorial embarrassment', a feeling of awkwardness in the encounter with art. In exploring its causes and effects I have drawn on arthistorical theories of reception and 'the gaze', on film theory, and also theories of the wider 'field of vision'. Sources include Laura Mulvey's polemic 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' which has been the catalyst for a wave of response, refutation and revision to the proposition that man looks and woman is looked at. In contrast to the intensely gendered look theorised within feminist studies, film theory, and queer theory. I have also drawn on an existentialist theory of seeing and being seen in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which neuters vision by thinking 'man' as 'mankind'.

The embarrassment of looking, or 'spectatorial embarrassment' is examined here in relation to two co-existent but conflicting dynamics of visual art; firstly, that of 'the gaze'; a disinterested aesthetic appreciation, and secondly, the emotive disruption of

---

<sup>65</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

'transgressive' art. The question in both cases is; 'within the context of spectatorship, how does embarrassment figure as part of the experience of art?' Much art is of course, precisely about looking; about the politics of looking, the genderedness of looking, the ethics of looking. Furthermore, spectatorial response in some cases is appropriated as the content and the meaning of the work. One such is Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* where the spectator must put her eye to a hole in a door and peep through to see a strange view beyond. The faintly bucolic landscape we chance upon is occupied by a spread-eagled female nude holding a lamp. She, the body, is otherworldly but corpse-like lying in an uncomfortable nest of twigs and dried leaves. She is anatomically disturbing; the legs, spread wide, are impossibly jointed and unequal in size, her genitals are not so much mutilated as appear to be partially missing as if they have started to heal over.



(installation view)



(through the keyhole)

Marcel Duchamp, *Etant Donnés* (1946-1966) mixed media

In a reconstruction of *Etant Donnés* at Tate Modern I peeped through the hole in the door, spying, a voyeur, feeling a little quiver of misdemeanor. I was unsettled by both the peeping and the strange vista. Her exposure exposed me. Then I sat for a while, just looking, from a comfortable distance, and noticed that many visitors

glanced briefly at the door, but then moved on. Peeping through holes is perhaps not considered to be polite.

## THE GAZE

To refer to looking as 'the gaze' is to embarrass the spectator with an encumbrance of theoretical presumptions. In arthistorical terms it suggests a degree of privilege and carries with it connotations of detachment, knowledge, and connoisseurship that underwrite cultural competence. Feminist art historians have accurately read this as a competence authorized by the patriarchy and thus the gaze is now not a gender neutral term. Film theorists borrowed 'the gaze' to label the look of the camera *and* the film-goer, and in mainstream western cinema, this has largely been the perspective of the normative, white, heterosexual male. In film theory the gaze is *never* gender neutral; it is informed by psychoanalytic concepts of desire and anxiety, and in the case of commercial cinema, is also driven by the demand for profit, and therefore vulnerable to allegations of exploitation. In addition to being instrumental in the objectification of women, and sometimes men, the gaze also stands accused of bias and exploitation on grounds of race and sexuality. The gaze that I am considering here as imbricated in embarrassments takes into account the more recent layers of meaning of pejorative (gender) differentiation, but as supplementary to the deeply rooted original meaning of a look of cultural competence. For my work on embarrassment, 'the gaze' is considered to be a loaded term that takes it as read that spectatorship is a scene of objectification.

The spectatorial position characteristic of 'the gaze' is identified here as a potential source of embarrassments: firstly there may be a failure to display the necessary

disinterest that is the sign of cultural competence, and opposing this, there is a certain revulsion towards the idea of cultural competence as an embarrassing white, male, middle-class stereotype. Then there is the feeling of voyeurism, of being caught looking, and the discredit of 'getting away with it' offered by the gaze as the 'alibi of art'. Finally, there is perhaps a small and academic embarrassment in talking of 'the gaze' at all. It is a little passé; an overworked, over-critiqued and overdetermined phrase inclined to be dismissed in some quarters as just 'over', with the implication that everything that there is to be said, has already been said.

In *Critical Terms for Art History* Margaret Olin defines the gaze;

'Gaze' is a rather literary term for what could also be called 'looking' or 'watching'. Its connotation of a long ardent look may bring to mind the intensity in which knowledge and pleasure mingle when I behold a work of art. Whilst most discourse about the gaze concerns pleasure and knowledge, however, it generally places both of these in the service of issues of power, manipulation, and desire.<sup>66</sup>

The gaze assumes a particular spectatorial standpoint; that of cultural competence and identification with the socio-ideological hegemony. This is extensively theorised by Bourdieu who states, with specific reference to looking at art, that seeing is ancillary to knowing; 'the capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of knowledge (*savoir*)' and that seeing/knowing then enables a culturally competent person to decode elements of the artwork and so appreciate it in the *legitimate*, that is, correct and appropriate manner.<sup>67</sup> Such competence or 'cultural capital' may, according to Bourdieu be an innate competence born of social privilege, or a competence that is acquired through education.

---

<sup>66</sup> Margret Olin in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). p318.

<sup>67</sup> Bourdieu, p2.

But what if such cultural capital is doubtful? Like the Autodidact in Sartre's *Nausea*, the spectator may feel incompetent, or illegitimate in the art gallery. They may feel they are missing something, and afraid that that signals inadequacy, a lack of competence, exclusion from a coterie of cultural privilege.

The Autodidact suddenly grows sad:

'Those portraits in the main hall? Monsieur,' he says, with a tremulous smile, 'I don't know anything about painting. Naturally I realize that Bordurin is a great painter, I can see that he knows his stuff, as they say. But pleasure, Monsieur, aesthetic pleasure is something I have never known.'<sup>68</sup>

The Autodidact (self-taught and thus in possession of illegitimate knowledge rather than innate cultural capital) is gropingly aware of something that he knows he doesn't know. Something that he feels he doesn't feel. What he is failing to find is not in fact knowledge, or feeling, but distance, a detachment that brackets out life. What is missing is a *critical* distance that quite separates life and art.

Differentiating between those individuals whose cultural capital originates in social privilege and 'legitimate' education and those who aspire to a cultural competence in excess of their social origins, Bourdieu notes; 'the autodidact, a victim by default of the effects of educational entitlement, is ignorant of the right to be ignorant that is conferred by certificates of knowledge.'<sup>69</sup> I find that I too am ignorant of the idea that ignorance might be anyone's *by right*. And I am certainly embarrassed by *my* lack of critical distance. The response to art that I berate myself for consistently failing to achieve is predicated on Kantian aesthetics and propagated by an old-school modernism. Clive Bell argued, almost a century ago, that there is a 'peculiar emotion' that all true works of art produce. He called this 'aesthetic emotion' and considered it to be infinitely superior to the common-or-garden type; the ordinary emotions of life;

---

<sup>68</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans., Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2000 (1938)).p157.

<sup>69</sup> Bourdieu, p329.

To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation.<sup>70</sup>

Evidently I fail to leave the ideas and affairs of life behind. I am not exalted. As a spectator I am never apart from my biography; my gender and my social origin are the conditions of my looking. Real, inconvenient, ordinary life persistently corrupts my spectatorship, and my response is embarrassingly emotional in the ordinary idiom.

Another embarrassment that disgraces the gaze is its voyeurism. Olin's definition goes on to say that the gaze is like 'the publicly sanctioned actions of a peeping Tom'.<sup>71</sup> The gaze is a look that satisfies appetites for difference, for sex and violence, and also for sentiment. It is a dubious look, already guilty, with the implication that the spectator, like Sartre's voyeur at the keyhole knows he and his peeping are seen by the other, he has been caught looking. 'The gaze' causes the uncomfortable feeling that in the context of art, we are always 'caught looking'. But if one of the embarrassing things about looking at art is its propensity to address our appetites for transgressive images, the counterpart of that embarrassment is what Cashell calls 'the alibi of art'.<sup>72</sup> The diplomatic immunity of 'art' lets the spectator 'get away with it' by invoking a dispensation to indulge a taste for images that if not-art might be considered socially or morally bankrupt. The art-ness of the image in fact, not only authorises our looking, but reframes a voyeuristic look as urbane and cultured. I would argue that the alibi, as *an alibi* is embarrassing. It suggests a degree of hypocrisy that may conflict with our sense of a best self. I find that I am

---

<sup>70</sup> Bell, Clive 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis' in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

<sup>71</sup> Olin in Nelson and Shiff, p318.

<sup>72</sup> Kieran Cashell, *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* (London: I B Tauris, 2009). p1.

embarrassed not (only) for enjoying 'difficult' images, but for enjoying them 'as art'. I am not censorious of 'difficult' images (quite the opposite), I enjoy looking at them and sometimes they are embarrassing but I would prefer to own my choices, in fact to 'own up' to my pleasure despite the embarrassment this sometimes causes.<sup>73</sup>

## TRANSGRESSIVE ART

It has become a commonplace to describe art, and particularly contemporary art as 'transgressive'. In *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, Anthony Julius identifies three types of transgression that art might stand accused of: Art might, and perhaps should transgress against the canon, art might transgress against the spectator, and less commonly, it might transgress against the law. Transgressive art of the most prevalent, second type hijacks emotions, taking spectatorial response as its subject and its meaning. It demands a response that evades or exceeds the pure gaze. Faced with a 'transgressive' image or event, the neutrality of disinterestedness is an untenable position, and the spectator is moved; shocked, angry, aroused, disgusted, or delighted, maybe even embarrassed. There is a tacit assumption that art that transgresses by arousing spectatorial emotion is somehow therapeutic, that it constitutes a kind of affective labour.<sup>74</sup>

At the heart of much contemporary transgressive art is a trashing of the ivory tower of aesthetics and a poke in the eye to the bloodless composure of the gaze. It

---

<sup>73</sup> See also Angela Carter on the sanitising effect of art cited by Doyle who writes; 'Angela Carter describes this received wisdom as the 'liberal theory that art disinfects eroticism of its latent subversiveness, and pornography that is also art loses its shock and its magnetism, becomes 'safe'.' Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). pxvii.

<sup>74</sup> See for example Chris Jenks cited in Cashell, p2. Jenks writes; 'uncompromisingly honest confrontation with the less salubrious aspects of the human condition is assumed, according to a tacit but widespread adherence to atmospheric post-Freudian tropes, to be a healthy social regulative.'

defies the 'pure gaze' of Bell's aesthetic emotion and denies suspension of the messy feeling-ness of life. This is the view put forward by Kieran Cashell in *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art*. He sees the project of transgressive art as the utter demolition of the gaze and its privileged vantage point of disinterest.

What contemporary transgressive art – more aggressively than any previous cultural practice – has actively sought to do is *invalidate the principles of institutional aesthetics*. To this end, the principal target of transgressive antagonism will be discovered to be the paradigmatic concept of philosophical aesthetics, namely, the so-called 'disinterested' mode of aesthetic contemplation.<sup>75</sup>

Cashell maintains that in its annihilation of the refuge of disinterest, transgressive art does not constitute an aesthetic of immorality, but in fact, a reinstatement of the moral and ethical dimensions of art spectatorship.

As might be expected, embarrassment, as a minor foolish-feeling is not (usually) central to the project of transgression. But there *are* contexts in which transgressive art is cause for the small feelings of embarrassment and it is therefore important to establish at least some of these contexts. I suggest that three notable embarrassments of transgressive art are; as a meta-feeling, the exposure of *le privé*, and where there is an unintentional failure. One additional point of note is that although transgressive art's stock in trade frequently includes low cultural forms, it tends to maintain, and perhaps even intensify ideas of cultural competence, and this might be considered to be a supplementary cause of embarrassment.

---

<sup>75</sup> Cashell, p4.

(i) META-FEELING

Embarrassment may be a subsidiary feeling; the residual affect of something stronger. The emotion elicited in response to the artwork may have been a powerful emotion, perhaps anger, shock, or disgust, but subsequently the spectator may feel the embarrassment of having drawn attention to themselves, or behaved in a manner incompatible with their sense of self by showing strong emotion, or perhaps by showing any emotion at all. Such emotional engagement is to be avoided at all costs according to Elkins' art historian who preferred to be thought to be stony and unfeeling rather than risk being seen to let emotions get the better of him. Jennifer Doyle describes experiencing just such a meta-feeling at having betrayed her critical self by openly crying at Franko B's *I Miss You*.

We stumble over our own feelings – and over the discomfort they pose, especially for the critic. They force us to confront the inhibitions of (especially) art criticism: in which we aren't supposed to write from the proximity of love, but from a distance of assessment. (Literary critics got over *this* ages ago.)<sup>76</sup>

The criticality we might expect of ourselves has a quality of distance, whilst emotion suggests a more proximate engagement. In showing what we feel, and even that we feel at all, we expose ourselves to the embarrassment of both observation and evaluation. We risk making a fool of ourselves.

(ii) EXPOSURE OF *LE PRIVÉ*

Alternatively, embarrassment may in fact be the primary emotion the work seeks to provoke. For the provocation to be embarrassing it must address what Roland Barthes terms '*le privé*', the private life of the spectator, who we think we are. The temperament of *le privé* is not fixed, but subject to ideology and changes 'according to the *Doxa* it addresses:'

---

<sup>76</sup> Jennifer Doyle, "Critical Tears: Franko B's 'I Miss You'," in *Franko B: Blinded by Love* ed. Dominic Johnson (Bologna: Damiani, 2006). p43.

If it is a *Doxa* of the right (bourgeois, petit bourgeois: institutions, laws, press), it is the sexual private life which exposes most. But if it is a *Doxa* of the left, the sexual exposition transgresses nothing: here “private life” is trivial actions, the traces of bourgeois ideology confessed by the subject: confronting this *Doxa*, I am less exposed in declaring a perversion than in uttering a taste: passion, friendship, tenderness, sentimentality.<sup>77</sup>

Ideology, has for many thinkers, been conceived as running from left to right, or from west to east, as if located either side of the Seine or Central Park. Bourdieu, for example, writes of; ‘the contrast that is usually drawn between ‘intellectual’ or left-bank taste and ‘bourgeois’ or right-bank taste’<sup>78</sup> There is a minor, perhaps academic, embarrassment in the use of such out-dated sources; do they lack credibility or are they just unfashionable? It could be argued that Barthes’ *doxa* is a very specific *doxa* of a post-war France, and Bourdieu’s ideas of ‘taste’ are similarly historically specific, but, I would contend that the premise of left and right as ideological directions remains valid. They are constantly evolving and no more fixed than the culture they are embedded in. A more contemporary example of left and right *doxas* is provided by Rancière. In 2009 under the heading ‘The Misadventures of Critical Thought’ he wrote;

Thus on the one hand we have left-wing irony or melancholy. It urges us to admit that all our desires for subversion still obey the law of the market and that we are simply indulging in a new game available on the global market – that of unbounded experimentation with our own lives.<sup>79</sup>

And;

Opposite this left-wing melancholy we have seen a new right-wing frenzy developing that reformulates denunciation of the market, the media and the spectacle as a critique of the ravages of the democratic individual.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, pp82,83.

<sup>78</sup> Bourdieu, p292.

<sup>79</sup> Jaques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spector* (London: Verso, 2009). pp33,34.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*p37.

Both left and right ideological *doxas* have their own points of embarrassability that can strike at the self-image. The right wing *doxa* is the province of small c conservatism, thus embarrassability factors will be nudity, sexuality, perversion, and deviance but also lawlessness, injustice, irrationality, dissonance, exhibitionism. The values of this *doxa* are exposed and challenged by things that break rules, initiate change and deviate from norms. A left leaning *doxa*, on the other hand, is invested in the idea of freedom to deviate, expressed by Rancière as ‘unbounded experimentation’, but finds trivia, romance and affection, banality or domesticity can give rise to embarrassability. Within an intellectual context (including this), the left is usually preferred and the right disparaged as repressive and pedestrian. The left is however defensive of its left-ness so that, as Barthes notes, it is particularly embarrassed by ‘the traces of bourgeois ideology confessed by the subject’.<sup>81</sup> That is to say, a sense of self as intellectual and free is embarrassed by gestures of a residual conservatism, such as sentimentality and confession. In considering the points at which class, and particularly middle-class-ness might figure in spectatorial embarrassment, it seems probable that ‘traces of bourgeois ideology’ might be particularly troublesome to those who are middling in class and defensive about having, or being mistakenly assumed to have middle-brow taste.

Although transgressions that embarrass may seem to be minor infringements and lack the outrage factor, they actually strike hardest at the heart of the ‘private self’. Anger for example may be a strong; an intense emotion, but despite its strength may not challenge our sense of self. Righteous anger in fact would be self-affirmative. An embarrassing sentimentality, however, may seriously contravene a sense of self if we preferred to consider that self as radical and bold. Also, whilst the exposures of the right wing may be numerous, more prone to be sensationalised, and capable of arousing strong(er) feelings, the transgressions that

---

<sup>81</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p82.

expose the private self as subject to a left wing *doxa*, may in fact, be the very ones most likely to embarrass. It is in fact possible that showing feeling, letting feelings get the better of us is exactly what is most embarrassing to the 'boiled rabbits' of the intellectual left.<sup>82</sup> The one-to-one encounter of performance art might be exemplary of this category of transgression. Being singled-out, having to engage when we might naturally prefer to spectate from a safe and critical distance can be embarrassing. We are exposed, and the problem is in the proximity and the intimacy of the encounter. Where we might expect of our self a capacity for reason and for impersonal criticality, we are mired in feelings.

### (iii) FAILURE OF GESTURE

And lastly, there is the case where the transgression of the artwork is slight, a minor ruffling of the feathers of social niceties, or an underwhelming sense of anti-climax; and we are left asking, 'is this it?' This category of transgression is *unintentionally* embarrassing. The spectator is embarrassed by the failure of gesture. Where we anticipated horror, disgust, abjection, we were psyched up for sex, or braced for decency to be outraged, the offence is limp and inoffensive. The burden of failure, of the failure of gesture is then shared by the spectator who has failed to summon up an appropriate intensity of emotion and may be embarrassed and even apologetic about their indifference.<sup>83</sup> The failure of gesture might be symptomatic

---

<sup>82</sup> George Orwell described as 'boiled rabbits' the 'left-wing intellectuals who are so 'enlightened' that they cannot understand the most ordinary emotions.' in 'My Country Right or Left' [www.orwell.ru/library/articles/My\\_Country.co.uk](http://www.orwell.ru/library/articles/My_Country.co.uk) (accessed 22.12.11)

<sup>83</sup> An example of failure might be Vaginal Davis does Vanessa Beecroft in 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Care' (2001). Jennifer Doyle was in the audience and writes on the spectacle of sexual failure and the audience 'not getting it': 'We were in a state of anticipation – and then an almost excruciating boredom. [ . . . ] We found ourselves leaning forward, scrutinizing the performance. A question yawned before us. Whose failure was this? The marine's? Or was he the recipient of a bad blow job? Were we the problem? Did we make the marine nervous? I could say that a cloud of anxieties gathered over the room: the spectacle of phallic failure produced the possibility that the shame circulating throughout the room might come to rest on the audience.' Doyle is of the opinion that the failure was more interesting than the intended effect. Through the failure of the 'marine' to maintain an erection and to ejaculate, the investment of the audience was 'exposed' to hinge not on pornography as content, but on 'military culture as a pornographic fantasy.' *Sex Objects*, pp125,126

of the mediocrity of the artwork. Sometimes the spectator is suspicious of the work's integrity, or originality, or point; the work might be banal, or clichéd, or pedestrian. This can be embarrassing as the mediocrity or pointlessness of the artwork sticks to the spectator.

## **ARTWORKS & NAVIGATION**

The artists whose work has been the catalyst for thinking about embarrassment in this project are Gilbert & George, Jemima Stehli, Franko B, Adrian Howells, and Sarah Lucas. They perhaps have little in common. They are contemporary, mostly British, not 'great', sometimes challenging. The works discussed here, each in different ways deal with the prevailing dramas of our times; identity, gender, class, sexuality, power, liberty, but what connects them in the context of spectatorial embarrassment is less immediately apparent than subject, period, or genre but might be glimpsed in the manner in which they anticipate and address the spectator.

### **(i) CONTEMPORARY & BRITISH**

The artworks under consideration span a period beginning in the last decade of the twentieth-century and the first of this one. They are British, and might be considered to address a largely British audience, and that is significant in terms of the emotional register of the work and its narrative, and also the emotional repertoire an audience might carry with them. Strictly speaking, Gilbert Proesch and Franko B are Italian by birth, but as both have been working in Britain for so long, it is fair to say that they work in a British idiom.<sup>84</sup> Against a prevailing trend of

---

<sup>84</sup> I would really prefer to say that the work of all these artists is 'English' and so dovetail nicely with the comments of Christopher Ricks and Nicholas Ridout on the English sensibility being particularly susceptible to embarrassability, but, I am anxious to avoid criticism as a

increasing globalisation, not just in the art world but in societies generally, this has been a productive era for artists working in a recognisably British vernacular. As Malik comments, in the 1990s British art adopted 'a position of increasing localisation that exposed its peculiarities.'<sup>85</sup> Its exponents are notable for an irreverent yet sophisticated approach to critique, exhibition and (self-)promotion.

(ii) NOT 'GREAT'

According to Ngai, there is a direct correlation between the inter-emotional ranking system and canonical status. Great works narrate and elicit great emotions and minor works trade in minor feelings. Ngai writes; 'something about the cultural canon itself seems to prefer higher passions and emotions – as if minor or ugly feelings were not only incapable of producing 'major' works, but somehow disabled the works they do drive from acquiring canonical distinction.'<sup>86</sup> Whilst I would not described any of the artworks discussed here as 'great' in the sense of being canonical, neither do I claim for them a trash aesthetic; 'so bad it's good'. They are however, to some extent, doubtful in their critical acclaim, and that doubtfulness, perhaps even mediocrity, is important to the ambivalence of spectatorial response. Gilbert & George, for instance, are not overly much-admired. Despite endorsements such as representing the UK in the 2005 Venice Biennale and the major retrospective at Tate Modern in 2007, they remain a curiosity, an anachronism, somewhere between the greatness of Bacon and the populism of the yBas. They are probably on the brink of being cosily regarded as 'National Treasures'.<sup>87</sup> Much of their output, I would argue is characterised by a deliberate mediocrity; they trade

---

'Little Englander' for disregarding the Gallic provinces, even though the Scots, the Welsh, and the Irish are *not* generally known for their embarrassability.

<sup>85</sup> Amna Malik, *Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel* (London: Afterall Books, 2009). p9.

<sup>86</sup> Ngai, p11.

<sup>87</sup> It is worth commenting however, that cultivating an anti-establishment stance, drawing attention to all unfavourable criticism and playing down any support is a fairly typical artistic stance, and certainly one that can be attributed to G&G. See particularly Daniel Farson, *Gilbert & George: A Portrait* (London: Harper Collins, 1999).

in the banal and the repetitive with a boyish glee in being filthy. I am attracted to the dubiousness of it all; I don't know if I should be taking it seriously. I don't even 'like' some of it, but I find it compelling viewing.

(iii) SOMETIMES CHALLENGING

To some degree or extent, each work encountered here might be described as 'transgressive' in that they seek to undermine received values, transgressing against both the canon and the spectator, but, and most importantly, in only a modest way. They operate in a minor key, at low intensity; their provocation is understated so that the contravention of artistic or social protocol is masked or not immediately apparent. Coming in the wake of a previous trend for high-voltage, confrontational art dealing in extremes of shame, outrage or trauma, the works under discussion here prompt a very much more muted response. The peculiar temperance of audience feeling and paucity of critical attention they attract are interesting and arguably worth investigating, firstly due to the value of attending to hitherto overlooked subjects, but secondly and more importantly, because of the potential counter-value of a spectatorial and critical response that is low-key and lukewarm.

(iv) TOWARDS THE SPECTATOR

Besides the loose connections of time and place and an irreverent attitude, where I think there *is* common ground in the artworks discussed here, is in the attention to the spectatorial as a compromising position. The spectatorial position they anticipate in relation to their work is not particularly one of agency, but it carries with it a sense of provocation and obligation; we are unlikely to get away with 'just looking'. Also, each artist is very 'present' in their work. Rather than being an invisible hand or omnificent narrator, they are insistently, unnervingly part of the encounter and we are on first name terms. When the spectator engages with the

work, she seems also to engage with the producer, producing the feeling that there is no anonymity in the consumption of these works. Furthermore, the artworks discussed here, each contest the idea of spectatorship as a position of privilege and ease, and instead, configure spectatorship as a look-looked-at, a look that is always, on some level, 'caught looking'. Spectatorship is posited as a position of responsibility; the spectator must account for herself and for her looking, and to some degree, for the object of her look.

What sort of spectator do these works imagine or anticipate? Malik writes of Lucas's work; 'there is a knowing use of words, gestures and forms that defines a culturally specific spectator. In this case, middle-class aspirations are being quoted, staged, maybe even mocked.'<sup>88</sup> This is an interesting premise, and one that might easily be imagined as extending to other works considered here. However, what these artworks actually seem to achieve is not to define or predict a 'culturally specific spectator', but to procure a particular degree of spectatorial self-consciousness so that the spectator is aware of herself/himself as 'culturally specific'. He or she is a specific and singular product of gender, class, habitus, with specific knowledges and opacities, specific doubts and tastes. These artworks each belong to an unstructured but cumulative body of works that single out spectators as persons. They are working against the grain of globalisation, and arguably, against the collectivism of multitudes and swarms. The spectatorial experience they anticipate is one of discomfort and uncertainty, but if we slow down the experience, allow the intensity and pause of the blockage, it is also one of originality and possibility.

In *Artificial Hells*, Bishop discusses the politics of spectatorship in contexts where the spectator is an active element of the work rather than 'just looking'. She notes

---

<sup>88</sup> Malik, p63.

the transformation of audiences throughout modernity; what they were named and what that developing taxonomy might mean to the experiences of spectatorship. She writes; ‘the identity of participants has been reimagined’ as; a crowd, the masses, the people, the excluded, the community, and most recently, volunteers. This, she offers, might be seen as ‘an heroic narrative of increased activation and agency of the audience’, or alternatively, as their gradual commodification.<sup>89</sup> What each of the artworks that are discussed in the following chapters, in terms of spectatorial embarrassment, most have in common is perhaps that they address, or *feel as if* they address, not an audience of a mass or a crowd or a community, but a person. Rather than being one of many, now we are each on our own. These artworks engender the sensation of being addressed as an individual and culturally specific person whose relation to the work; its subject matter, its maker, is an inimitable moment of confrontation and exchange. The value of that exchange is as Sedgwick might say, localised and nonce; it is a singular experience.

## CHAPTER ONE



My encounters begin with a visit to the major exhibition of Gilbert & George’s work at Tate Modern and explores the embarrassment caused by the outdated but tenacious modernist imperative that I should leave my emotional baggage at the door and view art from a position of ‘disinterest’; a position I cannot occupy comfortably; and perhaps not at all. The conventional atmosphere of the museum/gallery, as a space of cultural capital is

<sup>89</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012). p277.

considered as adverse to emotional engagement: it is a public space where private feelings should be suppressed. The excessive male bias of the work of Gilbert & George draws attention to me, as female, in a way that is on the brink of embarrassment; it makes me feel self-conscious. My spectatorial position, as female, is one of exclusion; I am 'without', unable to see my 'likeness' in their work, and I am in search of somewhere comfortable to look *from* that is not too 'sticky' with connotations of homophobia or a borrowed homoeroticism.

## CHAPTER TWO



The second chapter explores the difficulty of theorising embarrassment using Sartre's work on seeing and being seen from *Being and Nothingness*, and also anecdotal accounts of (the making of) Jemima Stehli's *Strip*. Stehli invited men from the art world; critics, curators, gallerists, to watch her strip, and the work consists of series of photographs of the men watching. *Strip* is a disarmingly straightforward exposé of the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of women that is (still) pervasive within the context of art and the power nexus of the art world. Both resources used in this chapter are imperfect; the anecdotal accounts obviously ignore or edit out some embarrassments and Sartre's theorisation of the look fails, because it fails to account for the genderedness of looking. In the failure of theory, lies my embarrassment at not being able to see *without* an insistent, hierarchical and almost paranoid gendering.<sup>90</sup> This leads me to consider

---

<sup>90</sup> From a feminist spectatorial perspective, the sincerity of *Strip*'s challenge to the art-world power nexus is not clear-cut, and the ambivalence of this is a potential site of embarrassment. I have been using *Strip* as 'an example' since the work was first shown in 2000, and the more I consider it, the more multifarious it becomes. I have one of the prints,

embarrassment as an example of Tomkins' 'weak theory', one that holds good in only limited circumstances and is not easily transferable. Finally, I am unable to resist the analysis of *Strip* from a knowingly gendered position that exposes my ambivalent feminism.

### CHAPTER THREE



*Don't Leave Me This Way*, a short work of one-to-one performance art by Franko B provides the next encounter. For three minutes I sat in almost total darkness a few inches away from the artist. I could have spoken, I could have maybe touched him, but I 'just' looked, and was embarrassed by my desire to look and by the failure of a gesture of intimacy. Franko's 'monstrous' work is contrasted with Marc Quinn's 'freakish' sculpture, *Alison*

*Lapper Pregnant*, and using the monster and the freak as metaphors for the disinterest of the gaze and the interest of transgression, I consider an ethics of looking, and how this might be a cause of embarrassment. My investment in looking at Franko B is finally considered as an economic embarrassment within the economy of affective labour. I am embarrassed by the situation that I have paid to look at someone, who purports to offer me intimacy.

---

*Strip no. 5 Dealer* (shot 4 of 6) of Paul Stolper on my wall, and it continues to be an awkward pleasure.

## CHAPTER FOUR



The offer of 'intimacy and risk' enticed me to engage in another one-to-one encounter. *The 14 Stations of the Life and History of Adrian Howells* confirmed the marginality of embarrassment, not only as something slippery and elusive,

but as always 'incidental'. In this performance Howells staged episodes from his history that exhibited a less-good self that he wanted to expose in terms of a narrative of confession. His performance in fact hinges on 'exposure' as a breach of conventions of private and public. I found little embarrassment in the intimacy of (his) confession, or the risk of participation, but it was unexpectedly manifested in the sentimentality of 'unfinished business' which is considered here as a touchstone of Lauren Berlant's 'intimate public'. This particular embarrassment is one that predominantly troubles the radical nature of a left-facing *doxa*, and I was embarrassed to find myself indulging in a sentimental nostalgia, and to be counted in, as one of the intimate public.

## CHAPTER FIVE



Chapter Five is uncomfortably personal.

Despite the challenge laid down by Gilbert & George of 'perverse' sexuality and its biblical condemnation in their work *Sodom*, I am instead embarrassed by connotations of intimacy. *Their*

intimacy exposes my uneasy relationship to the public intimacies of coupledness and my exclusion from them. *Sodom* interpellates me; it singles me out and exposes my

interest in intimacy and asks that I account for myself and my single status. As a singleton, I am embarrassed to find my state disparaged by what Berlant calls 'love's plot', and the promotion of coupledness as 'an institution of privacy', which, as a woman I am supposed to subscribe to, or at least aspire to. Finally this chapter considers singularity as an expression of the first moment of embarrassment, a feeling of difference and attention, a state of animation, expectant and anxious, almost like love.

## CHAPTER SIX



Chapter Six takes a less personal tone, and looks at the role of embarrassment in the work of Sarah Lucas, and in particular, in her self-portrait, *Got a Salmon On # 3*. Lucas's work has been described as small-time and low-rent and seems to eschew a high-brow theoretical position, which leaves the spectator unsettled and 'without'. The spectator's capacity to know is restricted; we are not 'in the

know', and less than comfortable with the things we think we know. Through analysis of her apparent refusal of conventional femininity, I suggest that her disidentification with femaleness is a move to evade evaluation embarrassment, and that in fact, embarrassment is a female emotion. The 'female' embarrassment Lucas refuses is off-loaded onto objects elsewhere in her work which are emphatically gendered and sexualised in ways that employ both misogyny and humour. Evaluation of Lucas's work is considered finally in association with Freudian psychoanalytic theory as a productive framework for the study of (female) embarrassment.

## CHAPTER SEVEN (CONCLUSION)

The final chapter moves towards a critical epistemology of embarrassment as a 'body of knowledge'. The method of feeling-capture used throughout, is re-evaluated as a 'weak method' that is recognisable as the somewhat outdated literary analysis of 'reader-response criticism'. This is a form of analysis that pays intense attention to the reception of the text, and conceives of meaning as something that unfolds and evolves as a process of engagement.<sup>91</sup> Gathering together the strands of what can be known of embarrassment, of a weak theory of embarrassment, of its weak truth claims, and its feeble political ambition this chapter proposes that what is now 'known' about embarrassment confirms its singularity; it is embodied, empirical, inimitable, and resistant to the generalisation of theory-proper. Singularity provides the cathectic intensity of embarrassment as 'embodied criticality' that makes us self-aware in situations of 'without-ness' when we can neither be nor belong comfortably. I propose finally, that embarrassment, as a conservative mechanism reinforces social and cultural ideas of 'normal', but, when redefined as an embodied criticality, embarrassment is found to be critical of the construction and constructedness of being 'normal' that it apparently endorses.

---

<sup>91</sup> Reader-response criticism emerged in the latter half of the twentieth-century with many of its main principles defined by theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Jonathan Culler, and Norman Holland during the 1970s. It centred on a relocation of meaning, placing it not in the text but in the reading process where the objectivity of the text becomes consumed by the subjectivity of the reader. Tompkins writes; 'the important point is that literature *is* the activity that the reader performs and not a stable artefact: 'it refuses to stay still'.' (pxvii) The experiential process of producing meaning for the reader is opposed to the concept of a mind/body dualism, but recruits all aspects of human existence *and* experience in the production of 'literature' as a subjective response which Holland describes as 'an in-gathering and in-mixing of self and other'.pxix. Jane P. Tompkins, ed. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore John Hopkins University Press, 1980).

## FOREWORD:BACKWORD

As I reach the end of this introduction, I am heartily sick of typing the word 'embarrassment', and I suppose you will also soon sicken. To mitigate this, I offer some thoughts on alternative words.

Keats uses the word awkwardness, which accurately captures the mildness, and also the reticence to speak of the situation. Ruskin wrote of 'excessive self-attention', which alludes to both conceit and, surely unintentionally, to masturbation. Chagrin sounds pretentious. Mortification is exorbitant. I have considered discomfiture, which I like, and humiliation, indignity, and ignominy, which are all too strong. Discredit is good in the sense of the discrediting of one's image, and also it is suggestive of financial embarrassment. *Dis*-ease is also good because according to Barthes, ease is the opposite of embarrassment. Loss of face, loss of composure, and loss of dignity are all effective in suggesting that it is a temporary problem. What is lost may be found and recovered. Loss also suggests lack and thus a psychoanalytic interpretation. Loss of face is particularly apt as it suggests the visually grounded discrediting of self-image. Loss of face also alludes to the disfigurement of the blush, and to the superficiality of our image, of the front we put up, that can so easily be affronted.

## **Chapter One: In The Gallery: A visit to the Gilbert & George Major Exhibition at Tate Modern.**

As *Spectator* I was interested [ . . . ] only for 'sentimental' reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think. Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup>

---

Gilbert and George said; 'We wanted to *do* art to be embarrassed.' And so do I, but when I 'do' art, my doing is not making, but seeing. I like looking at art that makes me feel just a little bit uncomfortable, unsettled. I look, look away, and glance back, slyly, shyly. Should I be looking? Is this worth looking at? Sometimes the images ignore me, sometimes they stare back, a reverse gaze, returning me to myself. I like to look at myself, but I don't like to be caught doing it.

I first encountered the images of Gilbert & George about twenty-five years ago at an exhibition in Liverpool; they were gaudy, holding hands, ten feet tall. They leered down from the wall at me. I wasn't sure if I liked them but I definitely wasn't embarrassed. Over the years I have got to know their work better and become engrossed in the contradiction of respectability and rudeness that is their life's work. My interest in Gilbert & George is grounded in the chronicling of their urban cosmos of graffiti, rent boys, tramps, litter, vandalism, hostility, shit, money, drunks, decay, and detritus that we call home. Gilbert and George amble around this world like two latter-day Marco Polos, observing, with an eye for detail, with an eye for the ordinary, for all the things that are there all along, remarkable; unremarkable.

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans., Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993). p21.



Gilbert & George: at home in their urban cosmos

Michael Bracewell compared their illustration of the urban environment to ‘a version of the Mass Observation projects carried out in the UK during the 1930s’ which has, ‘a quality of detachment and suspension of moral judgement . . . and yet emotion spills over the edges of the facts’.<sup>2</sup> And that is exactly how it is; their gritty realism is stained with sentimentality and sexuality, and importantly, any moral judgement is definitely the province of the spectator. It’s all down to interpretation. And now I find their work embarrassing, or to be more accurate, I am embarrassed by my response to their work. And what I am most embarrassed about is the sense of exposure; does my response reveal too much about me? Am I making an exhibition of myself?

## **FEELING ‘STICKY’**

In my spectatorial engagement with art, I struggle with an entrenched idea of a proper aesthetic appreciation that I fail to feel, or at least, any such feeling is overwhelmed by a personal and probably inappropriate response to the subject

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael Bracewell and Lisa G Corrin, *Gilbert & George: Dirty Words Pictures* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2002). p12.

matter. I do not feel the bloodless 'aesthetic emotion' of the pure gaze; but only everyday emotions, haphazard, messy feelings of the common kind. Bourdieu asserts that the capacity to experience aesthetic emotion is a power *not* universally inscribed. For him, it is of course, a question of social *habitus* that determines spectatorial capacity for the pure gaze and he notes the irritation of those, who like me, fail to feel aesthetic transcendence, he comments on their humiliation, and obscure sense of inferiority.<sup>3</sup> Nothing in my own history offers an easy explanation for my incapacity to gaze'; my family background of middle-class ambition and industry, a privileged grammar school education, and a long-standing interest in the visual arts should equip me with confidence and mastery, yet my spectatorial self is doubtful and diffident. 'The gaze', as a sign of cultural capital, denotes knowledge, privilege, and the gratification of desire in a way that confers a diplomatic immunity on the spectator. From this position of comfortable authority over the object of the look, the spectator is secure in *his* subjectivity, his comfort, and his authority. His subjectivity is underwritten by the (patriarchal) hegemony.

This is of course a position that belongs to a much-contested old-school convention, but one that I believe still exerts an influence. Although disparaged and disputed, there seems to be a tacit investment in the preservation of a 'dominant but dead' modernism, perhaps as a means of stabilising an artificial dichotomy between culture and counterculture, or between conservative and radical in which each is increasingly dependent on the other for definition and continuation.<sup>4</sup> The gaze, as a stabilizer of the dynamic between the subject and the object of the look, theoretically allows the spectating subject a degree of privacy. Without this, the spectator risks

---

<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu, p31.

<sup>4</sup> The position that 'Modernism is dominant but dead' is considered by Jürgen Habermas, see 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project' (1980) in Harrison and Wood, p1125. Such a division might be interpreted as a Foucauldian 'repressive hypothesis'. For a discussion of Foucault's hypothesis applied to emotion, and the vague possibility of escaping binarism (that is also 'repressive'), see Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* pp9-13 and pp109-111.

the embarrassment of objectification; *her* look is a look-looked-at, she is caught looking and must account for herself and her looking. The crux of the matter of the cultural competence of the gaze is said to be an ability to separate art and life; to achieve 'a break with the ordinary attitude towards the world', but when I look, I am unable to leave the thinking and feeling of ordinary life behind; they are an inseparable part of my looking.<sup>5</sup> I am stuck with them.

The spectatorial response elicited by the work of Gilbert & George is one of exposure, provocation and instability. Lauren Berlant makes similar claims for the address made by queer fanzines to their readership. She comments;

This move to materialise the spectator as *different* from the spectacle with which she identifies has powerful political force for women, whose collective and individual self-representations are always available for embarrassment, [ . . . ] By reversing the direction of the embarrassment from the spectacle towards the spectator, the zines rotate the meaning of *consent*. In severing sexual identity from sexual expressivity, the spectacle talks dirty to *you*, as it were, and you no longer have the privilege to consume in silence, or in tacit unconsciousness of or unaccountability for your own fantasies.<sup>6</sup>

In a very similar way, the work of Gilbert & George also seems to materialise the spectator as *different*. Looking, I am differenced; made strange by the ordinariness of their images and made ordinary by the strangeness of their images. They do not flatter me or allow any comfort. They talk dirty, to the spectator, and in so doing divert the direction of embarrassment. The embarrassment they claim to value becomes *spectatorial* embarrassment. If the spectator were able to muster the disinterested, aesthetic appreciation of the pure gaze she (or he) could perhaps keep her distance, and be as Berlant says, unaccountable. But she hears, or maybe eavesdrops on the pictures' dirty talk and her proximity, and thus emotional

---

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, p31.

<sup>6</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washinton City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). pp170,171.

investment (interest, curiosity, prurience, expectation) entraps her. The cost of looking is accountability; the spectator must account for the 'I' that the spectacle talks dirty to. She must account, as Berlant notes, for her *difference*.



Gilbert & George *Dog Boy* (1980) Photopiece, 181 x201 cm

*Dog Boy* is one of Gilbert & George's works that unsettles and exposes me. My interest is sentimental, and biographical; I take it personally. The work dates from the early days of their adventures in colour and *Dog Boy* is black and white, flanked by six flower heads on solid yellow ground. He is caught, framed against the last-ditch security measure of a metal gate set in a crumbling doorway of a rough neighborhood. Boy, about fifteen, maybe younger, a package under his arm, cheap

windcheater unzipped to reveal a scrawny body in a t-shirt. Hair, a bit long, a mistrustful look in his eyes, lovely mouth, like a girl's. It's like looking back into my adolescence; he looks like the boys from the comprehensive school back home, the ones that were never going to make much of themselves. Not like the grammar school boys for whom achievement was mapped. He is vulnerable; life will happen to him. He is not as tough-looking as many of Gilbert & George's boys; not so street-wise as the *Knights*, not as cocky as the *Patriot*, or as churlish as the *Britisher*.

The title, *Dog Boy*, is 'sticky'. The abjection of 'dog' as an insult, 'sticks' to the boy. The dog in the image is far from abject, a sturdy little Jack Russell in a studded collar, tail up, ears pricked, but still, the term 'dog' dogs the boy. Sara Ahmed applies the term 'sticky' to emotion and emotional contexts, but also to texts and speech acts about emotion; 'stickiness involves a form of relationality, or a 'withness', in which the elements that are 'with' get bound together.'<sup>7</sup> Sticking, says Ahmed, 'is dependent on past histories of association that often 'work' through concealment.'<sup>8</sup> Stickiness works at an unseen level, it is insidious, it is subconscious, like unthought thought. And it is the stuff of prejudice, of neuroses, of desire, of gut-feelings, and of embarrassment.

A fine example of 'stickiness' occurs in Michael Petry's account of the proposed artworks for the exhibition 'Hidden Histories' in Walsall in 2004, where one of the pieces, Felix Gonzales-Torres's *Untitled (Ross)* was vetoed by the local council. The abstract conceptual work consists of a pile of wrapped sweets equal in weight to the body of Gonzales-Torres's lover, Ross Laycock who was dying from an AIDS-

---

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p91.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p13.

related illness. Spectators participate by helping themselves to sweets, and the total mass shrinks over time. Petry reports first hand on the rejection.

In a formal meeting to discuss all the works proposed for the show, the official [Head of Arts for the local council] angrily denounced the piece, stating that everyone knew that all “homosexuals” were “pedophiles” and that everyone knew that “pedos” try to catch children with candy, and that he would not allow such perversion to take place “on my [his] watch”.<sup>9</sup>



Gonzales-Torres *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA)*

Allowing the furore over the sticky sweets of *Untitled (Ross)* to stick again and to articulate the homoerotic and homophobia that are always strong undercurrents in the consumption of Gilbert & George’s work poses the question; who is Dog Boy looking at? Two old queers with a camera? What have they offered him to pose for them? No, to pose for me. I am the one now looking, and so I am complicit in all the anxieties and desires that are ‘with’ the image of the boy. I don’t devour him as a homoerotic fantasy, for me, the attraction is sentimental, recalling narratives of my past. But something in his shifty look is replicated in my gaze, which is also shifty, furtive even. And I worry for him. ‘Go home; don’t take sweets from strangers’.

---

<sup>9</sup> Michael Petry in Amy K. Levin, ed. *Gender, Sexuality and Museums* (London: Routledge, 2010). p156.

The stickiness of ideas and images embarrasses me. I am embarrassed by the contaminating juxtaposition of the lovely Dog Boy with someone else's homophobia. They came together in my head and now I can't prize them apart. And initially by 'prize' I meant disentangle, but now I cannot value them apart either. The transgressiveness of Gilbert & George's work is often assumed to be the rude words, the flying shit, see my underpants, see my arsehole, as if in response to Bill Grundy's moral majority provocation: 'Go on, you've got another five seconds. Say something outrageous.'<sup>10</sup> But it is not. The transgression of their work is not what they put in the images but what we as spectators read into them, or take out of them, as if the image is a repository for sticky thoughts. Looking at their work there is always the hazardous potential that I, as the spectator, may expose myself, letting ordinary life corrupt my looking, having ordinary, everyday emotions when I should be more pure in gaze.

If the work of Gilbert & George can be said to be a repository for sticky thoughts, to articulate those thoughts, to say what I see, is a form of sticky word association. It brings embarrassment to light; it traps it in language, in discourse. Putting embarrassment into words always makes things worse. Denise Riley's essay 'All Mouth and No Trousers' exactly captures how this can progress from an insubstantial idea of embarrassment to an embodied feeling, how; 'the standing of the word as thing solidifies, and the coming flavour of it becomes hard to hold in the mouth.'<sup>11</sup> To say what we mean, sometimes we have no option but to use words from a 'linguistic constituency' to which we don't belong.<sup>12</sup> This is always awkward. The embarrassment of solidifying difficult but deniable thoughts into the un-deniability of language is like the bringing into existence that Lee Edelman claims for

---

<sup>10</sup> From Grundy's interview with the Sex Pistols on the *Today* programme broadcast by Thames Television, 01 December 1976.

<sup>11</sup> Riley, p104.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p104.

psychoanalysis. The analytic scene is according to Edelman, one that actually summons up emotional states rather than just talking about them.

Freud's metapsychological theories, after all, repeatedly articulate a structural return to a trauma occasioned by an earlier event that has no existence *as a scene of trauma* until it is (re)presented – or (re)produced – as a trauma in the movement of return itself.<sup>13</sup>

So the (re)productive telling, as a solidification in language, calls into existence something out of nothing, or next to nothing. In the same way, an embarrassing moment may pass unmentioned, passing into an unmentionable past, but alternatively, if we are called on to account for the embarrassment that was fleetingly felt, to try to specify *exactly* what was embarrassing, to designate or to name, to find the words, inadequate, unfortunate, loaded, compromising words, this actually *causes* a further layer of embarrassment. The present becomes thoroughly sticky, contaminated by the past and by passing thoughts, and embarrassment is not just reproduced, but produced. And not just as a thing of the past, but of now, in a present moment.

The phenomenon of spectatorial embarrassment that I want to explore here is initiated by the spectator's declaration (my declaration) of interest in the object of the look and the obligation to be accountable for the 'I' that looks. But the account of that embarrassment is important in itself; the speaking/writing of embarrassment is what Sartre might call 'a solidification of self'. The temporal and spatial structure of embarrassment is inflected by Ahmed's 'stickiness' of things being 'with', and by Riley's 'standing of the word as thing', and by the psychoanalytical 'movement of return'. Each of these concepts imagines tentative relationships of substitutable causes and effects that are similar if not identical to the relationship between the

---

<sup>13</sup> Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994).p175.

experience of embarrassment and its narrative, which are also metaleptically substitutable.

The sticky associations and compromises of embarrassment, of seeing/knowing, and thinking/feeling, are blocked and complicated by the difficulties of language, but demanded by the narrative structure of the show-and-tell of disclosure and interpretation, by the analysis and distillation of theory. The process of narrative calls for the transmogrification of feeling into the blunt solidity of words giving wordy substance to the slight and nuanced ephemera of affect. The reification of embarrassment in language is mirrored and explored here through the narrative structure of the anecdote; a brief account, but made real by its contingency, by thick description, and by a commitment to being 'true'. This process of emotional blockage, difficulty of language, and the subsequent critical thinking it sparks is the praxis of the following chapters.

## **SPACES OF CULTURAL CAPITAL**

Spectatorial embarrassment experienced when looking at art may be compounded by the specific context of that spectatorship. The museum or gallery has a longstanding investment in procuring a particular spectator-experience, and whilst intentions of directors and curators may be changing to encourage a less formal encounter, the spaces of cultural capital they work within have a history of the promotion of serious learning and contemplation. The art gallery according to Bourdieu, 'often calls for an austere, quasi-scholastic disposition, oriented . . . towards the accumulation of experience and knowledge.'<sup>14</sup> The gallery, the

---

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, p272

museum, or the exhibition space is a place of cultural capital in the way that a bank is a place of financial capital. The similarity might extend to the architecture declaring wealth, authority, endorsing enlightenment values and aesthetics. Other parallels have been drawn; with temples, as places of ritual, and with schools as places of pedagogical intent, they are, as Doyle notes, 'spaces in which we encounter culture, usually on someone else's terms.'<sup>15</sup> All are places and spaces of institutional inequality.

In theory, according to Carol Duncan, the gallery is;

A liminal zone of time and space in which visitors, removed from the concerns of their daily, practical lives, open themselves to a different quality of experience.<sup>16</sup>

In practice, Duncan recognises the failure of this;

In reality, people continually "misread" or scramble or resist the museum's cues to some extent; or they actively invent, consciously or unconsciously, their own programs according to all the historical and psychological accidents of who they are.<sup>17</sup>

Biography, then undoes the capacity, or inclination to be ideal spectators who meet the anticipated criteria; who see what they are expected to see, who know what they are expected to know, and feel what they are expected to feel. 'Spectator' is a role we are supposed to know how to play. In the gallery, there is a code of appropriate behaviour, a prescriptive 'norm' that as a spectator I am expected to approximate. Deviate from this and I will draw unwanted and unfavourable attention to myself. Deviate from this norm and I may be embarrassed. Walk, don't run. Talk quietly, don't shout. Look. Look as *if* I am engaged. Absorb the image, take it all in, but

---

<sup>15</sup> Duncan compares museums to temples; Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007)., Doyle compares them to schools.; 'Critical Tears: melodrama and museums' in Nicholas Baume, *Getting Emotional* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2005). p43.

<sup>16</sup> Duncan, p20.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p13.

don't be taken in by it, it is art, not reality. Consider, reflect, study, approve, disapprove, but don't crowd, keep a distance. Sometimes things are roped off, or there is a line on the floor that the visitor must not cross. Don't cross the line. Keep a safe distance, physically and emotionally. Don't laugh. Don't cry. Don't cry out in pain or jump for joy. Indifference is perfectly acceptable. It is okay to look bored.

One of the things spectators are embarrassed to do in the place of cultural capital is to *show* emotion. Not only is looking at art sometimes embarrassing in itself, but moreover there is the meta-embarrassment of being embarrassed by an inappropriately emotional response. Elkins, Doyle, and Butt have all written of being moved to tears by art or performance, but felt that there was something unacceptable about the emotion they felt, and about its public display.<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Doyle says;

When an artist successfully overrides the self-consciousness and the inhibitions that settle on us in places like galleries and classrooms, it comes as a shock: finding ourselves crying, laughing, afraid, disgusted, aroused, outraged – can leave us feeling a bit naked.<sup>19</sup>

Both innate self-consciousness and the politics of display that proscribes certain types of behaviour as inappropriate may cause the spectator to police their instinctive response. But sometimes we just can't help ourselves; the emotional reaction is unstoppable, and the best we can hope for is to hide our feelings, and to keep our response as quiet as we can; to try to 'cover up'.

Doyle describes an occasion when her emotions 'got the better of her'. She was at Tate Modern watching a well-attended performance piece by Franko B, called *I Miss*

---

<sup>18</sup> See instances of tears in Elkins, and Doyle in Baume, and Gavin Butt, "How I Died for Kiki and Herb," in *The Art of Queering in Art*, ed. Henry Rogers (Birmingham: Article Press).

<sup>19</sup> Doyle in Baume, p43.

*You*.<sup>20</sup> Franko, naked and covered all over in white paint, like the vernix of a newborn, walked up and down a canvas cat-walk, all the time bleeding onto the canvas through catheters inserted into his arms. The piece speaks of many things, of painting, of the fashion industry, of duration and endurance, of bodies and bodily fluids, but Doyle was affected by the *intimacy* of the work. She responded to the apparent desolation of a lone man, purposefully walking, growing weaker, walking, bleeding, bleeding *for* something? In spite of being just one member of a sizeable audience, she took it very personally; he was bleeding *for* her, she was the 'you' that Franko's 'I' was missing. She says;

When Franko walked out of our view and the lights went up, I was overcome by tears – not by gentle tears, but by a wave of feeling so intense it threatened to take me over with racking sobs – the kind of crying that makes you shudder. [ . . . ] And it's about the last sort of feeling I expected to have in a museum. I managed to shake it off, but not without giving myself away.<sup>21</sup>

And then to compound the embarrassment of having sobbed at the conclusion of the piece, having 'given herself away', Doyle suffers the further indignity of hearing others in the audience 'scoff' at those who cried (she was apparently not the only one). The intense, personal, immediate and instinctive response of those who cried was derided. Perhaps for the failure to demonstrate the pure gaze of cultural capital, perhaps for the lack of *critical* engagement, perhaps more basically that it shows weakness, sentimentality, a soft underbelly.

The conclusion Doyle draws from her emotional outburst (note the pejorative term) is that despite the disparagement of a perhaps out-dated modernist aesthetic that privileges a seemingly cold-hearted transcendence of reason, and the detachment of the pure gaze, what we as spectators increasingly look for in art is emotion. The desired emotional transaction between image and spectator must, above all else, be

---

<sup>20</sup> Franko B *I Miss You* (2003) performance piece, Tate Modern

<sup>21</sup> Doyle in Baume, p44.

sincere. As the affective turn impacts on our social and cultural relations in ways that are subtle, insidious and pervasive we look to art to provide an emotional experience, as Bourriaud would have it, a relational aesthetic.<sup>22</sup> We seek to make a connection and need to be sure we can trust the other party with our feelings, and with our soft underbelly; we don't want to get hurt. Doyle sees the spectator drawing closer to the image, checking it out for the sincerity that makes it worth the emotional investment;

Ultimately, what matters is how these works provoke us to scrutinize the image, looking for signs of sincerity. In doing so they court our attention and force us to draw near. That ambiguity is the very thing that seduces us: in our hearts we hold on to the possibility that someone might be crying for us. ("I miss you.")<sup>23</sup>

This indicates potential for spectatorial embarrassment. If the spectator draws close to the work, looking for sincerity, looking for the possibility of a genuine emotional interaction, opening themselves up to this possibility, it replicates the conditions of Silvan Tomkins' account of the beginning of shame-embarrassment; ' . . . because one wishes to look at or commune with another person but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar.'<sup>24</sup> The expectation of an intimate exchange can be vexed, not necessarily cancelled, but things may not be as imagined and the spectator is wrong-footed, left feeling exposed, having approached and made eye-contact, offered up her belly, but a stranger looks back. The spectator is then embarrassed, unsettled by both her initial desire and the resulting anxiety of the strange.

---

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans., Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods, Collection Documents Sur L'art (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Doyle in Baume, p49.

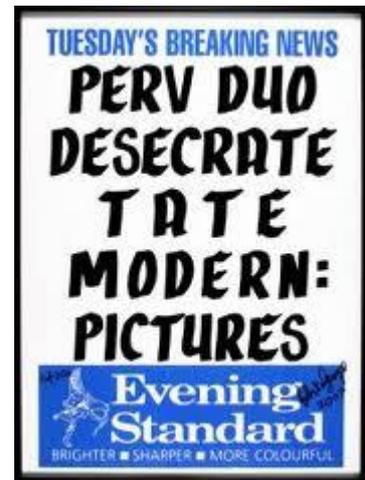
<sup>24</sup> Sedgwick and Frank, p135.

## 'MAJOR EXHIBITION' AT TATE MODERN

Tate Modern looks nothing like a bank or a temple but it is however a memorial to industrialisation and capitalism, men making power, men making money out of men making power, and its scale is monumental. It is also a monument to re-appropriation and reinterpretation, rejuvenation even, and reputed for its enthusiastic inclusiveness and earnest assumption of pedagogical responsibilities. In 2007 this was the industrial-scale arena for the most comprehensive exhibition of the work of Gilbert & George to be staged in the UK. It is fair to say that the Tate was not an early adopter of Gilbert & George. They invested in some early works, (such as *Balls*) but didn't show them until considerably later. The relationship between Gilbert & George and the Tate has been mildly antagonistic; Gilbert and George have from time to time berated the Tate's exclusionary tactics and have been less than complementary about Tate Modern. They like to play the part of outsiders, with the Tate as the establishment opposition, but by 2007 they had, as George put it, 'managed to kick in the door of the Tate'.<sup>25</sup>



Tate Modern 2007



<sup>25</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Gilbert & George, The Conversation Series* (Koln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter Konig, 2007). p171. See also Francois Jonquet, *Gilbert & George: Intimate Conversations with Francois Jonquet* (London: Phaidon, 2004). (pp328-331) *Balls* (1972) was acquired by Tate in 1972, and exhibited 2005 in the exhibition 'Open Systems: rethinking Art c.1970' Tate Modern.

François Jonquet asked them: 'What do you think of the Tate Modern?' and Gilbert replied; 'A sausage machine! People go into a sort of art factory, and people come out. The artist is not the most important part. More than the art it's the movement in and out.'<sup>26</sup> He seems peeved that the artist should not be pre-eminent, but why the artist and not the visitor? On bad weather days the most important things are apparently the gift shop and the café. In good weather it is a matter of location. Sometimes though, the publicity Tate generates threatens to overtake all to become the most important thing (and in this it truly does resemble a sausage machine). Tate Modern has an aptitude for controversy and (occasionally) manages to make art dangerous.<sup>27</sup>



Gilbert & George discuss hanging at Tate Modern, 2007

I am in the gallery. Within the context of this exhibition there is no disputing the fact that size matters. The works loom large, and wandering from room to room, I am somewhat overawed, perhaps belittled. Looking at the works I find I am attracted and repelled in equal measure; and in that moment of confusion, I find that I don't know where, or how exactly to look. I want to both look, and look away. I feel

---

<sup>26</sup> Jonquet, p330.

<sup>27</sup> Carsten Höller's slides (2006), Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* (2008), and most recently Ai Weiwei's sunflower seeds (2010) have all made the headlines on health and safety issues.

obliged to look. I have paid to look. I feel physically awkward, I feel too much of myself, an embarrassing surplus as I admit to an uneasy resistance to the images. As I stand there 'just' looking, I don't know what to do with my hands; palms are dry, mouth is wet. Saliva gathers; I swallow it. It is unacceptable to spit in galleries, I think. Is anyone else looking?

There's the rub; is anyone else looking? For embarrassment is a self-consciousness *with others*. Others either really present at that moment, standing behind me, watching me, or imagined others, or the vague discomfiting unfamiliar of 'Other', but always others who judge, and I suppose, find me wanting. What should be my response to *this* image, to *this* situation? I am alone, in the sense of being there at the exhibition on my own, so I don't have to speak in a literal sense, but there remains the problem of body language. Should I look thoughtful, amused, disgusted, bored? Can I fake a pure gaze? Can I look neutral? If I could look neutral, maybe what I think, maybe how I feel won't show, maybe others won't see that I am moved, that I am inappropriately emotional, making connections between these images and my ordinary life. Maybe they won't see that I am embarrassed.

The work of Gilbert & George deliberately challenges the embarrassability of the spectator. It has a capacity for *double entendre*, and in a perverse way. If works that are seemingly innocent are loaded with (perhaps queer) erotic potential, so too works that are rude and unseemly might be read queerly as something quite lovely, or indeed charming. As spectators we are continually wrong-footed, exposing our own prejudices, neuroses, and desires. The perverse *double entendre* of their work exemplifies Roland Barthes' proposition that what exposes a person to embarrassment depends on the discourse involved. Bourgeois discourse, he said, is scandalised by the exposure of 'the sexual private life', whilst left-wing, radical discourse is offended by 'traces of bourgeois ideology confessed in the subject . . .

passion, friendship, tenderness, sentimentality'.<sup>28</sup> Gilbert & George manage to expose the spectator to both of those embarrassments.

I am capable of being embarrassed by the sexual private life they describe, or to be more accurate, it is my insatiable and prurient curiosity that feeds off it that is embarrassing, and I feel bad that I am insufficiently cool about it all to be *disinterested*. Other images have the capacity to embarrass me quite differently. The mawkish sentimentality of their work and its tacky patriotism can also make me squirm, as can its mediocrity. So as I stand 'just looking', failing to present a 'coherent self', what part of me feels embarrassed? Surely not my bourgeois self? Surely I am not embarrassed by the cartoon nudity, the super-sized turds, the references to 'deviant' sexuality? Or is it the ordinary shitty world I live in? Is it the tenderness with which I am offered tramps, rent boys and dog boys?

## FEELING QUEER

In my spectatorial engagement with Gilbert & George I am looking, as Doyle suggests, for signs of sincerity. The signs are elusive. But ambiguity is there in spades, everywhere I look I see ambiguity, *double entendre*, banality that must mean something, meaning rendered meaningless. This was also noted by David Sylvester, who said:

There is something deeply equivocal about what is expected of us. However forthright, however shockingly forthright, they [both] are in some areas, insufficient information is furnished to tell us in what spirit we are meant to

---

<sup>28</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, pp82,83.

react. The work may be meaningful to ordinary people, but that does not mean that the meaning is clear.<sup>29</sup>

Underpinning my response is a gnawing sense of doubt about the integrity of their work. The sheer longevity of their performance as living sculptures, and the overwhelming volume of work at the 'major exhibition' might be taken as confirmation of the seriousness of their work, but still there is a suspicion that it might be some elaborate (and very long running) hoax, and does that rule it out as art? I doubt the integrity of the work, and yet it moves me. It makes me feel unsteady, as if I cannot be certain that I am seeing what I see. It makes me feel *queer*. And the queer I invoke here is the queer of my Enid Blyton childhood. Queer, as in not straightforward, not all that it seems. I want to use this naïve older meaning, which can now only be read by looking backwards, through the theoretical harnessing of queer as a refusal of the normative, through the recuperation of gay pride, and through homophobia. Yes, all 'sticky' situations, that leave their mark on the meanings we ascribe, and all relevant to the reception of Gilbert & George's work. But this queer feeling is potentially the beginning of an adventure. It dares me to look, and to say what I see. And queer also has the old meaning of fraudulence and of forgery, as in 'queer as a nine bob note', which again throws into question the integrity of artistic intention and the sincerity of any emotional transaction I might get involved in.

There is, in the field of art history/art criticism a lack of consensus on how, or if, to pigeonhole the work of Gilbert & George. It has variously been described as conceptual, realist, and performance art; for some critics it is barely art at all. Gilbert & George have repeatedly pooh-poohed any suggestion that their art is conceptual. Gilbert commented; 'Everybody was doing Conceptual Art but we wanted to express

---

<sup>29</sup> David Sylvester, *About Modern Art: Critical Essays 1948 - 2000* (London: Pimlico, 2002). p316.

feelings, something real. An art of feeling.<sup>30</sup> Their stated ethos and methodology however, are purely and essentially conceptualist. In an *Artforum* article of 1967, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', Sol LeWitt offers a working definition of conceptual art;

When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine which makes the art.<sup>31</sup>

This is a description of Gilbert & George's mechanistic working methods;

We have a system for making each work of art, and once we've decided on the system we cannot change it. That's it – you have to accept it . . . we've never rejected an art work we've made. What we've finished is finished.<sup>32</sup>

The artworks are perhaps no more than a bi-product of the arc of their work; the sustained concept of being the artist 'Gilbert & George'.



The idea/machine at work

What LeWitt describes as an idea that becomes a machine is 'Gilbert & George'.

The idea/machine once created, acquires an autonomous energy whilst George and

---

<sup>30</sup> Jonquet, p88.

<sup>31</sup> LeWitt, S. 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', Reprinted in Donna De Salvo, ed. *Open Systems: Rethinking Art C.1970* (London: Tate publishing, 2005). p180.

<sup>32</sup> Obrist, p72.

Gilbert surrender agency and become drones in the production of the artworks. The idea is everything, and the resulting image should stand, without editing, however embarrassing it might be. There is however, a natural revulsion to the idea of autonomous energy supplanting human creativity. How can a spectator entrust the soft underbelly of her emotional response to an idea/machine?

The idea/machine, or perhaps the firm; 'Gilbert & George' has a curious quality of middle-aged, middle-class, mild-mannered respectability which exists despite Gilbert and George's flagrantly unconventional lifestyle with its stifling adherence to routine, and also in spite of their subject matter, sometimes risqué, rude, or sometimes just downright crude. Alex Bacon comments on the 'respectability' of the firm, which is 'always undercut by an edge of the vulgar and unseemly, something which cannot be simply understood as a residue-effect of some of their more incendiary artworks.'<sup>33</sup>

The queerness of Gilbert & George is hidden in plain view. Their relationship, for example, though rarely questioned, is always and essentially in doubt. Petry comments on their long-running refusal to confirm or deny that they are 'a couple'; 'Were they to foreclose the argument, the artist (Gilbert & George) might cease to exist, as uncertainty is integral to the programme of the two men.'<sup>34</sup> This long-running ambiguity even manages to outlast the recent legitimization of their relationship by a civil partnership, not apparently in imitation of a straight marriage but undertaken for 'administrative reasons'. Of course no one is really fooled. Besides 'administrative reasons' we suspect there may be love.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Alex Bacon, "Punks, Skinheads and Dandies: Matrices of Desire in Gilbert & George," in *The Art of Queering in Art*, ed. Henry Rogers (Birmingham: Article Press, 2007). p78.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Petry, *Hidden Histories: 20th Century Male Same Sex Lovers in the Visual Arts* (London: Artmedia Press, 2004). p90.

<sup>35</sup> See Hudson, D. 'Out In The City' (2009) 'They tied the knot at a registry office in Bow, east London, last year. Their two staff acted as witnesses and they celebrated afterwards at an Indian restaurant close to their home. "[Civil partnerships] are very, very important," says

Some of their later works are for me, embarrassing particularly *because* of the intimate coupledness that is revealed, and this is discussed at length in Chapter Five, but here, I will concentrate on the cultivated ambiguity that is the dominant feature of their life and work. The fastidiously maintained strategy of humdrum respectability has enabled Gilbert & George to present themselves to the world as both very straight and extremely queer. The double standard is an example of how Sedgwick suggests 'codes of gay "knowingness" are imbricated with codes of gay deniability'.<sup>36</sup> The ways in which Gilbert and George have produced themselves draw on a number of cultural tropes both flaunting and cloaking queerness, including the flâneur, and the bachelor.<sup>37</sup>



Morecambe & Wise

In other words we agree to turn a collective blind eye. Gilbert & George have been compared to comedians Morecombe & Wise, who were often seen side by side in bed, in their pyjamas, discussing Ernie's plays on prime time 'Aunty' BBC television. It was unthinkable that there was anything queer about this. As a nation, we publicly overlooked the peculiarity whilst privately enjoying the inference that we didn't see. More recently a journalist writing on the alleged tax evasion of Dolce and Gabbana

---

George solemnly, "because if something were to happen to one of us, it could be a nightmare." (Transcript of interview available at [www.david-hudson.co.uk/archive/gilbertandgeorge.html](http://www.david-hudson.co.uk/archive/gilbertandgeorge.html) accessed 30.06.11)

<sup>36</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of The Closet*, p52.

<sup>37</sup> See Sedgwick on bachelors in *Ibid.*, p188-212.

referred to them as 'the Gilbert and George of the fashion world', conferring on them an old-school respectability, not so much of two old queens but of two old dowagers, whose establishment is beyond reproach.<sup>38</sup>

In their long-running routine as 'Gilbert & George', Gilbert and George have come to occupy a marginal but privileged position similar to that inhabited by the characters identified by Bakhtin as the rogue, the clown and the fool who 'create around themselves their own special little world, and their own chronotope'.<sup>39</sup> They occupy a position associated with theatrical trappings (and thus artificiality) and yet belong to the public square of reality. The rogue the clown and the fool, advises Bakhtin, should be seen metaphorically:

Sometimes their significance can be reversed – but one cannot take them literally, because they are not what they seem . . . they are life's maskers; their body coincides with their role, and outside this role they simply do not exist.<sup>40</sup>

The co-extensivity of role and body claimed here is echoed in Gilbert & George's declaration that they have no life outside art. 'We don't have any other private life: we eat, go to sleep, think about art. When we have an exhibition, we get drunk, that's it.'<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> 'Stefano Gabbana and Domenico Dolce could face up to five years in jail if sent for trial over alleged tax evasion. [ . . . ] The affair is potentially highly embarrassing for the "Gilbert and George of Italian fashion",' [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) Friday 26 November 2010 (accessed 11.01.11)

<sup>39</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). p159.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p159. Bakhtin's 'square' is a space from classical history where deeds and discourse are explicitly in the public domain.

<sup>41</sup> *The Words of Gilbert & George*, p183.



Poseurs?

This gives rise to the fascination of trying to catch them out. When they take off the responsibility suits at night, do they revert to being something or someone else? Despite an ‘inning’ revealing that George was married and a father of two, all the evidence indicates that when they shut the door of the house in Fournier Street, they remain Gilbert & George.<sup>42</sup> But still the sticky suspicion lingers. There is always in their life and work a degree of implausibility and the spectator is unable to be certain of reading the works as either ‘frank’ or alternatively ‘insincere’. Professional cross-dressers such as lady-boys, who aim to completely fool, are traditionally the cause of mortal embarrassments; they make a fool of the spectator. However, the pleasure of seeing a really good drag queen is not in the perfection of the illusion but precisely in the imperfection, in the spectatorial collusion in the artifice. Gilbert & George, in their respectable responsibility suits frustrate their audience with a performance that prevaricates, fudging the division between the flawless deceptions that ‘fool’ and those accompanied by a conspiratorial wink.

The fastidiously maintained façade of Gilbert & George is both the cause and site of embarrassment. The comfort of certain knowledge is denied. The spectator may be

---

<sup>42</sup> Over the years a number of articles have appeared in the press, e.g. ‘A Skeleton in George’s Closet’ by Jack Malvern in *The Times* (21.01.06). Also mentioned as early as 1970 in ‘Studio International’ See also Farson, pp28-33.

embarrassed by the suspicion that she is not 'in the know'. I read their work as 'queer' but without confidence in the meaning, or indeed meanings of the word. I suspect that my spectatorship may also be queered, like a pitch. As a spectator I am disinclined to get too close to an unfeeling idea/machine, and seeing no clear sign of sincerity, I am reluctant to engage emotionally, and to trust them with my feelings. The difficulty *and* attraction of the doubt I feel is in the precarious balance between frank and fraud, and the caught-between-the-two-ness that results in spectatorial ambivalence. But still I look; my look is drawn in to the vacuous space of doubt and my only option is to try to cover up my ignorance, not knowing if I am supposed to take them at face value, or with a wink.

## **FEELING FEMALE**

One thing I am very certain of is that the work of Gilbert & George, and my spectatorship of it, mark me out as female. The gendering of spectatorship is not in itself a cause of embarrassment, but feeling female establishes a predisposition towards an emotional response and towards exposure of the self as flawed. Being female is to be sexed rather than neutral, and to be a body rather than an intellect, and so the potential for a dis-passionate response is already foreclosed. The cause of the excessive femaleness of my spectatorship is the remarkable gender bias of their work. The landscape of Gilbert & Georgeworld is exclusively a spunkland, a boys-own, boys-only terrain. It is peopled by boys and men, rent boys, cocky boys, old men, religious men, black men, men in suits, pretty boys and derelict men. Women are completely absent, but not, I would argue, due to misogyny; simply that we, women, don't figure. Gilbert and George have stated that everyone else paints women; they don't. Representation of the female body within, and as art is so

ubiquitous that a deliberate omission should perhaps have attracted more attention, but like their sexual preferences, it goes largely unmentioned. The female absence within the frame draws attention to the genderedness of looking, a genderedness experienced as a surplus, outside, looking in. As I will discuss, the spectatorial position is a potential inversion of Mulveyan, normative gender roles, which posits woman as spectacle and man as bearer of the look. So whilst the exclusively male content of the work makes me aware of my gender, so too does the very act of looking.

Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' is the benchmark for a gendered and psychoanalytic reading of the spectator-text relationship. Though flawed, contested, and revised it remains an important work. Mulvey's basic premise is that mainstream western narrative cinema; metonymically standing for all visual experience is produced to gratify the appetites of the normative heterosexual male. Everything is organized from this specific viewing position, for *his* viewing pleasure. The man looks and the woman is looked at, or as Mulvey famously and splendidly puts it, 'woman connotes to-be-looked-at-ness'.<sup>43</sup> The woman is the object of multiple looks; she is looked at by the other (male) actors, by the camera, and finally by the cinema audience. Hers is a passive role of display, whilst the man enjoys the mobility and power of the look as a tool for control, and for fulfillment of desire; a look that within film theory is 'the gaze'. The (heterosexual) male is offered two types of visual pleasure; scopophilia, objectification of the image, subjected to a controlling and curious gaze, and narcissism, a fascination with likeness and recognition, rather than possessing the image, here the one who looks fantasizes that he *is* the image.

---

<sup>43</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Mulvey's much criticised gender binary originally presupposed a straightforward heteronormativity – and given that she was analysing mainstream western narrative cinema, this was not unreasonable. Duncan makes the same assumptions for the gallery/museum;

Nevertheless, not only is the museum's immediate space gendered, but so also is the larger universe implicit in its program. Both are a man's world. This job of gendering falls largely to the museum's many images of female bodies. Silently and surreptitiously they specify the museum's rituals as a male spiritual quest, just as they mark the project of modern art in general as a male endeavour, built on male fears, fantasies and aspirations.<sup>44</sup>

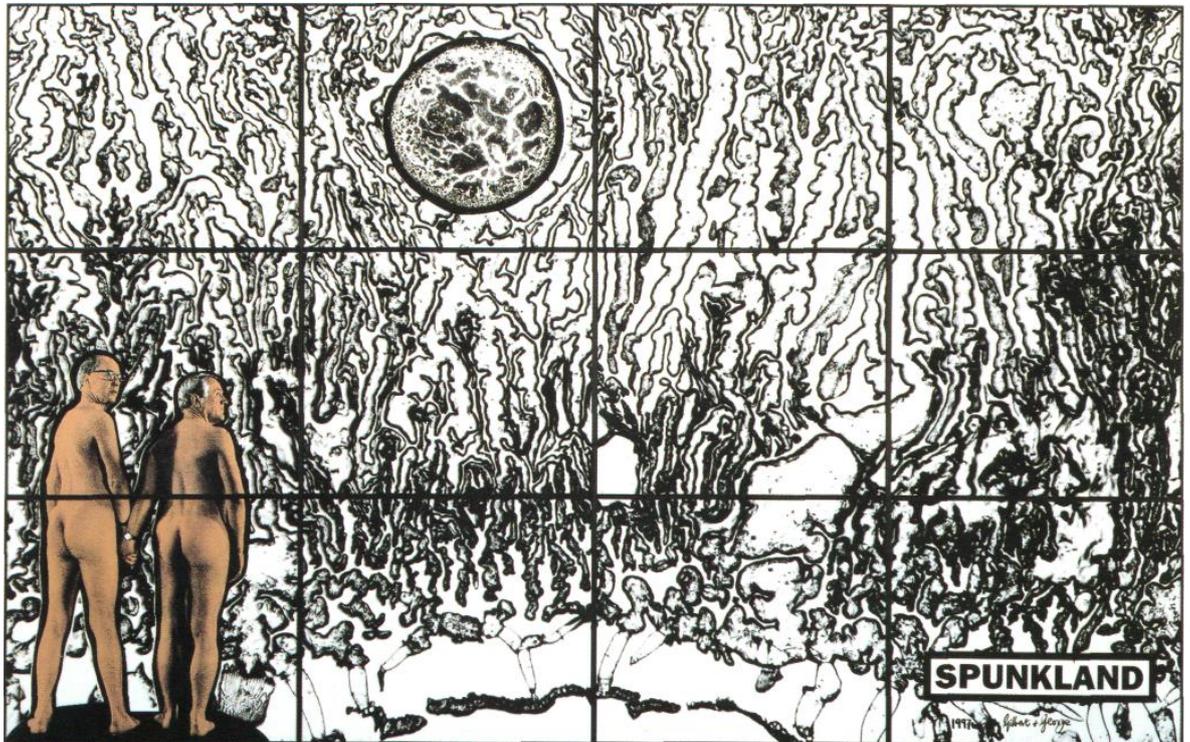
In Gilbert & Georgetworld, woman is completely absent (yet still it reads as a man's world) and so, if the object of the look is *never* female, could spectatorship of their work call for a reversal of 'normal' subject/object positions? Looking at a male object of display, is the spectator invited or obliged to adopt a female viewing position? Is the spectator, perhaps momentarily, objectified?

Spectatorship may be feminised but this does not of course necessarily frame it as female. Spectatorship of this male territory is not a simplistic inversion of the Mulveyan gender binary but *is* characterised as restricted, passive, emotional, and excessive. The images that confront the spectator are imagined for a male viewer, who is denied the normative viewing pleasures (looking at women) and forced to come face to face with an intense vision of (his own) masculinity. And yet, as the construction and stability of masculinity depends on its 'other', the absent feminine is more troubling in its absence than its controlled, i.e. looked at, presence could be. In Mulvey's Freudian interpretation, woman is the object of pleasure but also causes anxiety; 'in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her

---

<sup>44</sup> Duncan, p113.

lack of penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure.<sup>45</sup> The absent female is here cast as a threat to a queer equilibrium.



Gilbert & George *Spunkland* (1997) Photopiece 190 x 302 cm

The intrusion of femaleness into their boys-own world is evident as the imagined unpleasure of castration anxiety. This is closest to the surface in *Spunkland*, a vast image of magnified ejaculate creating a landscape that has a quality of fossilised minerals, lava flows, or petrified forests. A planetary object above adds to the sense of a barren landscape, and to the disconcerting instability of scale as if Gilbert and George have found themselves shipwrecked in Brobdingnag. In this fragile phallic world Gilbert and George wander hand in hand like lost boys. Because they are turned away from the viewer, their bare bodies, pink, like newborn mice, have no (visible) penises. The spectacle of the smallness of the figures with their evident lack juxtaposed with the excessive maleness of ten feet of spunk is an embarrassing

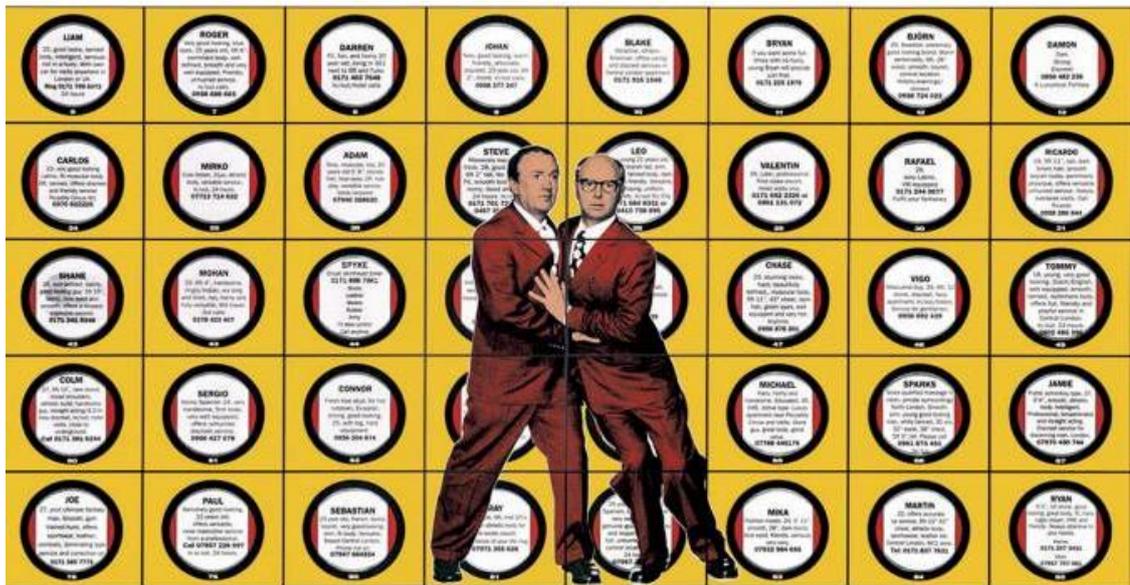
---

<sup>45</sup> Mulvey, p22.

display of castration anxiety. The self-contained and reductive maleness brings about the realisation that the image of woman has nothing at all to do with male desire; my role is to *be* anxiety.

As a female spectator, I am aware that my spectatorship of Gilbert & George intrudes on an exclusively male scene, by men and for a male gaze, a scene of pleasures I could or should take no part in. This makes me feel voyeuristic, like a tourist in their world. I am especially aware of indulging in gender, or perhaps even sexuality tourism, while standing for a long time, too long, reading the *New Horny Pictures*, each a matrix of ads for rent boys.<sup>46</sup> I read them with pleasure and some fascination knowing I am *not* the target audience of the ads and aware that this leaves me in a curious relation to the (content of the) art work. I read:

LET ME BE YOUR FANTASY . . . Older gentlemen welcome . . . 100% discreet . . . In/Out . . . rough & ready dead handsome VWE . . . Keep my phone number, you may need it.



Gilbert & George *Named* (2001) detail

<sup>46</sup> *New Horny Pictures*; 2001 16 works: *Ten, New, I Am . . . , Black, Nine, Geography, Thirteen, West End, Twelve, Eight, Phone, Two, Tom, Ages, Four, Named*. The works are colossal; *I Am . . .*, for example is 338 x 1491 cm. Quotes from *I Am . . .* and *Tom*.

The ads are interspersed with images of G&G, impassive, suited, staring straight ahead. Formally these works are not engaging; the content however claims my prurient interest. Gilbert and George have described them as a memorial, and there is indeed a rather maudlin similarity with reading the inscriptions on gravestones. The spectator is eavesdropping on other lives, other deaths but there is a degree of sentimentality about the spectatorial position with its spurious distance and vicarious pleasures. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick notes that 'the position of sentimental spectatorship seemed to offer coverture for differences' and she lists wealth/poverty and sexual entitlement as sentimentalised differences, both of which are poignantly, sentimentally applicable to these works.<sup>47</sup> And in a wider sense, the way that *The New Horny Pictures* spectacularise homosexuality, reducing it to just cheap sex, could be read as an acute observation on what Sedgwick calls 'a sentimental appropriation by the larger culture of male homosexuality as spectacle.'<sup>48</sup>

Or the spectator might take them at face value; they are very much about looking, and most specifically the intensity and duration of the look that we invest in them. This may range from a cursory glance, or browsing, through to a systematic and thoroughly engaged survey of the services available for hard cash. And that is where they become embarrassing, when the look lengthens into window shopping. They invite both too much interest and paradoxically too little; we risk taking them too literally. Each ad is complete with a phone number. I don't know if they are real, or just another tease. I never had the balls to ring.

As a tourist in spunkland, snooping around the blatant homoeroticism and its evil twin; homophobia, my spectatorial position is comparable to that of Fanny Hill

---

<sup>47</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, p151.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p145.

peeping through a hole in the wall at 'two young sparks' in an adjoining room at an inn, engaged in preposterous pleasures, a spectatorial event that she recounts in her 'memoirs'; *A Woman of Pleasure*. Fanny is in many ways a reliable witness, and gives a good account, despite her extravagant use of euphemism with its obvious links to embarrassment.<sup>49</sup> She does not shrink from her duty to see everything she can, and to say everything she can see. Looking through her spyhole, she reports the following:

Slipping then aside the young lad's shirt, and tucking it up under his clothes behind, he showed to the open air those globular, fleshy eminences that compose the mount-pleasants of Rome, and which now, with all the narrow vale that intersects them, stood displayed and exposed to his attack: nor could I, without a shudder, behold the dispositions he made for it. First then, moistening well with spittle his instrument, obviously to render it glib, he pointed, he introduced it, as I could plainly discern, not only from its direction and my losing sight of it . . .<sup>50</sup>

At one point Fanny considers that one of the boys may be a girl in disguise, but then discounts this as a mistake on her part. The homoerotic scene, described with the same candour that she brings to bear on all her other descriptions, is one of *misrecognition*, mistake and mispleasure (is this also a particularly feminised viewpoint?).

Like Fanny, my spectatorial position is precarious. The vicarious pleasure I take is one of both recognition and misrecognition, and the embarrassment that Gilbert & George cause me is one of exposure. I am caught looking at something that quite explicitly excludes me, but as I look, I am drawn in. My awareness of exclusion is uncomfortably close to a desire for inclusion. That I am left out makes me feel

---

<sup>49</sup> The vocabulary that Cleland gives Fanny is a satirical swipe at other writers of 'whore biographies' particularly Defoe and Richardson. The language now lends the episodes an element of humour, which partially negates the pornographic content. John Cleland, *Fanny Hill or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (London: Penguin Books, 1985 (first published 1748)).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p195.

exactly that; left out. I am excluded twice, once by femaleness and then again by straightness. I am embarrassed by my petulant desire to be counted in. Calvin Thomas offers a frank account of his straight relationship to 'queer', admitting the awkwardness of 'the decidedly ambiguous labor of straight queer aspiration.'<sup>51</sup>

Looking, perhaps unreasonably, for a direct address to *him* in Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, Thomas acknowledges his hope to be 'liked'. Firstly he wants to be liked, that is to be valued, and secondly to be 'made visible, counted in, to be liked in the mimetic sense of having one's own likeness reproduced.'<sup>52</sup>

If I am embarrassed by not being 'liked' in spunkland, here I differ from Fanny. She is not embarrassed; she feels outraged. Her response is typically of *her* life and times, she burns 'with rage and indignation' at the unspeakable vice.<sup>53</sup> Fanny is exposed by her outrage at a scene of mutual pleasure, which she goes to extremes to see; she pierces the paper wall between herself and the scene with a bodkin to make a peephole, and stands on a chair to get a better view, *and* has the patience to see it through to the end. Is it possible that Fanny's outrage is somewhat disingenuous, less at the 'odious' scene than at her *exclusion* from it? Within the scene she witnesses there is no space for her, no likeness of her, no potential for identification; her would-be place has been usurped by a 'sweet pretty stripling' who was 'like his mother behind'.<sup>54</sup> And Fanny is left *without*.

---

<sup>51</sup> Calvin Thomas, ed. *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality* (Urbana IL: university of Illinois Press, 2000). p12.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p21. See also Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>53</sup> Homosexuals were then reviled alongside heretics and foreigners as 'not like us'. See Peter Wagner's notes to the Penguin Classics edition: Eighteenth-century attitudes to homosexuals or 'Mollies' were generally condemnatory. They were typically portrayed as effeminate, misogynistic perverts. Cleland, p231. See also Bray, Alan, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982) and Katz, Jonathan Ned 'The Age of Sodomitical Sin 1607-1740' in Jonathan Goldberg, ed. *Reclaiming Sodom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> Cleland, pp194,195.

Fanny is exposed by her outrage, and I am exposed by my exclusion/desire for inclusion; I am fascinated, touched, appalled, compromised, and *without*. 'Without' here is working for me like Edelman's 'behind', and Thomas's 'liked', doubling its meaning to indicate both my spectatorial position as a mere onlooker, outside the frame of action, and also the embarrassing sense of lack that the image causes me to feel. This is what Barthes would term an amphibology; a 'sticky' homonym that infers a relation between two meanings. Not so embarrassing as a Freudian slip, and subtler perhaps than a pun, more like a *double entendre*. An amphibology insists on meaning both its meanings at once, 'as if one were winking at the other and as if the word's meaning were in that wink.'<sup>55</sup> The meaning, like the embarrassment is in language, but also embedded in discourse.

Fanny's spectatorial position has been interpreted as inversely gendered. Nancy Miller recommended that 'Fanny must be viewed as 'a male "I" in female drag'',<sup>56</sup> and Edelman also reads Fanny's position as one of reversal, associating her privileged seeing subject position with masculinity; 'Fanny's very spectatorial position, for example, confers upon her the power to see without becoming an object of scrutiny herself – a power culturally coded as the prerogative of the heterosexual male'<sup>57</sup> Edelman, continuing his conceit of the analytic scene as a sodomitical (be)hindsight also comments that like an analyst, she was able to 'come upon the sodomitical scene from behind.'<sup>58</sup> Fanny was able to 'peep' unobserved, but in the context of the museum or gallery, this is not the case. I am seen to look, I am 'caught looking'. As a spectator, I am defined by my act of looking and the visibility of that looking, within the gallery space, perhaps inhibits me from fully and

---

<sup>55</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p72.

<sup>56</sup> Nancy K. Miller "'I's in Drag: The Sex of Recollection", cited in Edelman, *Homographesis*, p186.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p186.

<sup>58</sup> Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*. p186.

comfortably occupying the privileged and fully subjective spectatorial position.

I still feel very female.

The spectatorial position of woman in a queer homoerotic environment is figured by Doyle as one of empowerment, but without any recourse to the role reversal of looking 'in drag'. Doyle envisages it as an opportunity for straight pleasure; to run an eye over the male body with impunity. Citing the work of film theorist, Laura Marks on gay porn, she suggests that; 'some people may intensely enjoy haunting spaces in which they are invisible (or at least differently visible), and consuming images not only not intended for them but not interested in representing them and their desires.'<sup>59</sup> Doyle argues that a queer homoerotic space is not experienced by woman as an asexual place, but actually, one in which her sexual subjectivity is 'acknowledged in all its unruliness' and that she freely enjoys her subjectivity as time out from her objectivity; that is, as a sex object.<sup>60</sup> But if, in this space she is invisible, *who* acknowledges her unruly sexual subjectivity? Who sees her at all?

Doyle and Marks both argue that the female spectator in gay male spaces enjoys a mobility in the freedom from connoting 'to-be-looked-at-ness', and with that mobility comes power, to run amok, to haunt, to see without being seen. But it seems to be a restricted freedom, a kind of impotent power that *in this space* lacks agency. As Marks writes; ' . . . this power is short-term and contingent as any other kind of looking.' Although I would not argue that the freedom of the female spectator in the queer environment of Gilbert & Georgeworld is casual in embarrassment *per se*, it is on the brink of embarrassment because it brings about an intense self-

---

<sup>59</sup> Doyle, *Sex Objects*, ppxxvi,xxvii.

<sup>60</sup> Doyle writes; 'The insertion of herself into a queer homoerotic environment is not a retreat from the sexual. For this woman, finding herself in a queer space can be sexually empowering – it may be the *only* space in which her sexuality is acknowledged in all its unruliness; or it may be a space in which she feels like a sexual subject precisely because she is not a sex object.' Ibid. ppxxvi,xxvii.

consciousness. Although I, as the spectator, am invisible to the male subjects and objects that are each to the other reversible; I see me. And I know that I am also 'caught looking'. In the same way that in embarrassment the self experiences being everything and nothing, in embarrassment the self may feel both hyper-visible and invisible. In the imaginary space of spunkland, I am intensely aware of seeing myself seeing, and it is I who must acknowledge my unruly sexual subjectivity. I might haunt the margins of Gilbert & George's scenes of masculinity, as Marks says, 'dropping in on other desiring gazes', but my marginality, my without-ness, is mine, returning me always to *myself* as a mere borrower.<sup>61</sup>

Alex Bacon argues that gender *and* sexuality are determining factors in establishing a spectatorial viewpoint in relation to Gilbert & George. He makes the point that the masculinities 'framed' by their work are unstable, or 'shaky' as a result of their excesses. The excessiveness of their images applies certainly to gender and sexuality but also to class, patriotism, blackness, whiteness, symbolism, faith and shit which are frequently overdetermined, and so complicate the picture. The excess of masculinity implicates the spectator in objectification of, or identification with, the image so that; 'the particular ways in which the viewer is figured and implicated in their seeing of the work mean that they must at least provisionally, momentarily, even antagonistically, encounter a gay male gaze which here does not belong to any single body,'<sup>62</sup> Bacon draws a direct comparison between a gay male gaze and a feminine or at least a feminised gaze, arguing that; 'the parallel between Gilbert & George's queer(ed) masculinity and femininity is centred in the fact that

---

<sup>61</sup> ' . . . I borrow a gay man's look at other men, drop in on a man's desiring gaze at another man' Laura U. Marks, "Straight Women, Gay Porn, and the Scene of Erotic Looking," *Jump Cut* 40, no. (1996).

<sup>62</sup> Bacon, p82.

many of Gilbert & George's masculinities operate excessively, which is to say (ontologically) like femininities.<sup>63</sup>

But as Bacon says, the female gaze, *my gaze*, as a twice-excluded heterosexual woman, is *not* exactly coincident with a gay male gaze and can only assume, borrow, or perhaps even usurp this spectatorial position, at best 'provisionally, momentarily' and at worst, 'antagonistically'. The overriding factor is not the sameness of desiring men, but the difference of *being* woman, and being disadvantaged, marginalised, dis-liked, without, unimportant, impotent, and embarrassed. Part of the difficulty of analysis of the motivation of the gaze as gendered and/or sexed, is in maintaining the distinction between how we look and who we look as. Spectatorial embarrassment as self-consciousness, persistently returns the spectator to the quiddity of her/himself, paradoxically always materialising 'the spectator as *different* from the spectacle with which she identifies'.<sup>64</sup> This absurdity reveals a preoccupation with self/image and same/strange, with each self (*myself*, Thomas, and Fanny) tending towards a narcissistic and somewhat peevish fixation with being 'liked'.

Arguably then, if Gilbert & George's excessive masculinities oblige the spectator to adopt an excessively feminised (but not female) gaze, this, regardless of who we look as, prefigures an emotional spectatorial response. Doyle notes the tendency to disparage a personal, embodied response to art as a breach of established order; or as she says; 'a failure of intellect to rise above emotion.'<sup>65</sup> The male/female, reason/emotion dualism this conjures up is part of a conceptual diachronic hierarchy of the universe where emotion is *always* maintained as inferior to reason; always the

---

<sup>63</sup> Bacon, p77.

<sup>64</sup> Berlant, *The Queen of America*, pp170,171.

<sup>65</sup> Doyle, *Sex Objects*, p111.

underdog. The feminised gaze will incline towards the embodied, emotional, passive, and excessive, whilst the masculine gaze that is occluded would have been rational, articulate, and able to maintain critical distance. Thus the possibility of Bourdieu's 'pure gaze' and Bell's 'aesthetic emotion' in response to Gilbert & George is always difficult, maybe even impossible.

If the feminised gaze predisposes the viewer to adopt an emotional viewpoint, producing an embodied response, it is then the feminised gaze that is most susceptible to Barthes' *punctum*. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes proposes that images have an ordinary content, the *studium*, which is available and communicable, and supplementing this, some but not all have an element that he calls the *punctum* that is capable of piercing or bruising the viewer; something that perhaps cannot be explained without recourse to its visceral effect. Barthes identifies the *punctum* as being particularly and exactly a phenomenon of the photograph, attributable to its real-ness; to being a testament of a real moment caught in an indisputable past that was always destined to become bygone. But in a looser sense there is perhaps something recognisably *punct-ish* about certain (photographic and non-photographic) fragmentary visual details (the 'partial object') that are arresting in a way that is wholly experiential and not easily anticipated or rationalised. This is experienced imprecisely, as a feeling; in the moment of the glance, as a sticky/slippy friction that is resistant to analysis. Something 'catches my eye'. Even as I look away I am slightly *piqued* by what I am now not looking at. The desire to re-look may be curious, or prurient or sentimental. It is a moment of hesitance, of dithering, of regret or difficulty. Is the feminised gaze (passive, receptive, disenfranchised) particularly disposed towards, or sensitive to, this combination of interest and damage that such particular, peculiar visual fragments can cause?

Barthes states that the *punctum* is indescribable. He states; 'what I can name cannot really prick me' and thus establishes an abstractness of cause in opposition to the concreteness of the bodily damage it incurs; the prick, the bruise. The abstract, un-nameable-ness of the *punctum* is symptomatic of its capacity to disturb; to name what is *punctum* would be to diminish its power or magic, but there is a risk of also diminishing the spectator. Barthes cautions; 'to give examples of *punctum* is, in a certain fashion, to *give myself up*'.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps this indicates that it is in fact possible to know exactly what it is about an image that attracts and distresses, but there is an inherent disinclination to know, to say, to name, to be diminished.

Certainly, I believe it is possible to locate the disturbance of 'partial-objects' that are *punct-ish*. But to say what it is that pricks, that 'piques' that attracts and distresses, is however, sometimes difficult *and embarrassing* because it entails exposure. It entails admitting that our appetite for a particular image may in fact be prurient, sentimental, or just in bad taste. Barthes says of the *punctum* that it 'shows no preference for morality or good taste; the *punctum* can be ill-bred.'<sup>67</sup> Sometimes we would prefer to project a more cohesive, better-bred self. Sometimes what we would say is shallow or insubstantial and seems insufficient reason for the sentiment we feel. Sometimes what we would say would expose our shabbier, less impressive selves, the selves that are responsive to the bad taste, immorality or even amorality of the *punctum*. I suspect that our disinclination to say what, exactly what, about an image is *punctum* or *punct-ish*, is no more than a blockage; the blockage of our own embarrassment.

Or is it possible that looking at the work of Gilbert & George, the spectatorial position is not feminised, but sodomised? And in suggesting this, I tender sodomy as an

---

<sup>66</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p43.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p43.

overturning of norms, without comment on the gender of the spectator; as Fanny noted, we are all like our mothers from behind. Returning to the embarrassment of language, of a difficult word sitting like a stone in the mouth, I admit, I am uncomfortable about using such an extravagant metaphor (or conceit maybe?). Not embarrassed at the conjunction of spectatorship and sodomy, but at the extravagance of the sodomitical being brought to bear on the slight and marginal affect of embarrassment. The metaphor is certainly not intended to attempt a neutering of sodomy, or a domestication of its power to disturb but as a way to explore the negative value, or perhaps counter-value of spectatorial embarrassment.

This proposal annexes properties of sodomy as semantically and syntactically negative, that is; 'saturated with socially stigmatised meanings', and 'organised by trajectories of repulsion', (Ngai's description of 'ugly feelings').<sup>68</sup> The negativity is, I think, an important aspect of spectatorial embarrassment; it is a wrongfootedness, but one that can potentially overturn conventional outcomes of looking. Thinking the spectatorial position as sodomised is quite productively, an acknowledgement of the antagonism between categories of 'normal' and 'not normal', with normal, like normal behaviour in a gallery or museum, coercively framed as a desirable okayness, confirming conditions of competence and composure; conditions I find myself 'without'. I am excluded from being 'in the know', without reason, without cultural competence, and outside the frame of reference. Even where 'normal' is queerly reconfigured I am uncomfortable. By framing the spectatorial position as sodomised, looking at the work of Gilbert & George, the spectator is faced with an opportunity to resist the coercive force of okayness. By overcoming the 'natural trajectories of repulsion' that incline the spectator to look away, by looking, we confront desires and anxieties that are both sexual and sentimental, and the dialogue that ensues if we say what we see, can be an awkward one. Spectatorial

---

<sup>68</sup> Ngai, p11.

embarrassment is perversely a coming face to face, with a self that is neither as whole, nor as wholesome as we imagined it to be.

## REFUSING EMANCIPATION

The spectatorial position I have outlined is perhaps an unenviable one. The spectator whose feelings I describe suffers a number of embarrassments; she is daunted and unsure of her cultural competence. In her bringing of real life to the frame of art she is exposed by her antipathy for displays of sexuality, or sentimentality, sometimes unfortunately both. She is baffled by the lack of clear meaning, wondering if G&G is an in joke that she is not 'in' on. Exposed as female, she is without the frame, looking in at exclusively male world, and 'without'; excluded from male pleasures (but yet the cause of their anxieties). She is not 'liked'. And she is always disadvantaged, on the back foot, always on the wrong side of the reason/emotion divide, excessive, and vulnerable to the bruising of the *punctum*.

Rancière offers the spectator emancipation; and perhaps this may include freedom from embarrassment.<sup>69</sup> Rancière's spectator originates in, but is not confined to the auditorium of a theatre; she may be at the cinema, at an exhibition, or alone on the sofa watching television. Spectatorship, in theatrical terms, has been considered problematic and in need of emancipation because it puts the viewer in a compromised position, one in which the capacities to know and to act are restricted. The first problem is that viewing is posited as the opposite of knowing. The second is that viewing is the opposite of acting, that it is a passive state. Two principal solutions proposed in the realm of theatre relate to distance; firstly that the spectator

---

<sup>69</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*.

should maintain distance, observe, evaluate and calculate in a 'distanced investigation'. The alternative is to collapse distance, to abandon the position of a neutral observer in exchange for 'vital participation'.<sup>70</sup>

Rancière takes a more radical approach questioning the assumption of the hierarchical pairings of terms as essential opposites. He argues instead that terms such as 'viewing' and 'knowing', 'seeing' and 'doing', and even 'activity' and 'passivity' are not logical oppositions but terms describing the 'distribution of the positions and capacities and incapacities'. Whilst the terms lie within frameworks of inequality, emancipation becomes possible when the spectator understands that 'viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions.'<sup>71</sup> However, in Rancière's challenge to the opposition of activity and passivity, he still privileges the capacities and meaning of 'activity'. He argues in fact, that viewing is already active, that we do it all the time, and that it is 'normal'.<sup>72</sup>

Rather than following Rancière in seeking to reframe the spectatorial position as one of strength, of certainty, and of action, or even of normality, I suggest instead a reconsideration of the values that pertain to the minor affective register of doubt and passivity, indeed of embarrassment itself. This must not be a reversal of values but what Edelman calls a 'queer oppositionality', one that 'opposes the logic of opposition'.<sup>73</sup> Strength, certainty and action that are the 'opposite' of embarrassment draw their credentials from a phallogocentric system, which as Bersani says must preserve the 'denial of the *value* of powerlessness in both men and

---

<sup>70</sup> Referring particularly to the work of Brecht and Artaud, Rancière discusses two theatrical solutions to the 'problem of the spectator'. pp4,5.

<sup>71</sup> Rancière. pp12,13.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 'Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation.' p17.

<sup>73</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, p4.

women. I don't mean the value of gentleness, or nonaggressiveness, or even of passivity, but rather of a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self.<sup>74</sup> My contention is that there is in art and particularly in the art of Gilbert & George, a capacity to engender a minor instance of just such a 'radical disintegration and humiliation' of the self, and that spectatorial embarrassment is symptomatic of that capacity.<sup>75</sup> The undervalued feeling of spectatorial embarrassment, of being in a doubtful space, of being blocked, restricted, queered or sticky manifests as a lack of coherence, a coming apart and a going to pieces. I believe that whilst being hard to ascribe any value to this in conventional terms, it holds out some sort of promise.

Gilbert & George deliberately deny the viewer any degree of certainty, or comfort, or even cover; we are exposed. In the moment of embarrassment, when we know that we have failed to present a 'coherent self', I suggest that there is an opportunity (if only . . . ) to consider what other categories of self might have been possible, might be possible next time. Despite Rancière's proposed emancipation of the spectator, I am still (and willingly) embarrassed by Gilbert & George, or more accurately, by my spectatorial response. I am still embarrassed by the subject matter that matters to me, by my failure to maintain a critical distance, and how this results in exposing too much of myself. Leaving the Gilbert & George exhibition, and mindful of Fanny, I am careful where I tread. Fanny, you may say, got her comeuppance. As she quit the scene of peeping through the hole in the wall, and flustered by all that she had seen, in her agitation she tripped and fell, face down, arse up. This might be a compromising position, but alternatively, I prefer to see it as another failure of intellect to rise above emotion.

---

<sup>74</sup> Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," in *Reclaiming Sodom*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 1994). pp256,257.

<sup>75</sup> Bersani describes art as an attempt to replicate the disintegration of self that can be achieved by sexuality and sexuality as itself an earlier attempt to replicate the disintegration of self of an original and psychologically determined pleasure/unpleasure. Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). p111.

## Chapter Two:

### Interface: On using anecdote and theory to account for the embarrassment of Jemima Stehli's *Strip*

But to my embarrassment I find I cannot disentangle an erotic which I believe to be gender-irrelevant from hypergendered scenarios. Jane Gallop<sup>1</sup>

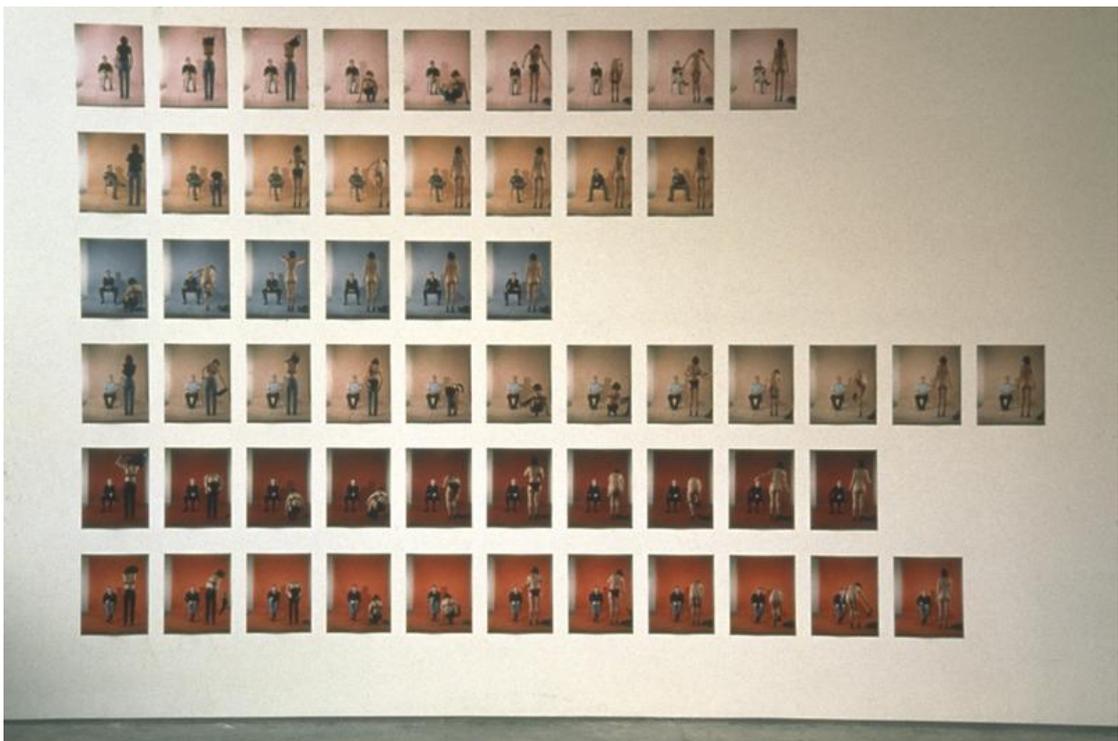
---

The interesting thing about embarrassment is that the less there is of it, the more interesting it seems to become. But the less there is of it the less inclined we are to mention it, let alone theorise it. Embarrassment can be so transient, so insubstantial that it is in fact embarrassing to subject it to the rigours of academic attention. It is so lightweight that like a little bit of fluff, it dances away as soon as it approaches critical mass. This chapter is about the difficulty of trying to theorise the insubstantial feeling-ness of embarrassment. The framework for this somewhat awkward manoeuvre towards theory is a single artwork; Jemima Stehli's *Strip*, which encapsulates instances of looking, being looked at, and being 'caught looking', any and each of which, might prefigure spectatorial embarrassment. The methodology adopted in this chapter is a juxtaposition of anecdote and theory used as contrasting (and sometimes conflicting) resources in thinking about the seeing and being seen that is played out in the series of images of *Strip*. The anecdotes are personal accounts of the making of *Strip* from Stehli and from some of the male contributors. The theory comes from the work of Jean-Paul Sartre whose emotive interpretation of the field of vision is of a combat zone of subject and object positions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, p108.

Whilst I have no doubt that *Strip* is a work that is in some way embarrassing, the embarrassment is not always where I expect to find it. When I try to pinpoint it, it gives me the slip, leaving me empty handed, and curiously red-faced, embarrassed at missing my mark. The site of embarrassment in *Strip* evades my theorising only to resurface, around the margins, in contradictions, repressions or pauses, in language, and frequently in what is not said at all. What I find embarrassing about *Strip*, like so many embarrassments, is a bit insubstantial, it is barely there, and somewhat self-effacing; this is in itself a stumbling block. Like embarrassment, *Strip*, is academically lightweight. Can this rather clichéd artwork, and the mildly dis-comfortable sensation it produces be a worthwhile subject for study?



Jemima Stehli *Strip* (1999) Installation View

Jemima Stehli invited a number of men to come and watch her take her clothes off. Not just any men, but men of some standing from her world, the art world; writers, critics, curators, gallerists. One by one they came to her studio to 'sit' for her and to

watch her strip. And they didn't just get to look, they were documented as looking. While Stehli stripped, her watchers, each watching an exclusive audience-of-one strip show chose the moments at which to record themselves watching. One of them commented:

Along with five other men, I sat in front of her camera taking photographs with a long cable release as she casually took off her clothes. The photographs could be seen as a series of collaborations but ultimately any notion of equality disintegrates as the viewer contemplates just who is caught posing and who is caught enjoying looking at whom.<sup>2</sup>

The true subject of the work seems to be neither Stehli, nor her chosen men, but the look itself, as both a look-looking and a look-looked at, with attendant interpretations of scopophilia, voyeurism and the specifically art-world look of 'the gaze'. The looks within the work act as a prequel to the spectatorial position which is implied to be equally exploitative in its consumption of the image. The work engenders spectatorial ambivalence, producing what Rosalind Krauss calls 'the visuality-effect'. 'This double effect, of both having the experience and watching oneself have it from the outside'.<sup>3</sup> *Strip* makes the spectator uncomfortably aware of seeing herself seeing. It offers nowhere comfortable to look *from*. *Strip* asks 'who are you?' 'From where do you look?' Do you imagine yourself sitting sweaty-palmed, dry-mouthed, with your trouser legs riding up? Do you imagine un-hooking, un-zipping, un-dressing? Do you reveal too much? Are your desires and anxieties on show? Are you enjoying this? Are you caught with your pants down? Are you caught looking?

I feel mildly embarrassed about Stehli's awkward undressing, yet my spectatorial identification is more strongly cross-gendered, identifying with the men, facing the

---

<sup>2</sup> Burrows in David Burrows and John Slyce, *Jemima Stehli* (Birmingham: ARTicle Press, 2002). p6.

<sup>3</sup> Kraus, R. 'The Im/pulse to See' in Hal Foster, ed. *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988). p58.

camera, tight-lipped, faking nonchalance. The men are each uncomfortable; they are scapegoated for the exploitation of woman in, by, and as art. Their cultural power, and by implication their masculinity is questioned by the obvious interrogation of subject/object positions, and they are represented as voyeurs with all the seedy connotations of 'peeping'. These factors, by extension apply to the spectator who is also watching Stehli strip. I too look, gaze, peep. Some of my embarrassment is second-hand; I am embarrassed *for* the subjects of *Strip* but I am also caught looking, and caught enjoying looking, enjoying the exposé, with more than a little *schadenfreude* at the predicament of the chosen men. One final embarrassment arises from the fact that the images also make me feel stereotyped. I am reluctantly pigeonholed as a knowing consumer of art, and as an ambivalent feminist, wondering if it is okay (yet, or still) to like the shoes.



Jemima Stehli *Strip* No 4 Curator, (1999) shots 4 & 11 of 12

Stehli's choice of dress for the project is interesting. She rejected any overt theatricality in favour of a pair of Levis and a black t-shirt. This deliberate practicality and anonymity reinforces Stehli as artist and Jemima as everywoman. Underneath she wears a black bra and a very comprehensive pair of black pants,

the kind of matching combination that I would hope to be wearing in the event of being knocked over by a bus. But the shoes say something altogether different. Stehli was already known for her shoes; they are 'her thing'. This is evident in works such as *The Pink Shoes* (1996)<sup>4</sup> and *Wearing Shoes Chosen by the Curator* (1997)<sup>5</sup> in which she displays herself lying prostrate on a concrete floor wearing nothing but shoes. Both are somewhat abject. The shoes selected for *Strip* however have something else to say for themselves. They speak of Stehli's own choice, and of power. They are also a little out of sync with the rest of the outfit, a little tongue-in-cheek dominatrix. The *Strip* shoes are black stilettos with five-inch heels. They have an ulterior motive and might be referred to as 'fuck-me-shoes'. In short, they punctuate the outfit and bring an element of fetish to her otherwise unremarkable attire. On a practical note, Stehli commented that the shoes made her feel good by making her taller; both taller than the seated men and taller than they expected her to be, thus even stripped of their fetish-power the shoes are very much part of the power play of the work.<sup>6</sup> They were the only thing she didn't strip off.

## ANECDOTE AND/OR THEORY

The two resources used in this chapter are quite at odds. As Jane Gallop noted in *Anecdotal Theory*, 'anecdote' and 'theory' carry diametrically opposed connotations with the anecdote always short, self-effacing and trivial in contrast to theory's earnest and reputable academic project. The anecdote promises something

---

<sup>4</sup> Stehli, J. *The Pink Shoes* (1996) is a study in abjection and objectification showing Stehli lying face down wearing only the shoes. She has her arms by her side palms upwards and turns her face away from the camera.

<sup>5</sup> Stehli, J. *Wearing Shoes Chosen by the Curator* (1997) Stehli displays herself on the gallery floor as something like an installation piece for the exhibition, 'Peripheral Visionary' at Eindhoven.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with the artist 25.02.09

personal and true, an account of what really happened, and so it is contingent. Its status is marginal; it is an aside, a digression from the main subject, and therefore no more than trivia. Theory, on the other hand, implies a general application; the truth it offers is only ever 'generally' true, but yet it claims an abstract authority. Both, as I will show, are a bad fit for this project, both are most effective in accounting for embarrassments at the points where they are least effective on their own terms; both work best where they fracture and fail.

What is compelling about Sartre's theorisation of vision and visibility, is the emotional and negative qualities of his accounts of seeing, of being seen, and of being caught looking. He solicits our engagement through little vignettes; they have a quality of event, but yet are abstract propositions. Sartre's philosophy, in fact, makes little or no distinction between perception and feeling; both are essential, and to some extent, indivisible elements of the human experience of existence, an experience Sartre initially associated with nausea, but might equally be one of an aversive self-consciousness, in fact, of embarrassment. In *Nausea*, the protagonist, Roquentin reflects:

We were a heap of existents inconvenienced, embarrassed by ourselves, we hadn't the slightest reason for being there, any of us, each existent, embarrassed, vaguely ill at ease, felt superfluous in relation to others.<sup>7</sup>

At the moment of embarrassment we see our self, as seen by the other, and we experience too much, too intensely, too much of our self, we feel a superfluity of self.

The other intriguing aspect of Sartre's theorisation of the look is that it is gender-neutral or at least neutral in the default sense that 'mankind' is neutral. For Sartre, the subject and object positions are cut loose from the emotive burden of gender,

---

<sup>7</sup> Sartre, *Nausea*, p184.

and expressed *only* as difference between self and other. The idea of a gender neutral experience of seeing and being seen as a source of embarrassment, is both engaging and disturbing. The potential of theorizing embarrassment as a basic human experience existing extrinsically to gender is one that we might want to believe. But Sartre is presenting a hypothetical situation, an 'abstract proposition', and in reality, we are subject, as Rose says, to ' . . . the always-waiting structure of sexual difference which gives to [our] attempted bodying and disembodying the most predictable and stereotyped of sexual tropes.'<sup>8</sup> If embarrassment were solely a matter of exposure, then the gender-neutral theory might stand up to scrutiny. But factor in that embarrassment is exposure of a gendered self to a gendered other, and is additionally a feeling of evaluation, again of a gendered self by a gendered other, and Sartre's theory fails to fully account for the complexity of the emotional investment. The conditions of maleness, femaleness and all stations in between can, in themselves, provide exceptional conditions of embarrassability, but to a post-Mulveyan and feminist sensibility, to turn a blind eye to gender proves to be a source of embarrassment too.

Sartre's work offers a theory that from the outset is only partially effective. It is too abstract. Where it fails, it fails to keep at bay the gendering of vision, it fails to account for the embarrassment of being the subject, or the pleasures of objectification, and, when applied to *Strip*, it fails to account for the pleasure of the shoes. The insidious gendering of *everything* has the potential to embarrass; it is excessive, suspicious and corrosive. The embarrassments of gender, and particularly gender stereotypes, result from the coercive norms of hegemonic ideologies and structures to which we are expected to belong. Sedgwick comments on the feminist inability to think *without* the assumption or presumption of gender:

---

<sup>8</sup> Rose, J. 'Sexuality and Vision: Some Questions' in Foster, p120.

The absence of any guaranteed nonprejudicial point of beginning for feminist thought . . . has led to the widespread adoption by some thinkers of an anticipatory mimetic strategy whereby, a certain stylized violence of sexual differentiation must always be presumed or self-assumed – even, where necessary, imposed – simply on the fact that it can never be finally ruled out.<sup>9</sup>

In considering the possibility of a gender-neutral feeling of embarrassment in contexts of seeing/being seen, *Strip* is arguably an awkward text to examine; why use a gender-neutral existentialist theory of the look to analyze a hypergendered work? Or conversely, why use *Strip*, which so blatantly addresses our assumptions about gender to exemplify a gender neutral theory? Despite the ostensible perversity, the use of *Strip* as text makes apparent the methodological failings, opening up possibilities of exploring the potentials of a ‘bad fit’. In this context, *Strip* is what Žižek would define as a ‘materialist example’:

There is always more in the example than in what it exemplifies, i.e., an example always threatens to undermine what it is supposed to exemplify since it gives body to what the exemplified notion itself represses, is unable to cope with.<sup>10</sup>

So like Žižek’s notion that represses what it cannot accommodate, *Strip* undermines Sartre’s theory, giving quite literally, ‘body’ to theory’s failure to account for the fact that some of the men Sartre sees, and is seen by, are in fact, women.

The anecdote, like theory is only partially effective at capturing and accounting for embarrassment. Anecdote is always generally disadvantaged by its perceived status as marginal, of less account than theory. In this, as I have argued, the relatively low status of anecdote is comparable to that of emotion, always playing second fiddle to reason. Furthermore, it is always singular and personal, and that

---

<sup>9</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp132,133.

<sup>10</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (New York: Routledge, 2008). ppxi,xii.

diminishes its academic standing. Some of these failings however, are exactly what enables the anecdote to account for marginalia; for small feelings in a minor affective register, and to situate experience within social contexts webbed by expectations of, for example, class or gender.

The anecdote has also a quality of being grounded in actual event; the story it tells is a true record; 'this is how it happened', and so lends an 'off the record' veracity which the neutral voice of theory cannot always match, and does not always agree with. But the anecdote makes only 'weak' truth claims; it is an account of something 'true' but only particularly rather than generally true. Gallop notes that the unpredictability of the real and incidental frequently disrupts theory, creating a juncture where theory is found to be a bad fit. The interruption of event produces a dissonance that shakes the complacent assurance of theory. The dissonance of the compromising situation of embarrassment, if we can overcome the blockage it produces, is just the same; an opportunity for a 'next time', for a different self, or a different theory. Gallop notes that the moment when incident jars against theory, the moment when emotion rather than reason is uppermost is exactly the moment that is worth thinking in and about, and this is the moment that anecdote tries to capture and anecdotal theory builds on.<sup>11</sup> As I have said, this is the whole point of anecdotal theory as a methodology; to think *through* the emotional response, *through* the blockage of embarrassment, to find a way to speak the unspeakable, and that the speaking has the promise of an embodied criticality.

Where anecdote is effective at producing or accounting for the elusive feeling of embarrassment is in its digressional inclusion of seemingly inconsequential detail, allowing embarrassment to slip in, and out of the story. In the relaxing of linguistic vigilance, sliding towards ordinary talk rather than the prescriptive jargon of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, p15.

theoretical *doxa*, the anecdote produces spaces for embarrassment to appear betwixt and between, sometimes in what is said, and sometimes in what is left unsaid. Sometimes it is actually in the language, as an awkwardness, in the words and in the syntax. It is evident in the pauses and unfinished sentences, where the right word eludes the speaker, or the word is there, but is a wrong word, a word that seems out of place, a word that would betray the speaker and give a wrong impression, so we leave it hanging, or substitute something else at the last moment. Sometimes the embarrassment can be caught in words that are sticky, words that slip, or words that are working double time, carrying two meanings, like Barthes' amphibologies.

Anecdote is however an imperfect resource. Some of its 'failings' work to its advantage, but not all. One of the critical failings of anecdote, and by extension, of anecdotal theory as a tool to examine embarrassment is that the anecdote is an *edited* version of event and so often, the embarrassment has been already edited or edited out. Anecdote, by definition, is a story, either a telling or a re-telling, and in the telling, the one who tells may be meticulously honest, or may self-fashion, revising the event with a little artistic license. Anecdotes about embarrassment tend to be self-deprecating, relieving the awkwardness of the situation by reliving it with a little humour and a little distance. Anecdotes about embarrassment can thus have a cathartic effect; the awkwardness of the embarrassing moment is historicized through telling, it is accommodated and becomes part of the narrative of our lives. I have proposed that the slighter the embarrassment the more interesting it is, but the very slightest of embarrassments do not make good stories, they lack substance, and to try to put them into words seems overly self-interested, and redolent of a navel-gazing narcissism. So the slightest of embarrassments, where they are to be found in anecdote, are not found in subject matter, but in omissions, in language, in

inference, and in insignificance. The most interesting accounts of embarrassment are in anecdotes that are 'about' embarrassment, in the vaguest sense of the word.

## **EXISTENTIALIST *STRIP* No 1: SEEING AND BEING SEEN**

My initial encounter with *Strip* was not with the work itself but with a review of its first showing. I was hooked by the story it told, by the review as an account that was 'about' a predicament. It was about being visible and being vulnerable, yet trying to recover some dignity. It seemed to offer the self-exposure of anecdote as a form of damage limitation.



Jemima Stehli *Strip* (1999) No 6 Critic (shot 9 of 10)

Adrian Searle, art critic for *The Guardian*. In *Strip*, Searle is a man trying to look like a man who is confident and professional. His backdrop is a deep and dramatic red; the red of passion and anger; a serious colour. He took ten shots, in six of them Stehli is either bending over or crouching; in two she is balanced on one leg. There is something a little sadistic in his choice of shots. They are however an evenly spread documentation of the strip process and they are also compositionally, amongst the best. In his review he offers the following anecdotal account of his involvement.

I feel like a man in a Francis Bacon painting, churning on my seat. In my hand is the trigger, the cable snaking away to the camera that faces me. Also facing me, and between me and the camera, is the artist. She begins to undress. I've got 10 shots. I can fire when I like. I squeeze the bulb that drives the shutter. Everything about this situation feels loaded. I'm extremely self-conscious. I find myself firing the camera whenever she appears awkwardly balanced – unhitching her bra, bending to take off her shoes, untangling herself from her jeans. I guess I'm trying to wrest some power from the situation, to catch her at a moment of vulnerability, to catch those moments between moments. [ . . . ] I notice that one of my trouser legs has ridden-up and that somehow that look of power and confidence I wanted to present (I was as careful to dress as Stehli was to undress, in my critic's black suit and Profumo-era tie) has managed to go awry. Rather more of me is exposed than I would like.<sup>12</sup>

Searle's account is self-deprecating, he admits his vulnerability and exposure, which were feelings he both did and didn't expect to feel. He reveals his grasp of the subject/object positions involved as hierarchical. He interprets the situation as a struggle for mastery and has tried to come out on top. His advantages; being male, having professional status, keeping his clothes on, and having (some) control of the camera do not seem to have been sufficient to overcome his handicaps; passivity,

---

<sup>12</sup> Adrian Searle, "Why Do I Feel Naked?," *The Guardian*, 15.07.00 2000.

voyeurism, being photographed. He dressed carefully, defensively even, and during his participation, and later in his review he takes care to establish his cultural capital. His 'Profumo-era tie' was chosen and mentioned to signify his competence in areas of style, history, politics, and culture. But it was not enough. He became aware that his trouser leg had ridden up exposing sock, ankle, incompetence.

Largely, Searle's account of *Strip* can be read in terms of a Sartrean theorization of seeing and being seen as a struggle between self and other, that is, without gender.

Sartre's premise of the confrontational nature of vision begins with the simplest of situations; that he sees the other and its/his presence for him is one of object-ness.

But rather than ask us to agree to this as a proposition, Sartre asks that we 'experience, in imagination a familiar emotion.'<sup>13</sup> And to demonstrate the

antagonism of subject/object, he describes a scenario that does not merely show but makes us imagine ourselves in that position and *feel* the truth of what he says:

'I am in a public park. Not far away there is a lawn and along the edge of that lawn there are benches. A man passes by those benches. I see this man.'<sup>14</sup> He

describes how he sees something; 'an object', but knows it to be a man. And because the other that he sees is a person not an object, his person-ness must also be manifested in some way, and that refers to the man's being-for-himself and

Sartre's being-for-others. The person-ness of the other inevitably indicates Sartre's state of object-ness *for the man*. Thus for both the self and the other the look is a combative field with each jousting for the power that accrues to the subject, for to see confers subjectivity, and to be seen imparts objectivity. Each wants to see without being seen; to be a subject, and avoid being an object.

---

<sup>13</sup> Sartre, *Being & Nothingness*, pxiv.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pp277,278.

The other, as subject, has the freedom not only to see Sartre but also to judge him, and it is this freedom to judge that enslaves Sartre who expresses his predicament in strongly emotive terms:

Thus being-seen constitutes me as a defenseless being for a freedom which is not my freedom. It is in this sense that we can consider ourselves as 'slaves' in so far as we appear to the Other. . . . I am the instrument of possibilities which are not my possibilities . . . and which deny my transcendence in order to constitute me as a means to ends of which I am ignorant – I am in *danger*.<sup>15</sup>

As Sartre describes it, the condition of seeing and being seen is one of reciprocity. As both Sartre and the man are simultaneously object, both are compromised by being seen. As the look, in the park, at the edge of the lawn is reciprocal, it is inferred that simultaneously each inflicts on the other the same judgment, slavery, danger, and embarrassment. The uncomfortable state of being seen is curiously like the theatrical predicament of the spectator, one in which the capacities to know and to act are restricted. Thus the attribution of qualities of activity and passivity connoted by Sartre; that the one who looks is active, is contrary to the assumption that the looking of theatrical spectatorship is a passive looking, but accords with Rancière, who argues that the passivity of the spectator is a fallacy, and that the spectator is already emancipated and is already active.

Searle watched Stehli strip. As she stripped, she watched Searle watching. Their looks position them each as both subject and object, both master and slave. In trying to catch the awkward moments when her attention is on a zip or a button, when her balance is precarious, Searle is trying to find, and capture a moment when Stehli is *not* looking at him, when he is master of the visual field, as he says, 'to wrest some power from the situation'. I suggested this struggle for power to Stehli

---

<sup>15</sup> Sartre, *Being & Nothingness*, p281.

and she completely disagreed. Her account is that Searle's own aesthetic sensibilities kicked in and it was a gesture of genuine collaboration with the artist to produce the most visually interesting images of the body in action. But she also admitted that he displayed a degree of competitiveness towards the other sitters, and wanted his strip to be 'the best' (and that I can believe).<sup>16</sup> So whilst Searle's anecdotal account fits Sartre's theory, Stehli edits it out. Stehli chooses not to see it that way; she dismissed both Searle's anecdote and Sartre's theory as being incompatible with her own story of collaborative creativity.

Despite the congruence between Searle's account and Sartre's theory, there is something omitted, that by its very omission, is problematic. Sartre's look, particularly the look-looked-at is emotive in its configuration and in its articulation; it is described in terms of defenselessness and danger. So although we begin with a difference between an ungendered self and an equally ungendered other, there is a predisposition to read the subject as masculine because it is dominant, and to read the object as feminine, because it is inflected as more emotional, and because it loses the battle for subjectivity. There is, to my mind, a difficulty in trying to maintain strict neutrality for the combative self and other, whilst knowing that the hierarchical gendering of looking equates the object position with the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of woman. Searle's account indirectly suggests that he anticipated the connotations of being objectified. His account of a carefully considered attire indicates that he self-consciously presented himself as a self *to be looked at*; in fact, he displayed himself. So when Searle strives to see without being seen, it is in effect, his masculinity that is a stake. The problem is, it is embarrassing to let gender spoil Sartre's theory, but also embarrassing to pretend that it doesn't.

---

<sup>16</sup> Interview with the artist 25.02.09,

## EXISTENTIALIST *STRIP* No 2: BEING CAUGHT LOOKING

John Slyce, Writer. Slyce has opted for casual dress and very shiny shoes. His backdrop is boudoir pink. He took nine shots; in the first Stehli is fully dressed (perhaps a premature squeeze on the trigger) and she doesn't get her pants off until shot seven. Either he got carried away early on, or was more interested in, or wanted to appear to be more interested in the process rather than the (naked) outcome; a privileging of means over the end.



Jemima Stehli *Strip* (1999) No 1 Writer (shot 1 of 9)

Slyce gives the following account:

There are no neutral positions offered in Stehli's work. We are all caught looking [ . . . ] at once consciously and unconsciously aware that we are

always already equal parts fetishist and voyeur, exhibitionist and flasher. Just as these reversible positions are in turn mirrored in the figures of the artist and her model as they stare into a ground glass lens and their reflection in a looking glass – subject and object come unfixed and collide a search is driven to look over and again at the other.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst looking and being looked at are potential, and potentially equal causes of embarrassment, being ‘caught looking’ always carries the negative charge of voyeurism and that can be particularly embarrassing. Sartre, again remaining impassively gender neutral, describes being seen peeping through a keyhole. He is in a corridor, crouched down at the keyhole peeping at some unspecified scene within. The fact that we don’t know what he is looking at heightens our curiosity, and so, our emotional investment.

Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice, I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole.<sup>18</sup> [and]

Here I am bent over the keyhole; suddenly I hear a footstep. I shudder as a wave of shame sweeps over me. Somebody has seen me.<sup>19</sup>

Before being caught the viewer/voyeur is unselfconscious but in a state of emotion (anticipation, jealousy, curiosity, vice). Once seen (or once he believes himself to be seen, and this is important) he is *aware of himself* and his being takes on a quite different dimension. He is aware of his being-for-others, and feels shame-embarrassment. ‘Do we not have here’ asks Sartre, ‘an experience which is self-destructive?’<sup>20</sup>

What is particularly interesting in Sartre’s account is the distinction between the unobserved, un-self-conscious-self and the alternative unsettled state of mind that develops on the awareness of the other’s look. Even though Sartre will also say

---

<sup>17</sup> Slice in Burrows and Slice, p21.

<sup>18</sup> Sartre, *Being & Nothingness*, pp282,283.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. pp300,301.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p301.

that he is 'always looked at', in the vignette of the voyeur at the keyhole he expressly speaks of a 'non-thetic self-consciousness' which is unobserved so that 'there is no self to inhabit my consciousness.'<sup>21</sup> It is the possibility of contrast between two states that is important here, for the embarrassment of being looked at in this instance is not a perpetual state of existence but a sometimes-feeling, the effect of a cause. And the trigger, the catalyst is the other, but the cause comes from within the self, from the 'possibilities' of the self. At the moment of embarrassment the self is aware that this was not the anticipated outcome, not the desired outcome, things could have turned out better, if only . . .



Jemima Stehli *Strip* (1999) No 3 Critic (shot 2 of 8)

---

<sup>21</sup> Sartre, *Being & Nothingness*, p283.

As Slyce admits, the chosen men in *Strip* are all caught looking. Although they have been invited to watch, they are caught looking, caught by the camera, looking at a striptease, and the looking is *assumed* to be libidinous. Voyeurism implies that the looking, or what we have been looking at transgress some socially or even self-imposed propriety. 'Being caught' implies that we have been up to no good. Voyeurism is almost always inflected with sexuality and is an unpleasant, knicker-sniffing sexuality. Because 'voyeurism' is a term of Freudian psychoanalysis it is inescapably sexual and consequently gendered. And the gender is male; *he* is a peeping Tom. The voyeur is not only shamed, but also named. To be 'caught looking' is then to suffer multiple disadvantages, the voyeur, is seen; he is objectified, he is a transgressor, a pervert, he is caught pleasuring himself in a way that is semantically negative. It is a furtive looking that implies impotence. *His* pleasure is passive and thus lacks the 'normal' and healthy attributes of an active masculinity. So again, where Sartre's theory of 'being caught looking' starts out gender neutral, the gendered implications of language are imposed as soon as 'being caught looking' is described as voyeurism. And again, theory fails to withstand the gendering inherent in the language it deploys.

### **EXISTENTIALIST STRIP No 3: LE REGARD**

Whilst Sartre writes of the look as digital, potentially on or off, and producing different states of consciousness, and different emotional states as 'a solidification and an abrupt stratification of myself', he also writes of a more pervasive condition of feeling looked at which he calls *le regard*. This is not the look of another person, though we might mistakenly see eyes and feel we are being watched: 'On the occasion of certain appearances in the world which seem to me to manifest a look, I

apprehend in myself a certain 'being-looked-at' with its own structures which refer me to the Other's real existence.'<sup>22</sup> The visibility that Sartre terms *le regard* is situated outside the self, but not in the other, it is in *otherness*. It is a diffuse and inescapable exposure and reflects a human predisposition to be self-reflexively aware of the self as constituted in relation to everything that is not-self, in short, in relation to the Other.<sup>23</sup> This is the feeling that troubled Roquentin in *Nausea*; he was 'embarrassed, vaguely ill at ease'. It is not conceivable that being subject to *le regard* should be a chronic and continuous cause of embarrassment. If we were endlessly aware of the self as 'looked at', in this excessive way, with our attention turned perpetually inward, life would be unbearable; nothing would get done. As Iris Murdoch wrote; 'To be damned is for one's ordinary everyday mode of consciousness to be unremitting agonizing preoccupation with self.'<sup>24</sup> We become aware of *le regard* only *sometimes*, in certain situations, perhaps triggered by the look of one who is strange, by the look of a libidinous or rival other, or when we think we see eyes, or we become aware of the rustling leaves, then we are re-called to subjectivity, and reminded that we are subject to *le regard*.

*Le regard* is construed as operating at the level of culture, language, signification, and Stehli addresses exactly this through her choice of watching men. Not only is she seen by Searle, Slyce, Stolper & co., she is also seen by the art world of exhibition, review, critique, commerce. The first thing that is immediately obvious about the men in *Strip* is that they are all conscious that the self they are invited to show is their 'professional' self; Searle wears his 'critic's black suit', Slyce

---

<sup>22</sup> Sartre, *Being & Nothingness*, p299.

<sup>23</sup> Sartre's '*le regard*' prefigures Lacan's theorisation of 'the gaze'. In *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* Lacan writes; 'The gaze I encounter – you can find this in Sartre's own writing – is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.' cited in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1994)., p362.

<sup>24</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Nice and the Good* (London: Penguin, 1978).

comments; 'we each enact, more or less, our public self'.<sup>25</sup> They had not been invited to contribute to this work by virtue of any personal qualities they may possess. They were there not because of *who* they are, but because of *what* they are. The titles of each segment contribute to their objectification; they are tagged by profession; 'critic', 'curator', 'writer', 'dealer'. Their look, besides being the look of an individual self, also signifies *le regard*. And also, of course, their look signifies the specifically artworld look of 'the gaze', a look that like *le regard*, is self-reflexively aware of its power and its corruptions; specifically, the questionable distribution of authority and profit within the artworld. By profession, each of the men is complicit in the objectification of woman, as image, as canvas, and in her commodification as collateral.

David Burrows, writer. For Burrows the invitation to take part in *Strip* was 'a kind of challenge but also a kind of collaboration'.<sup>26</sup> As Burrows is also a practicing artist, performance and nudity are for him, quite routine, and certainly nothing to get hot under the collar about. His anecdotal account of *Strip* fails to exemplify any of the embarrassment I have tried to attribute to the disadvantaged position of the object, or the seedy connotations of being caught looking. In fact Burrows claims to have maintained composure throughout.<sup>27</sup> The embarrassment he admits to feeling came later:

And it was only later, when the work was exhibited at the Lisson Gallery that embarrassment was a factor. And this [relates to] the paranoid world of art openings: it is difficult not to be affected by the knowledge that everyone is judging art, and people in that context. Artists, curators, etc. are very divided on Jemima's work, [. . .] What becomes embarrassing is the knowledge that others disapprove of my support of or involvement with Jemima's work. I did then and still do think that strip is an interesting series but there is still a

---

<sup>25</sup> Burrows and Slice, p17.

<sup>26</sup> From private correspondence with Burrows 03.02.09

<sup>27</sup> Burrows attributes this to the fact that the traditional role of male as bearer of the look remained intact. Ibid

feeling of embarrassment with the knowledge that some people disapprove or think that the work is not good and I have become identified with that work to a certain extent.<sup>28</sup>



Jemima Stehli *Strip* (1999) No 7 Writer (shot 5 of 11)

One final comment made by Burrows indicates the exposure to, and evaluation by the Other can cause the negative feeling of embarrassment even when the judgement turns out to be positive.

A friend of mine had a show recently which he didn't think worked that well and he said he felt embarrassed. I often felt like this in the past, and also felt embarrassed when people congratulated me on a show.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid  
<sup>29</sup> Ibid

The embarrassment is triggered by the realisation that the Other is attending to us, and we are evaluated. This indicates that embarrassment ensues not only in instances of negative evaluation, but from evaluation *per se*. In Sartre's view, shame-embarrassment is not caused by the judgement of the Other as negative *or positive*, but rather, is caused by the objectification this entails:

Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being *an object*; that is, of *recognizing myself* in this degraded, fixed and dependent being which I am for the Other.<sup>30</sup>

Whilst Searle's account of the making of *Strip* is of the visceral struggle for mastery of the object by the subject, the embarrassment described by Burrows is predicated rather on the more abstract 'being seen' of *le regard*, that is, being seen at a level of cultural signification. Burrows is anxious about *Strip's* use of the look as artistically privileged rather than libidinally charged. He expressly connects the work to embarrassment but it is his professional proximity to the work that he is uncomfortable about. He perceives in his involvement in *Strip*, a potential failure in the eyes of others, that is, a failure to advance the self he would like to be, or more accurately, since this is all about perception, a failure to advance the self he would like *to be seen to be*. In its critique of the exploitative nature of the art world, *Strip* bites the hand that feeds it. It very bluntly expresses the opposition between the body of a woman (artist) and the capital, both cultural and financial of the sitters; writer, critic, dealer; man. Whilst Stehli's work ostensibly draws attention to and perhaps challenges this opposition, the sincerity of that challenge is not so legible, and the friction between the too-legible content and the illegibility of intent has plagued the reception of the work. *Strip* was briefly good tabloid headline fodder, but its critical reception has been less straightforward and there is something embarrassing about that.

---

<sup>30</sup> Sartre, *Being & Nothingness*, p312.

## STRONG THEORY

The instinctive and automatic-anxious gendering of seeing and being seen that this chapter superimposes on the neutrality of Sartre's theory has been cited as the cause of some embarrassment. But here, that is displaced by the embarrassment identified by Burrows pertaining to being seen, or perhaps to being *not* seen, being overlooked by the hypercritical gaze of the art world. In his anecdotal account, the admission Burrows makes about this specific embarrassment unexpectedly provides evidence 'about' embarrassment. He comments; 'it is difficult not to be affected by the knowledge that everyone is judging (art, and) people in that context'. And his comment would be equally applicable to the presumptive gendering it displaces. Once we have read Mulvey, and Rose, and Doane, once we 'know' that 'the true exhibit is always the phallus' and 'women are simply the scenery onto which men project their own narcissistic fantasies', then it is, as Burrows says, difficult not to be affected by that knowledge, and to know that we are always exposed and evaluated by *le regard*, and by others who are 'in the know'.<sup>31</sup> Both Burrows' anticipation of artworld condemnation and the feminist default position of always assuming the absence of any 'non-prejudicial point of beginning' are forms of paranoia, and as such, constitute strong theory.<sup>32</sup>

In his work on affect theory Silvan Tomkins defined strong theory by the size of its domain, that is, the range of instances where the theory is applicable. A strong theory is not necessarily a successful theory (success being defined as avoidance

---

<sup>31</sup> 'Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious, or 'You Don't Know What is Happening, Do You, Mr Jones'' in Mulvey, p13. Originally written in 1972 and published in *Spare Rib*, 1973

<sup>32</sup> Paranoia has been 'theoretically' gendered as male, Ngai, writing of the paranoia of 'conspiracy theory', terms it 'a distinctively male form of knowledge production'. Ngai, p299. Freud established epistemological links between theory and paranoia. There are however, strenuous claims that paranoia is also a paradigm case of feminist theorizing from writers including; Ngai, and Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, and Schor, N. "Female Paranoia: The Case for Psychoanalytic Feminist Criticism" (1981)

of negative affect or promotion of positive affect). In fact, the more the theory fails, the stronger it grows.

As it orders more and more remote phenomena to a single formulation, its power grows . . . A humiliation theory is strong to the extent to which it enables more and more experiences to be accounted for as instances of humiliating experiences on the one hand, or the extent to which it enables more and more anticipation of such contingencies before they actually happen.<sup>33</sup>

By this definition, Burrows' paranoia about his exposure to the hypercritical art world, and feminism's accusative gendering of *everything* can be seen to be instances of strong theory.

Feminist theory of the field of vision as inherently gendered, sees everything in binary, and sees every binary as hierarchical. This strong theory is acutely alert to inequity, and as a result finds it everywhere, and so must continue to look for it. We are always on the back foot. Like Sedgwick claims for paranoia, feminist theory has a unidirectional vigilance, and the more it finds gender difference, the more it seeks out difference, and sees everything as differenced. As a strong theory it, ' . . . seems to grow like a crystal in a hypersaturated solution, blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding *or* things to understand.'<sup>34</sup>

Harnessing the equally strong theory of Freudian psychoanalysis (always seeking to uncover something that is always hidden), feminist theory knows that seeing must be understood not only a matter of perceiving the world, but as a libidinal drive, a mechanism to achieve pleasure or avoid anxiety.<sup>35</sup> This is always assumed to be egotistical, driven by self-interest, and always understood as taking place within an

---

<sup>33</sup> Tomkins, S. *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, cited in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p134.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p131.

<sup>35</sup> 'Vision, pleasure in looking as a component instinct of sexuality bears no relation to seeing as the means of perceiving the real world. Sight as a drive attaches itself to pleasure-giving or anxiety alleviation.' Mulvey, p140.

ill-defined but all-powerful structure of patriarchy, and patriarchy is understood to be one of the nebulous ideological powers that coercively constrict the normal behaviours of being and belonging.

The slight but nagging embarrassment I feel about the indiscriminate application of such a simplistic and accusatory binary may be symptomatic of a more widespread phenomenon. Ngai notes an academic embarrassment that has begun to be apparent. She suggests that the concept of 'patriarchy' has become the bogey-man of feminist rhetoric in the way that 'conspiracy theory' is to paranoia. Patriarchy, she writes, is so 'monolithic yet amorphously delimited and fundamentally abstract' that it is 'a source of embarrassment' to academics, but yet, as she admits, it is a concept that we cannot think without, or indeed, outwith.<sup>36</sup>

## **A WEAK THEORY OF EMBARRASSMENT**

This chapter tenders the proposal that embarrassment is somewhat indiscriminate, elusive and unpredictable, and whilst difficult to theorise effectively, it may be found in the failures of both theory and anecdote to fully account for it. Bersani suggests that the moments when theory appears to fail, are actually productive. He notes in the work of Freud instances of 'textual embarrassment' when Freud 'appears to be resisting the pressures of an argument he does not make, *will not* make' and when his work '*depends on* a process of theoretical collapse.'<sup>37</sup> Following his line of

---

<sup>36</sup> Ngai writes of this emergent instance of embarrassment: 'Though increasingly a source of embarrassment in academics in today's newly repositivized intellectual climate, terms like "patriarchy" and "patriarchy-capitalism" which refer to monolithic yet amorphously delimited and fundamentally abstract systems, remain crucial for a critical language that in our anti-theoretical time, not only seems fated to ring with the "debased rhetoric" of "conspiracy theory", but seems capable of demonstrating how paranoia has become a normative state of affairs. Ngai, p301.

<sup>37</sup> Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, pp 2,3.

thought, it is then precisely at the moments of fracture and failure that I might locate a 'theoretical' embarrassment. It is to be found, for instance, in the lacunae of theory, and in the failure of theory to accommodate or even to admit its own shortcomings. The failure of anecdote, as something personal and true may hinge on its failure to be sufficiently personal, and so becomes as Miller suggests, 'merely a rhetorical ploy'.<sup>38</sup> Or the failure of anecdote may lie in being insufficiently true. It may be a prevarication that tries to circumvent the discredit of an inconvenient truth, presenting instead an edited or expurgated version. To theorise embarrassment as located in the contingency of error and omission is limited in terms of the extent to which it is effective. But such limits can be critically productive, curtailing embarrassment's theoretical domain and making only specific, that is to say, weak truth claims.

This weak theory of embarrassment is confined to a narrative of some particular instances of minor awkwardness that are most effectively accounted for by the failure of account, and by theoretical unaccountability. And the links between the instances are fragile, retaining for each account the singularity of event. The links are fashioned of similitude rather than sameness, or what Sedgwick terms 'textured analogy' which nicely captures the degree to which they 'feel' the same.<sup>39</sup> Such a theory of embarrassment would meet the criteria that Tomkins established for weak affect theory; of accounting only for 'near phenomena', of being rich in descriptive detail, but light on explanation.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> As discussed in the introduction, Nancy Miller asked 'Is it personal only if it's embarrassing?' Miller, p19.

<sup>39</sup> 'A weak theory's domain can be thought of as pockets of terrains each in analogic relation to the others and expandable only by textured analogy.' Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp120,121.

<sup>40</sup> Tomkins, S, *Affect Imagery Consciousness* cited in *Ibid.* p134. See also Tomkins, *Exploring Affect*.

Just as a strong theory is not necessarily successful, so in Tomkins' terms, a weak theory is not necessarily *unsuccessful*. As noted by Tomkins for humiliation theory, and as discussed by both Tomkins and Sedgwick in relation to paranoia theory, the more the theory fails to protect the holder of the theory from the negative affect, the stronger the theory grows as the reach of its domain is extended. The strength of a theory may thus be seen to be, in part, predicated on 'failure'. To theorise the major embarrassment of say a major social *faux pas* or a highly public political gaffe might be thought of as a strong theory, causing its holder to avoid all social situations or resign from politics. In contrast, to theorise the minor embarrassments such as the spectatorial embarrassments that arise from looking at an artwork that is perhaps 'sticky', or trite, or that looks back, actually requires a weak theory.

The interesting small embarrassments that we don't usually speak of directly cannot be strongly or directly theorised because the exact cause and site of the embarrassment cannot be anticipated. In fact, one of the interesting points about embarrassment is that as it always occurs as an unscripted and singular experience that may be *difficult* to articulate, and not susceptible to generalisation. And because of this, it is difficult to claim for embarrassment any general value. This is not to say that embarrassment is valueless, but that it should always be considered as a singularity, rather than collectively as something that can be relied upon to exhibit consistency.

The formulation of a weak theory of embarrassment does not, in itself, fully answer the methodological experiment of this chapter, of using theory and anecdote to locate embarrassment. We are conditioned to prefer resolution over uncertainty, and recognition over estrangement, and so expect one resource to be more apt or adept than the other; *either* theory *or* anecdote. And whilst theory is inherently 'strong' in the claims it makes, and anecdote is localised and singular suggesting a

'weaker' claim, there is in fact no neat outcome. Both theory and anecdote have proved flawed *in this instance*, and to be most effective where they fail on their own terms; theory is effective because of its blind spots, anecdote is accidentally revealing where it fails to be sufficiently personal or true. The lack of clear outcome here mirrors the spectatorial ambivalence that *Strip* generates that perhaps jeopardises any critique of the work. But it is actually in the supplementation of one with the other, of bringing both theory and anecdote to bear on the process of seeing/knowing *Strip* that is productive. It is the unlikely interface between theory and anecdote that yields an admixture of *and* or even *but*, in place of the exclusionary *either/or*, and so in the tentative theorisation of embarrassment using theory and anecdote as appositional rather than oppositional resources might be successful.

What binds the two methodological gambits together is their failure to be fully effective. The interaction of the strong theory of 'theory' and the weak theory of anecdote embodies what Sedgwick terms 'interdigitation', an interlocking of fingers, that she suggests occurs within an 'ecology of knowing'.<sup>41</sup> And she writes;

There may also be benefit in exploring the extremely varied, dynamic and historically contingent ways that strong theoretical constructs interact with weak ones [ . . . ] there are important phenomenological and theoretical tasks that can be accomplished only through local theories and nonce taxonomies; the potentially innumerable mechanisms of their relation to stronger theories remain matters of art and speculative thought.<sup>42</sup>

As I think Sedgwick makes clear, the overarching and authoritative general truths told by the strong theory of 'theory' are at certain times, in certain places ineffectual, or effective only when supplemented by specificity. Theory is sometimes bettered or made better by the pin-point accuracy of a localised, non-transferable, special

---

<sup>41</sup> 'But the history of literary criticism can also be viewed as a repertoire of alternative models for allowing strong and weak theory to interdigitate'. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p145.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p145.

telling of what is 'true'. And that the relation between the general and the specific, between strong and weak cannot be subjected to replicable systems; we must feel our way.

What becomes increasingly clear from my attempts to theorise the embarrassment of *Strip*, and indeed embarrassment *per se*, is that this is part of, (to borrow from Sedgwick) 'an ecology', not of knowing but of failing. Embarrassment and the attempt to subject embarrassment to theory belong to an 'ecology of failing' that assimilates the failure to know, and the knowledge that comes through failure. And within the scope of this knowledge, is the underlying awareness of how personal such failures and such knowledge must be; that is to say, that the failure and the knowledge are *localised*, and *nonce*.

## **STRIP AS (PSEUDO) FEMINIST CRITIQUE**

This chapter has thus far yielded a credible 'weak theory' of embarrassment, but has not adequately addressed the remarkable embarrassment of *Strip* that both theory and anecdote have failed to mention; that of the 'hypergendered scenario' and the problem of reading it from a feminist perspective. I came across a curious reference to Stehli's work as 'pseudo-feminist'; Slyce wrote; 'Jemima felt that these works [post *Strip*] created the possibility to turn away from an anecdotal and what she terms 'pseudo-feminist' line her work had come up against.'<sup>43</sup> I asked her what she meant, but she said she couldn't remember. Stehli's disinclination to discuss the term may be symptomatic of an ambivalence about feminism(s). Stehli's *Strip* reads as 'feminist' because it ostensibly critiques objectification of women, however, that critique is undercut by the narcissism and exhibitionism evident in her work.

---

<sup>43</sup> Slice in Burrows and Slice, p18.

And so *Strip*'s commitment to a feminist project might be considered to be questionable, perhaps denigrated as 'pseudo-feminist, or perhaps questioned and denigrated by 'pseudo-feminists'. In the same vein, my appreciation of *Strip*'s feminist critique is undercut by the pleasures of being catty about Stehli's pants and envious of the shoes. My pleasures show no sisterly solidarity and are neither socially nor academically admirable, they are in fact embarrassing. Feminism has acquired an image of being strait-faced and averse to such silly pleasures; see for example Ahmed's work on 'Feminist Killjoys' in which she suggests that; 'To be recognised as a feminist is to be assigned to a difficult category and a category of difficulty'.<sup>44</sup> 'Feminist' as a category has coercive normative values, some imposed from within the category, and some from without. The terms of belonging, of 'being feminist' seem to require constant definition, revision and qualification. Without this, the terms may be divisive, hence the ambivalence. We are prickly about pejorative assumptions of feminisms and even (or especially) 'post-feminisms'. It is possible that when Stehli spoke of 'pseudo-feminism', she meant simply some other feminism; not hers.

My category of difficulty, which is less militant than my mother's generation, but more political than my daughter's, is schooled in the mantra of equality but unable to forgo the pleasures of difference. And my reading of *Strip* is from within this complicated and ambivalent space of belonging:

This chapter has experimented with reading *Strip* through a pre-Mulveyan, existentialist viewpoint, and failed, that is, failed to keep at bay the somewhat compulsive gendering of almost everything, I want finally, to attend to what Sartre leaves out of his theory, and what to a very large extent Stehli and the men leave

---

<sup>44</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)., pp50-88.

out of their anecdotal accounts of *Strip*. What is avoided, and surely, *because* it is embarrassing is the 'erotic' of what Jane Gallop would call 'a hypergendered scenario'.<sup>45</sup> That is not to say that *Strip* is a work of much, or perhaps any eroticism if eroticism is defined as a tendency to arouse or excite real sexual desire. *Strip* is curiously sterile (and that in itself is embarrassing). The unmentioned dimension is of an assumed erotic and the *assumed* erotic is carrying the amphibious meanings of being both implicit and artificial. This erotic is fundamental to *Strip's* handling of desire and how that might be a source of pleasure, though always mediated by the concomitant threat of the dis-pleasure of anxiety. This is the argument that like the arguments that Freud couldn't, Sartre wouldn't make because his theory did not see gender difference.

As a hypergendered scenario; woman takes off clothes, man watches, *Strip* is a very sexist work. In its shameless harnessing of our limited and pedestrian expectations of polarised gender positions, *Strip* is an example of; 'the way sexual difference, if you give it half a chance, will take over any subversion or mutation of visual space.'<sup>46</sup> *Strip* is both a product and a critique of the emotive clichés of sexual difference implicit in seeing, being seen and being caught looking that (now) seem too obvious, too obviously overstated. And yet, although *Strip* might be disparaged as clichéd, I would defend the work as both knowing and witty; a point underscored by the oblique references in both composition and title to the comic strip.

---

<sup>45</sup> Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, p108.

<sup>46</sup> Rose, 'Sexuality and Vision; in Foster, p120.



Jemima Stehli *Strip* (1999) No 5 Dealer (shot 2 of 6)

*Strip* uses the normative, heterosexual, male, desiring gaze to suggest the absolute objectness of the female body that connotes a Mulveyan 'to-be-looked-at-ness', and draws equally on the stereotypes referenced by the work of stripper and the nude. The tension between 'her' availability and non-availability involuntarily frames each 'man' as desiring. What is particularly striking is the almost off-hand assumption of desire in the work, and how this is a particular site of embarrassment. The desire, as part of the *assumed* erotic, is also assumed, in that it is not visible, but an imagined *and* imaginary desire that is an implicit connotation of looking. It is assumed that he wants to *have* her, not least in the commercial sense, as a commodity.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> And so they did, using 'her' and her work as subject material for newspaper copy (Searle), book publication (Burrows and Slyce) and profit on selling her work (Stolper).

This aspect of the (spectatorship of) the work is not accidental. I asked Stehli about the importance of gender to the relation between the subject and object of the look and she said that she had tried the work with women watchers, but admitted that the results were not what she wanted. Regardless of the sexual orientation of the woman audience, they did not look at her in the same way. Women, she commented, always look at women as if in a mirror. It seems that women measure themselves against what they see; there is always a comparative rather than commodifying motive in woman looking at woman.<sup>48</sup> Man looking at woman however, is a most stereotypical look that includes an assumption of male desire and male prerogative, and I would argue that this aspect of the work should, in fact must, be accepted at face value as part of a Mulveyan critique of the normative (and thus always heterosexual) masculinisation of the spectatorial position. The spectator is required to take this work as both straight and straightforward. So whether the men in fact do, or don't, their desire is taken as read, taken for granted. Their desire is used as part of the meaning of the work; it is in fact, commodified. And their desire is perhaps taken as read. Because they are men, because they are looking, they are assumed to feel, normative heterosexual desire, and for this desire to be automatic, beyond control, involuntary, like an erection, like a blush.

Slyce, focusing attention on the woman, has suggested that the challenge of *Strip* lies in, ' . . . the scandalous knowledge that a woman might find pleasure in the controlled objectification of her body and its image.'<sup>49</sup> Here at last, we find mooted a notion of pleasure and perhaps a justification for the shoes. Slyce suggests that far from being a completely disadvantaged position in a Sartrean sense, being looked at can be a source of power *and* pleasure. This certainly seems a possibility, given the contrasting discomfort of the men. Even though Burrows looks amused and

---

<sup>48</sup> Interview with the artist 25.02.09

<sup>49</sup> Burrows and Slice, p12.

Collings laughs outright, their pleasure is uncertain; it may be a front to cover their embarrassment, to spare their blushes.

From a feminist point of view, there is still ambiguity over how much pleasure a woman may legitimately derive from her own objectification. The objectification of women within western cultural traditions is a widespread practice which twentieth-century feminism vilified, thus making it if not 'out of bounds', then at the very least, a hugely contestable source of pleasure for both the subject and the object of the look. The legacy of that vilification unintentionally produces the opportunity for viewing pleasures to be guilty pleasures; pleasures that we are inclined to disown because they embarrass.



Allan Jones *Chair* (1968)



Jemima Stehli *Chair* (1997/1998)

However, there is an alternative interpretation to the one offered by Slyce. We might instead read *Strip* as being not about 'her' or her pleasure in being seen at all. *Strip* might be more accurately read as a contemporary, commercial and contextualised re-framing of the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of woman. In the same way that Stehli has re-presented earlier works by Helmut Newton (*Here They Come*), and Allan Jones (*Table* and *Chair*), *Strip* reiterates the sentiment of Mulvey's (much) earlier account;

Women are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another, but what they see bears little relation or relevance to their own

unconscious fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires. They are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus. Women are simply the scenery onto which men project their own narcissistic fantasies.<sup>50</sup>

(And the indignation in Mulvey's dated polemic is now lusciously embarrassing.)



Helmut Newton *Here They Come*



Jemima Stehli *After Helmut Newton's 'Here They Come'* (1999)

The parade of *Strip* is a (pseudo-)feminist cliché that 'has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man'. It is 'about' man. Whilst the first thing that is immediately obvious about the men in *Strip* is that they are all conscious that the self they are invited to show is their 'professional' self; the second obvious thing about each man is that they each fail to conceal their personal self; facial expressions and body language betray them; they are all exposed. Their own 'narcissistic fantasies' are paraded for all to see. Stehli commented on the responses of her chosen men;

I was surprised. What I didn't expect was how much the male viewers who watched me strip revealed of themselves in the moment they chose to press

---

<sup>50</sup> 'Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious' in Mulvey, p13.

the cable release that took the shot. I had very mixed feelings about exposing that. . . . it was interesting to see their anxieties.<sup>51</sup>

I enjoy seeing that. I enjoy their embarrassment. This, for me, is the pleasure of *Strip* and it is, of course, a guilty pleasure.

---

<sup>51</sup> Rebecca Fortnum, *Contemporary British Women Artists: In Their Own Words* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p77.

## Chapter Three:

### Face to Face: The ethics and the cost of looking for Franko B

Detractors will say that I make monstrous work, and in a way it is: the Latin root *monstrare* means to show. If a monster is therefore something that shows itself as much as it is seen by you, then let me be a monster. Franko B<sup>1</sup>

And what she sees, the monster, is only a mirror of herself. Mary Ann Doane<sup>2</sup>

---

Spectatorial embarrassment may be triggered by the object of the look but it is rooted in the accountability of the subject, or at least in the feeling of accountability. By her looking she defines herself as a spectator and is accountable for herself, and also for her interest in the object of the look. By just looking she signals her investment in the image; she is imbricated in its values, in its content, context, and quality. This chapter considers that accountability and imbrication as an ethics of looking and considers the relation between the spectatorial subject and the art-object as a potential cause of embarrassment.

When I look at art I seem to be always 'caught looking' and in the caught-looking-ness of the spectatorial position I am exposed and must account for the 'I' that looks and is exposed by looking. What is at stake here in this exposure and accountability is not always the public face of identity, but what we identify *with* and *as* to our inner-self. This is what Barthes called *le privé*, the self-image that is at the very core of

---

<sup>1</sup> Franko B in Adrian Heathfield, ed. *Live: Art and Performance* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), p226.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. John Caughie and Annette Kuhn (London: Routledge, 1992 (first published in *Screen* 1982)), p236.

self. Being exposed by looking calls on the spectator to be accountable for herself, and also accountable for the relation she bears to the object of her look, a relation that might be figured as desire or revulsion, interest or disinterest.

Also considered in this chapter is the relation between embarrassment and transgression. When we look at an artwork that is 'transgressive' it deliberately revokes the spurious anonymity of 'the gaze' and calls on the spectator to be *interested*, to be involved, enraged, disgusted, aroused, afraid or even embarrassed. What transgressive art insistently demands is that we feel something. It directly challenges the spectator to relinquish the neutrality of detachment. Doyle comments; 'The risk we take [ . . . ] is that we might actually feel something. The truly shocking thing is that we have been so deeply trained to expect to feel nothing.'<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter I examine my response to two works of art that might be considered to be 'transgressive' in terms of their demands on the spectator. The looks they invite (or demand) are diverse and differently problematic. Franko B's 'monstrous' performance *Don't Leave Me This Way*, which is the main focus of the chapter, is based on the 'interest' of face to face contact as a proximate and affective interaction which requires that we engage ethically with the object of our look. This is contrasted with Marc Quinn's 'freakish' sculpture, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, which seems (at first) to allow the 'disinterest' of a variant of 'the gaze', that of the touristic gaze that maintains a distance from the object of its look. This is a look that is exploitative, for pleasure or curiosity, offering nothing in exchange, and so shirking any ethical obligation. Using the monster and the freak as metaphors for the interest and disinterest of the look, I consider an ethics of looking, and how this might be causal in spectatorial embarrassment because a breach of ethics may be a

---

<sup>3</sup> Doyle, 'Critical Tears' in Johnson, p44.

challenge to, or compromise of, a person's idea of themselves. A further ethical problem encountered in this chapter is the potential embarrassment of art when it constitutes affective labour within an exchange economy. How comfortable are we with buying feeling? This chapter attempts to own the embarrassment that can accompany the pleasures, (and dubious pleasures), and the cost of looking.

## I WENT TO SEE FRANKO B

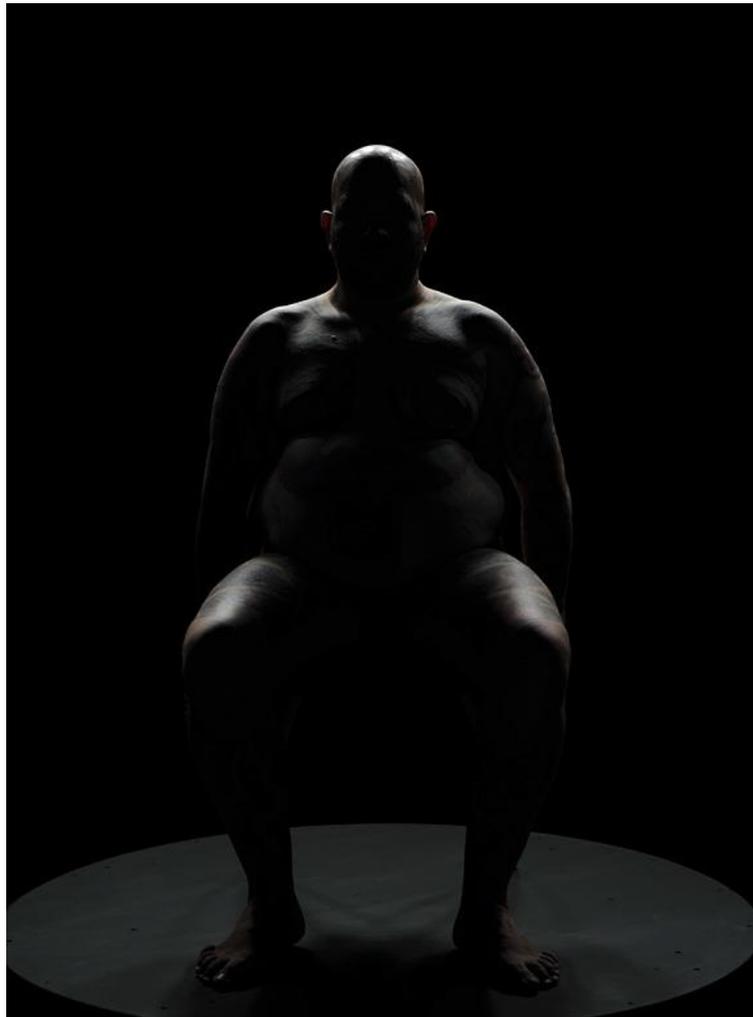
I went to see Franko B. It was a curious experience, not embarrassing exactly, or at least not at the time, but afterwards, I felt embarrassed about my motives, and my taste. I felt that the encounter exposed a self I was not entirely comfortable with and on reflection, the experience was one of coming to terms with that unsatisfactory self. I had booked an 'appointment', an exclusive one-to-one encounter, an opportunity to 'see' Franko B. I had paid. It was an unexpectedly hot day, a day when Trafalgar Square was full of tourists. They flocked, with maps, backpacks, and waterproofs. They were indiscriminately photographing each other and the pigeons, and I was impatient to get through the arch and out of the square. Franko B was appearing at the ICA in a performance piece titled *Don't Leave Me This Way*, ('Please note that this performance contains nudity')<sup>4</sup> and once on the Mall I walked slowly so as to make my time slot, so as not to be too early. When I got there, and it was my turn, I handed over my ticket, a man took me by the elbow and guided me through a doorway into the dark. It was not dark entirely, but a thick and airless gloom. As my eyes began to adjust I could sense shadows and glimmers, a sense of cavernous space. Franko's lair. My guide took me a short distance, he seated me, and then he stood back. He may have left, he may have stayed to watch me. I

---

<sup>4</sup> ICA publicity material [www.ica.org.uk](http://www.ica.org.uk) (accessed 05.03.11) I like that nudity continues to be something we should be warned about; I appreciate its power to disturb or disrupt, and hope that power is not eroded, for if we become insensitive to nakedness, then what else must be stripped off in order to disturb.

forgot about him. Sitting in front of me was Franko B. He was fat and naked, his body seemed to give off a faint hum of light. I felt what Barthes describes as ‘a kind of alert fascination’:

I am nailed to the scene and yet very wide awake: my attention constitutes a part of what is being acted out, nothing is external to the scene, and yet I read it: there are no footlights – this is an extreme theatre. Whence the awkwardness – or, for some perverse types, the pleasure.<sup>5</sup>



Franko B Don't Leave Me This Way (2009) NRLA Glasgow, photo by Hugo Glendenning

---

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, p123.

Vaginal Davis has described Franko B as mesmerically beautiful, but if beauty is in the eye of the beholder, this man was today, ugly.<sup>6</sup> He was ugly for me. His ugliness was of corpulence, excess; he spilled over the edges of himself. It was as if his inside mass could barely be contained by his tattooed and scarred skin. He sat silently with a toad-like stillness, displayed in a way that seemed barely human. He seemed sad, but I suppose he could have been bored. Bored of sitting still to be stared at; bored of showing himself. As I consciously tried to see as much as I could in the poor light, and to see all I could in my allotted time, I was extremely aware of 'seeing'. I strove to see. I wanted to look, no, stare, at his rolls of fat, at his love handles, at his jowls, at his penis lying like a slug, sleeping between thighs. I wanted to see if he was sweating in the stifling heat, around his armpits perhaps, or the folds of his neck. But what I saw most was his eyes. I saw the pink rim of his eyes, unexpected and hurtful, as if I had seen it before, and I would see it again, and be bruised again, I would always see it. It was like looking into the eyes of a caged animal that stares out between the bars in silent rage and disappointment. Franko was staring straight at me; but his eyes seemed sightless. I was looking for a sign, a token, a sign to know for sure that he saw me. But I was left wanting. I felt invisible. Was I just another tourist?

At the end of the time allowed to stare, a white light flickered briefly. Its brightness calculated to make me blink, to miss the exit of the object of my gaze. The light interrupted me, captured me, like the flash of a camera, or the death-zap of a take-away fly-killer. I was exposed, caught, and dispatched.

---

<sup>6</sup> Vaginal Davis, "Papi/Diaspora: The Beauty of Franko B.," in *Franko B: Blinded by Love*, ed. Dominic Johnson (Bologna: Damiani, 2006).



Franko B *Don't Leave Me This Way* (2009) *Lighting by Kamal Ackerie*

Now my time was up, the guide reappeared and showed me the way out. Out, into the sunshine, out through a back door with empty beer kegs lined up against the wall. Blinking, shaking my head. 'You can go round again if you like' he said, 'just get another ticket at the desk.' I walked away. I cannot easily say whether I saw art, or an artist. Maybe neither. Maybe I saw a freak, a monster, a relic, a shrine. Maybe I saw a hoax, a faux. Maybe I just paid to look at a naked chub. Maybe I am no knowing consumer of art, just a voyeur, with my eye at the keyhole, putting my penny in the slot, a penny to see the peep show, the sex show, the freak show, the bearded lady, a piece of the true cross. Just a sucker easily parted from her penny. Yes, afterwards, on reflection, I felt embarrassed.

Franko B has said:

Today . . . the artist is treated like a cheap Jesus, and I need to challenge that. The difficulty rests in breaking down vision. Our culture revolves around the look: if someone looks at you, they either want to fuck you, to rob you, or to sell you something.<sup>7</sup>

The look was a difficult one, a face to face encounter with a man/monster who purported to offer me love, but during my few minutes, didn't seem to notice me at

---

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, p12.

all. Perhaps it was a failed gesture of intimacy. Was this his failure, or mine? I looked at Franko wanting neither to fuck him, nor to rob him. Perhaps I wanted to sell myself, not my body, but my *self*, as a good self. Perhaps I failed.

I could have been embarrassed by the way that Franko's 'sculptural' body draws (my) attention to my body; that his nakedness exposes me. I could have felt embarrassed about the exchange of looks. He may have been looking at me; his eyes may have been better adjusted to the dark than mine, I may have been the object of his look, slave to his master. I may have been troubled by the sexuality of the exchange of looks, for as Silvan Tomkins said, looking can be more intimate than sex. I may alternatively have felt insignificant, that he did not see me, that I was not worthy of his look. I may have been embarrassed by 'the gaze', by the fact that it is no better than authorised voyeurism, or by the gaze's elitism that draws attention to my capacity to fit the stereotype of the straight, white, male spectator, and perpetuates a notion of cultural competence, a competence that I doubt I have.

But actually it was none of these potential embarrassments that I felt just then. I felt embarrassed about, in the vaguest sense of 'about', wanting to look. Was it the chosen object of my look that discomforted me; that I had paid to look, and to look at something monstrous? Not only the object of the look, but the circumstances of the looking were monstrous, and intimate, and dark, and empty, and costly. What was really troubling me was my curiosity and my *desire* to look at this, and to look in this way. Despite the awkwardness of being caught looking, yet there is a very prurient pleasure in the voyeurism of spectatorship. I find I am drawn to images of ugliness, freakiness, monstrosity, perversity. Despite the embarrassment, I am glad I looked. By the time I came out of the ICA, my desire had gone, not satisfied, just gone, abated, leaving an afterimage, a trace, a stain.

The relation between desire and embarrassment mirrors that between shame and interest theorized by Tomkins. For Tomkins shame is unthinkable without a preceding interest: ‘the innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest.’<sup>8</sup> And for Tomkins, the term ‘shame’ designates an axis of feeling that encompasses embarrassment. It is then the residual shred of interest, like my stain of desire, diminished and inappropriate but still felt that gives rise to shame-embarrassment and this is clearly expressed in the compulsion to look *and* to look away. What is initially a careless uncensored glance is followed by an instinctive and hurried aversion of the eyes as we register the object of our look as unsuitable, uncomfortable, strange. The look may then be reprised as an uncomfortable gaze as we indulge our interest. Without the investment of interest, or desire, the object of our look would not have the power to shame-embarrass us. A similar pairing of affects is noted by Barthes in relation to the *punctum* which, he says, attracts and distresses. The two feelings are again closely connected; if our attention were not attracted, we would be incapable of distress. The second feeling of the pair never entirely eradicates the first. The first is the root. Sedgwick acknowledges the interdependence of the mixed feeling; ‘. . . shame is characterized by its failure ever to renounce its object of cathexis, its relation to the desire for pleasure as well as the need to avoid pain.’<sup>9</sup> And it is the lingering pleasure of the first feeling; call it the desire, interest or attraction that might go some way to explaining Gilbert & George’s commitment to repeating the embarrassments of art and their estimation of embarrassment as ‘a good feeling’.

Embarrassment, like shame, like the *punctum* carries two unequal affective charges; the positive of attraction or desire and the negative charge that is secondary, but stronger, engulfing but not entirely eradicating the first. Interest and shame,

---

<sup>8</sup> Sedgwick and Frank, p5.

<sup>9</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p117.

attraction and distress, desire and embarrassment; these are the opposing forces at work in Tomkins' shame, Barthes' *punctum*, and in embarrassment. In each case there is an incomplete eradication of the initial positive by the stronger negative force. The tension between the affective forces contributes to what Goffman refers to as 'a failure to present a coherent self'. In that incoherence, there is a sense of the conflict of positive and negative, of desire and distress that is internalised. The negative contains within it a positive, as if it had swallowed it whole

## **EMBARRASMENT & MONSTERS**

I want to consider how the incoherence of embarrassment and the ugliness that I saw in Franko B finds form and signification in the figure of the monster. And how looking at the monster, who shows himself to me (*montstrare*: to show) is a transgressive look because it declares spectatorial interest (attraction, desire) but also an ethical look that is spectatorially accountable. The rubric 'monster' is used freely to include any number of creatures who inspire awe, terror, curiosity and revulsion. Mary Russo's work on monstrosity distinguishes clearly between two sub-categories; the grotesque (or monster) and the freak, differentiated not in terms of what their bodies are like, but how the relations between monster and not-monster are played out in the field of vision. *How* we look at these creatures and their potential to engender spectatorial embarrassment uncovers an ethics of looking.

Drawing on the work of Bakhtin on the carnival, and Stallybrass and White on transgression as political, Russo defines the grotesque (and particularly the female

grotesque)<sup>10</sup> as a creature of the carnival and of the uncanny. The grotesque is figured as roaming free, participating in a broad and reciprocal specular economy;

Russo writes:

The grotesque body of carnival festivity was not distanced or objectified in relation to an audience. Audiences and performers were the interchangeable parts of an incomplete but imaginable wholeness. The grotesque body was exuberantly and democratically open and inclusive of all possibilities.<sup>11</sup>

Stallybrass and White emphasise the instability that arises from rubbing shoulders with the grotesque; 'the grotesque is a boundary phenomenon of hybridisation or inmixing, in which self and other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone.'<sup>12</sup> Looking at the monster (Russo's grotesque) is a reciprocal look. He *shows himself*, we are invited to look, and to look with a mingling of abhorrence and adoration. This monster is something roaming free, walking amongst us and we may meet and commune, face to face. The looking here may be an intimate relation, one where eye contact is made. It is also an ethical relation *because* eye contact is made.

The freak however, according to Russo, is quite separate and by its immitigable difference, it is spectacular. The spectacle as a cultural trope is codified and commodified and the freak, as spectacle is both differenced and distanced from its audience.

---

<sup>10</sup> Russo's main interest is in the specifically female grotesque. Of the male grotesque she says; 'their identities as such are produced through an association with the feminine as the body marked by difference.' And, they 'are all set apart as heterogeneous *particular* men rather than the generic or normal men who stand in for mankind.' Also, Russo suggests that in the case of a male grotesque, factors such as 'male homosexuality and marked ethnicity interact with the iconography and aesthetics of the grotesque.' This I think would apply to Franko B. Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1995). p13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p78.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1986)., p193.

A spectacle, by definition, requires sight lines and distance. Audiences do not meet up face to face or mask to mask with the spectacle of freaks. Freaks are by definition, apart, as beings to be viewed. In the traditional sideshow, they are often caged and most often they are silent.<sup>13</sup>

The differentiation between the freak and the monster is expressed here in terms of the contexts of looking *at*. It is a difference of how 'we' look at 'them' and contexts of looking at the monster or at the freak are both potential sites of embarrassment.

The look at the freak is a touristic gaze, it is inherently unethical, we do not imagine they look back at us. When we look at the freak we deny the reciprocity that Sartre ascribes to the look-looking and the look-looked-at. We assume the privileges of freedom and subjectivity without reciprocity, without penalty. When we look at the monster however, we are at risk; we know he sees us because he shows himself to us. The monster invites us close, he engages us, we are proximate, and the proximity of our look is gendered feminine (though not, of course, necessarily female). The proximity of our look suggests an over identification with the object and an already othered subject position, that is to say, marked as gendered and sexed, predisposing an emotional engagement with the object of our look. Theories of the gendering of proximity in the field of vision go so far as to suggest an identification with the object, and perhaps even over-identification. This is predicated on a tendency to conflate seeing and knowing, leaving no room, no *critical* distance between subject and object.

For the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image – she *is* the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism – the female look demands a becoming.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Russo, pp79,80.

<sup>14</sup> Doane, p231.

There is, in the engagement with the monster the risk of 'inmixing', the risk of becoming monstrous. But, in contrast, the freak remains separate from ourself; we look at the freak from a distance. It is a safe distance, but not an aesthetic distance, for we do not, cannot, find it beautiful.

So when I went to see Franko B, did I see a freak or a monster? The fact that I paid to look, and the theatrical framing of the look correlate with the freak show. I even asked myself, 'was I just another tourist?' I certainly felt no better. But in fact, I believe that *Don't Leave Me This Way* is a work, as Franko himself entertains, that is monstrous. 'Detractors' he writes 'will say that I make monstrous work, and in a way it is'.<sup>15</sup> He argues that in 'showing himself' to spectators, he embodies the monster. The one-to-one-ness of the encounter, the reciprocity of the work, and the fact that he showed himself all make it monstrous. The concentration of looking required to see Franko B in a near darkness drew attention to the intimacy and ethics of the face-to-face, mask-to-mask, look-looked-at of the encounter. When I saw Franko B, he gave no sign that he saw me, but surely he must have? I looked right into his eyes, and felt rejected by his impassivity rather than merely overlooked.

The experience of looking at another, looking right into their eyes can be remarkably unsettling. Silvan Tomkins wrote of the ethics of looking in terms of two socio-cultural taboos; the first on looking directly into the eyes of the other, and the second, perversely, on *not* looking, or on looking away too visibly.<sup>16</sup> Tomkins proposed three reasons for the restriction on looking directly at the other. Firstly that mutual looking is intimate; more intimate than sex. Secondly, that the look-look has a 'unique capacity' of 'expression, communication, contagion, escalation and control

---

<sup>15</sup> Franko B in Heathfield, p226.

<sup>16</sup> Sedgwick and Frank, p137.

of affects.<sup>17</sup> By this he refers to the visibility of affects; if I am angry, and you look at me you will see that I am angry, or more to the point, if I am embarrassed and you look at me you will see that I am embarrassed and I will be embarrassed to be seen in this state and being seen will escalate the emotion. The third cause of avoidance of the look-look is expressly sexual in accord with a Freudian interpretation of looking as one of the earliest and primary contributors to the development of sexuality as a mix of pleasures and penalties.

On the second restriction, that of looking away too visibly or of not returning the other's look, not looking them in the eye, Tomkins says that this is either a matter of disrespect or, alternatively, a sign of a lack of self-esteem. The avoidance of eye contact constitutes a judgment that either 'you are not worth looking at' or, 'I am not worthy to look at you'. The ethics of looking outlined here suggest that eye contact is a form of social contract, and to make eye contact is to take responsibility for both other and self. To maintain eye contact whilst experiencing embarrassment is excruciatingly difficult, all impulses are to look away.



Franko B

---

<sup>17</sup> Sedgwick and Frank, pp144,145.

In *Don't Leave Me*, the spectator is invited to look at the other who is strange in a way that draws attention to the ethics of looking. The spectator is called on to consider their gaze, to return the gaze of the monster, if they can. The spectator risks intimacy, risks feeling something in an emotional proximity where as Stallybrass and White say there may be an 'inmixing' in which self and other 'become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone'. The touristic gaze, on the other hand, is predicated on the maintenance of distance, and being unethical, demands no such self-reflexiveness. On reflection, my look at Franko could not be a touristic gaze. It was so intense, so proximate, and so troubling, so monstrous; it was indeed a look that was too close for comfort.

## **EMBARRASSMENT & FREAKS**

In considering the potential embarrassments of the touristic gaze, there is a particular work of art that has been excessively exposed to just this. In fact, it can hardly be mentioned without the adjunct of a look that is cosmopolitan and indiscriminate. *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005) by Marc Quinn was displayed on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square from September 2005 to October 2007. Nearly, but not quite concurrent with *Don't Leave Me* in both time and place; a near coincidence. It is as if they had just missed each other. Quinn's work is a monumental piece of marble that apart from being too clean, easily held its own amongst the lions and admirals. But it is somehow 'difficult', or at least difficult to like with its vacuous whiteness, its expressionless eyes and its smoothed over and idealised representation of a real person as allegory. It is wearily weighted by the inevitability of the arguments for celebrating diverse bodies versus celebrating the deeds of great men. The work has generated a considerable amount of populist

controversy that negates the possibility of critical appraisal; it is difficult to say, for example that 'I don't like it' because that is to risk appearing to dislike people who are physically disadvantaged. Even to find words for the otherness of congenital deformity that do not speak from an 'able-ist' position is awkward, and so too is the phoniness of such able-bodied political-correctness that must sift through language to avoid some imagined offence.



Marc Quinn *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005)

The site specificity of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* guaranteed it as a tourist 'attraction'; Trafalgar Square is 'the centre of the *polis* – the navel of the political culture of the British nation.'<sup>18</sup> Besides being a confluence of political, military and regal powers, the square is also a site of art-historical power; home to the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery. Each of these various powerhouses of cultural and political tradition draws tourists; they flock to the site, to be there, to see for

---

<sup>18</sup> Cashell, p38.

themselves, to photograph, to be photographed, to take home a souvenir of having been there. Will Self commented that the traditional powers of the site ensure that, 'a statue of Alison Lapper at that point on the fourth plinth becomes, to my way of thinking, deeply subversive.'<sup>19</sup> Kieran Cashell, whose interest is in the compromised ethics of a disinterested aesthetic distance, extends this argument:

Will Self's admiration of the site-specificity of the sculpture fails to recognise that Trafalgar Square is now a locus of tourist appeal as much as it once was a nexus of imperial power. Therefore, the context tends on this occasion to codify the figure as a public *spectacle* – something to be looked at.<sup>20</sup>

They are of course both right, the work is subversive and a spectacle, and significantly, due to its subjection to, and provocation of, the touristic gaze, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* is an instance of spectacular freakery.

The freak as spectacle defines its onlookers as tourists. They look from a viewpoint that is naturalised as normative 'where they come *from*', and look at what is exotically 'other'. Looking at the freak confirms the spectatorial gaze, confirms *my* gaze, as touristic. Looking at a representation of the freak, or indeed at the freak itself *as art* positions me as casually, without compassion, commitment or understanding, looking for my own entertainment. I find this embarrassing: it does not meet my expectations of self. I look with what Cashell makes no bones about labelling 'the repulsive attitude of the cultural tourist'.

Quinn's sculpture is very conservative in form, made of fine Carrara marble and in the style of neo-classical Greco-Roman sculpture of gods and heroes; it *appears to* invite a disinterested gaze, a suspension of (base) everyday emotions and concerns in pursuit of aesthetic beauty. The site of the work, which is excessively touristic, *seems to be* laid bare to an omnivorous, consuming gaze in pursuit of entertainment

---

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Cashell, p46.

<sup>20</sup> Cashell, p46.

without engagement. But *Alison Lapper Pregnant* is actually a transgressive work of art and will not let us get away with either a disinterested aesthetic gaze or a disengaged touristic gaze.

Despite its classical form, and despite its location, *Alison Lapper*, as Self noted, is 'subversive', and is difficult to digest as 'just' a thing of beauty, or alternatively as an object of idle curiosity. It actually solicits our engagement. Cashell says of its ethical position:

Because the sculpture is so public, so prominent and *open* that it almost represents the idea of openness itself, the viewer is made to feel guilty for being tempted to adopt a disinterested (and therefore disrespectful) attitude towards the sculpture – and by extension Lapper and (by further extension) people with disabilities.<sup>21</sup>

And this is the nub of the transgressiveness of Quinn's work. He knows this. He knows, that a tourist like me will be wrongfooted; where we anticipated a long-dead and highly-decorated warmonger, we see a pregnant woman who is disabled.

Disabled bodies articulated in classical formal conventions cannot be processed as anything other than striving to achieve but ultimately 'falling short of' the traditional aesthetic principles – a relationship that is dependent on the very canonical and conservative ideology it evidently subverts.<sup>22</sup>

Quinn knows how difficult it is to maintain a distance. The work is transgressive because we must consider it not aesthetically, but ethically, and transgressive because like propaganda or pornography it is too insistent that we are *interested*. It calls for action. As Cashell says, it works as a call to 'put ethics, accessibility, tolerance and social inclusion into political practice.'<sup>23</sup> And this too is a product of its site-specificity, ensuring hyper-visibility and socio-political exposure.

---

<sup>21</sup> Cashell, pp46,47.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p41.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p47.

And because it calls on me to be interested, like pornography calls on me to be aroused, I find it embarrassing. I am busy looking the other way, and don't want to be called on, or interpellated like this. How much easier it would be to discuss this work in terms of a pallid, disengaged, gutless aesthetics; a system of judgement I need take no responsibility for. I don't want to be just another repulsive tourist collecting snaps, but, on the other hand to engage ethically as the work demands, is embarrassing. The work asks me to expose my beliefs, and principles. But even that is perhaps not the true site of embarrassment; I am in favour of equality, accessibility and visibility, and I recognise the dubiousness of the 'ableist' position that considers physical normativity to be unquestionably desirable and any deviation a handicap to be overcome. But these laudable principles I hold do not excuse my rude stare. The truth is, I am driven to look by a mixture of desire and revulsion.

In relation to *The Complete Marbles*, the series of sculptures of which *Alison Lapper* is part, Quinn suggests that; 'To see different bodies reproduced in the material of beauty and heroism, marble, involved a celebration of a wider notion of beauty and humanity.'<sup>24</sup> This is of course, admirable, but arguably, he overstates the capacity of the public gaze to transcend a deeply ingrained investment in normality, and the corresponding recoil from the not-normal as historically connected with evil, disaster, and suffering. Ann Millet-Gallant in *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art*, doubts our acceptance of 'not-normal', and she particularly doubts our capacity to escape the pervasive influence of the medicalization of 'different bodies', suggesting our investment is in correcting rather than celebrating difference. Millet-Gallant writes; 'The culturally ubiquitous medical model views disability as a set of medical and corporeal "problems" and works to cure, fix or eliminate these "problems" and

---

<sup>24</sup> Quinn cited in Cashell, p41

consequently disabled people from the population.'<sup>25</sup> We are so schooled in the 'breed standard' of human beauty that we can only see 'other' bodies as deviating from, and failing to meet these standards, and perhaps some people would prefer not to see them at all.

Bodies born with less or more than considered normal are always looked at as different, always differenced, always othered. But it is rude to stare, and in paying lip service to equality, we are supposed to turn a blind eye, overlook the difference and pretend that we all look the same. Is it not embarrassingly disingenuous to overlook difference?



Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005)

---

<sup>25</sup> Ann Millet-Gallant, *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p7.

I am embarrassed that actually I want to stare, like a child, like a tourist, to stare with an uninhibited consuming gaze at the freak. It is an insatiable and sexualised curiosity that is symptomatic of what Russo terms 'the pornography of disability'.<sup>26</sup> And I *want* to give free rein to the mixture of desire and revulsion that drives me to look, rather than politely, discretely look away. Ultimately, there is no sidestepping responsibility for the embarrassing fact that differenced bodies are publicly overlooked and privately fetishized.

In his analysis of *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, Cashell, despite scrupulous investigation of his own ethical position towards the work, betrays a small embarrassment when he says that the work should be considered to be collaborative.<sup>27</sup> He is squeamish about Quinn's authorship of the work being exploitative of Lapper, not because she is congenitally deformed, or female, or pregnant, but because of the other fact we know about her; because she is an artist. He is embarrassed that although Lapper uses her body as subject in her own work, when Quinn uses her body, the work achieves greater critical acclaim and contributes to *his* career as a successful artist. It is almost as if he has stolen something, taken all the credit, when she is an artist too. But she is not *the* artist, it is Quinn's work. Lapper was the model and became the spokesperson for the work, but this does not make it collaborative. Cashell is using the suggestion of collaboration euphemistically to cover his embarrassment at the intimation of the exploitation of Lapper-as-artist.

---

<sup>26</sup> Russo, p138.

<sup>27</sup> Cashell, p47. See also Millet-Gallant who comments that 'many have called the project collaborative'(p51) and also that, 'many find Quinn's ambivalence [on so-called 'collaboration'] disturbing', Millet-Gallant, p61.

## THE TRANSGRESSIONS OF FRANKO B

*Alison Lapper Pregnant* is transgressive but its mode of transgression is subversive in that it masquerades as classical sculpture, a contemporary interloper in a space where art is used to commemorate ancient achievement or (privileged) greatness. Franko B on the other hand, wears his transgression on his sleeve.



Franko B / *I Miss You* (2003) Tate Modern,

There is however, some slight awkwardness in discussing *Don't Leave Me* as transgressive. The difficulty arises from using such a strong term as 'transgressive' with all that it might potentially imply (wrongdoing, trespass, immorality, violation), to describe an insubstantial, fleeting encounter where so little was visible, and nothing was said. Some of Franko's previous performance works were grand, extravagant, public and dangerous. When Franko showed *I Miss You* in the turbine hall of Tate Modern it excited some members of the audience to cry their eyes out in sadness, sympathy and love. Doyle writes that she was moved to tears, overwhelmed by the intensity of the work.<sup>28</sup> She felt intimacy, even in the midst of a capacity crowd. In contrast, *Don't Leave Me* as staged at the ICA was low-key, private, a little fumbling in the dark, and soon over. And yet the work *is* transgressive; with no clear

---

<sup>28</sup> Doyle, 'Critical Tears' in Johnson

purpose, it invites people to sit in close proximity with a naked man, who is both strange and stranger.

As Roland Barthes has written, what exposes a person most, most damagingly, most embarrassingly, is exposure of *le privé*, the innermost self-image, not of our external identity but what we privately identify with. Our identifications (and counter-identifications and *disidentifications*) are responses to the *doxas* of ideology. Barthes, like many other thinkers, conceives of a spectrum of ideological *doxas* running from a radical left to a conservative right, with the individual facing in different directions at different moments and in differing circumstances. The right-wing *doxa* is subject to embarrassability, particularly over sexuality, whilst the left prides itself on being un-embarrassable, but in fact is disconcerted by failing to be sufficiently left. It is what Barthes terms the 'trivial actions, the traces of bourgeois ideology confessed by the subject' that are the Achilles heel of the left.<sup>29</sup> And the traces of bourgeois ideology that so often prove embarrassing include intimacy, sentimentality, and *inaction*, all of which Franko B exploits in *Don't Leave Me*.

The transgressiveness of *Don't Leave Me This Way* is of low intensity but multiple and layered. Firstly, it has transgressive pedigree. Franko B's previous performances with wounding, cutting, and the fetishization of pain and blood prefigure this in a sense of right-wing transgression and in *Don't Leave Me*, the body of the artist and his nakedness, to only a very limited extent, sustain this and our expectation of this type of transgression. Set counter to this, as a one-to-one performance, *Don't Leave Me* requires the spectator to expose herself in a left-wing sense, to the risk of intimacy, even romance, to enter into a scenario of a despairing bid to avoid rejection, perhaps to hold on to love.

---

<sup>29</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p82.

*Don't Leave Me* is marked by a motif of denial or frustration and this also might be considered as a further element of transgression. The denial and frustration of intent and understanding work to provoke the spectator, and establish conditions of spectatorial embarrassment, where the capacities to know and to act are restricted. The title alludes to an irredeemable situation of loss and sentimentally hopeless hope, and on several levels Franko works to deny the expectations (or hopes) of the spectator. Franko B is best known for his blood works and the lack of physical harm in *Don't Leave Me* denies the spectator their understanding of Franko as the man who bleeds for art.



The man who bleeds for art

Kamal Ackarie, who designed the lighting for the work suggests that the darkness of the piece is a counterintuitive move that is in itself transgressive. Ackarie comments that most people want a lighting designer to make the show to be seen. Franko

asked for the opposite; he wanted *not* to be seen, and he wanted to blind people.<sup>30</sup>

The almost-dark of the piece, almost denies the spectator the sight of Franko, who they have come to see. The marginality of the event as ‘something and nothing’ makes it difficult to be sure it is even worth mentioning, and this is also a form of transgression. For me, the lack of a clear acknowledgement from Franko that he saw *me*, that he looked back and returned my look, was particularly frustrating leaving me with a sense of inadequacy. *My* experience of *Don’t Leave Me* is also marked by the suspicion of a failure of gesture, or an evasion of intimacy. The lack of clear purpose or meaning of the work denies the spectator any sense of closure; just who is leaving and who is left? All that remains is a sense of loss, or perhaps failure; don’t leave me *this way*.

## EMBARRASSMENT & AFFECTIVE LABOUR

Looking at Franko B for the duration of the performance, and given the dark, and my concerted effort to see, I might just as easily say, looking *for* Franko, I thought I felt no embarrassment. Typically, the embarrassment was slight and slippery, unexpectedly catching me out, like a wrongfootedness. The site of embarrassment was not in the looking, which is central to the experience of the work, but around the edges. The site of embarrassment was in the *desire* to look; it was in my desire to look on the monster. And embarrassment is also peripherally present in the residual feelings of uncertainty, failure, and in the lack of intensity.

---

<sup>30</sup> Kamal Ackerie interviewed in *Don’t Leave Me This Way*, Short film, Director, Victor Ibañez. In earlier versions, such as shown at the Arnolfini in Bristol, there was a group audience, who were lit with bright light, whilst Franko was in the dark, but in the one to one version as shown at the ICA the lighting was very subdued throughout until the blinding flash that signalled the end of the appointment.

Quite unexpectedly, I found that in participating in *Don't Leave Me This Way*, I was also subjected to a slight economic embarrassment. My embarrassment was not that alluded to euphemistically as 'financial embarrassment', or more obscurely as 'pecuniary difficulties', when one finds oneself in receipt or need of goods or services for which one cannot pay. But rather, it was the embarrassment was of having paid. And come to think of it, as it was not a huge sum of money, I am embarrassed to mention it, embarrassed to give the impression that I couldn't afford it, or I begrudge spending on 'the arts', or that it was poor value for money, or that I am some freeloader. Money is in itself a source of embarrassment and perhaps a class-based source, rooted in traditional preconceptions of things such as old-money, the nouveau riche, thrift, extravagance and the stolid prudence of the middle ground. Both too much and too little can be awkward and there is a reticence and reserve in speaking of money; we are anxious not to expose ourselves as either flash and easily fleeced, or as a cheapskate.

The cost of seeing Franko B in *Don't Leave Me This Way* was £4.00 for a three minute one-to-one audience. If I had paid for admission to a gallery and looked at pictures on the walls there would be no embarrassment. The amount paid is not the issue, I even think I 'got my money's worth', but the awkwardness remains in the explicitness of the contract, that I paid to look, and he was paid to be looked at. Furthermore, because Franko offers to love his audience, as Marina Abramovic said, 'what really touches me deeply about Franko B's live performances is [ . . . ] the unconditional love given to his audience';<sup>31</sup> *that* is uncomfortable. And worse; he offers us intimacy. Miglietti says; 'He creates an intimate relationship of the

---

<sup>31</sup> Marina Abramovic (2006) in Francesca Alfano Miglietti, ed. *Franko B: I Still Love* (Milan: 24 Ore Cultura, 2010).

unexpressed with the spectator in a visual dimension'.<sup>32</sup> And that is definitely a problem. I seem to have paid for intimacy.

Nicholas Ridout explores the economic ethics of embarrassment arising from the 'predicament of the audience' of theatrical performance. The problem, he suggests, arises from the ethics of eye contact. Where Tomkins had posited the ethics of the look in terms of status and sexuality, Ridout sees status as economically grounded. In such moments; 'at least part of the embarrassment may stem from a recognition that the intimacy into which I am being seduced has been paid for.'<sup>33</sup> Intimacy and economics are strange bedfellows, they embarrass each other. Having paid to look, my desire to look is outed, and I cannot 'not look'; I cannot look away. It would be, among other things, rude, disingenuous, and a waste of money. 'The phenomenon of embarrassment arising from eye contact seems to expose the consumer as consumer in her own mind's eye, whether she looks away or not.'<sup>34</sup> So, I am exposed; exposed as a 'consumer', exposed as someone who pays to look at another person who is paid to be looked at and perhaps to look back at me. This uncomfortable transaction takes place within the economy of affective labour.

Negri and Hardt define affective labour as the work 'of human contact and interaction'. Affective labour is the third type of immaterial labour that 'drive[s] the post-modernization of the global economy' with the first two being the production and communication of information, and cognitive or creative labour. The production and transmission of emotion has perhaps the most substance of the three because of its quite literal embodied-ness, but it is, nevertheless, immaterial; 'in the sense that its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction,

---

<sup>32</sup> FAM in *ibid.* p23.

<sup>33</sup> Ridout, p89.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p89.

excitement, or passion.<sup>35</sup> Affective labour might not always produce comfortable emotions; it might also trade in grief, guilt or anger. Affective labour would also include the healing of wounds, the provision of intimacy, the confession of secrets, the telling of jokes, service with a smile, counselling, forgiveness, mourning, and the care of the sad and the mad and the dead.

Franco 'Biffo' Berardi offers a darker view of affective labour as we experience it within a capitalist economy; it eats away at our soul. Where once, it was the time and energy of the worker's body that was exploited in the production of value, now we are trading the cognitive and affective labour of our souls for the capacity to buy things. Berardi writes; 'The immaterial factory asks instead to place our very souls at its disposal: intelligence, sensibility, creativity and language.'<sup>36</sup> This is not to say we should not value affective labour, but a call to reconsider what we understand by value. For Franko B, the value of his work is relational.

Franko B takes the emotional response of his spectators as a serious obligation. It is not play, but work. He said;

It is very difficult to explain, but for me this is a very serious, very important aspect: feeling the responsibility of other people's emotions requires one to imagine a great weight; for me its not an experiment or a game that I am playing with someone, it is not some clever little thing, because it would be too easy to play with the feelings and emotions of people.<sup>37</sup>

He has at one time provided his audience with postcards to register their response to his work. Though not specifically about *Don't Leave Me* they give an indication of

---

<sup>35</sup> Michael Hardt and Anronio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). pp292,293.

<sup>36</sup> Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans., Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009). p192.

<sup>37</sup> Francesca Alfano Miglietti, *Extreme Bodies: The Uses and Abuses of the Body in Art* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2003)., pp235,236.

the degree to which his audiences feel something *worth* expressing. This is a selection of comments:

'I appreciate this provocation'

'Looking your arts I think I can be owner of myself, and that it is possible to ribegin, better. Anyway.' (sic)

'My responses to Franko B's work are almost always mixed'

'I cried'

'Thank you for all emotions I get'

'I like your artwork . . . but your videos are that bad, cheap and without sense'

'Everyone can now read you mind like an open book. Was it that what you want?'

'Lovely man, thank you 4 the goose-bumps'

'You are someone who smells good!! You know?'

'I can feel 'Yes, I'm living' in front of your work'<sup>38</sup>

The final comment is very reminiscent of the condition advocated by Nicolas Bourriaud for relational aesthetics. Bourriaud says that the first question we should ask ourselves when looking at art is; 'Does it give me a chance to exist in front of it, or, on the contrary, does it deny me as a subject?'<sup>39</sup> Like the respondent, I felt alive in front of *Don't Leave Me*, doubtful and insecure, but alive with Barthes' 'alert fascination' as a form of emotion that referred me back to myself.

Whilst Franko offers his spectator love and intimacy; it comes at a price. As I have already paid I cannot consider his love as a gift.<sup>40</sup> If I disregard the possibility of a gift and consider the encounter as a contract, for after all, I paid to look at another person who was paid to be looked at, then I might consider, that according to

---

<sup>38</sup> Johnson.

<sup>39</sup> Bourriaud, p57.

<sup>40</sup> Except perhaps in the Derridian sense, as a demand to be loved in return; *Don't Leave Me This Way*. Carol Mavor points out the difficulty of such a gift; 'the gift gives power to the giver and is not, despite all who claim differently, a gesture based on mutual reciprocity.' Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)., p415.

Barthes; 'the model of the good contract is the model of Prostitution.'<sup>41</sup> And that may be one of the oldest recognised forms of affective labour.



Franko B, *Don't Leave Me This Way (1-2-1)* (2009) ICA, London, photo by Hugo Glendenning

Barthes is ambivalent on the desirability of the contract. It is, he cautions, a 'bad object' legitimating bourgeois values of value exchange, and yet, he admits, we desire to have our relations with others contractually regulated, thus eliminating the awkwardness of 'the reluctance to receive without giving.'<sup>42</sup> Not, you will note, the other way about, a reluctance to give and get nothing back. For Barthes, the embarrassment would be in the discredit of taking, rather than the bourgeois expectancy of a return on outlay. On the model of a 'good contract' offered by prostitution Barthes says:

For this contract, declared immoral by all societies and by all systems (except the most archaic), liberates in fact from what might be called the *imaginary embarrassments* of the exchange: what am I to count on in the

---

<sup>41</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p59.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p59.

other's desire, in *what I am for him?* The contract eliminates this confusion.<sup>43</sup>

The embarrassments of the exchange, (whether or not we consider them to be imaginary) arise because, as already offered, intimacy and economics are an incongruous pairing, even if the intimacy is imaginary. But within the structure of the contract, the proximity of intimacy and economics is legitimised and the embarrassment is held at bay. It is as if Barthes had anticipated my predicament. It is as if he knew I would want to ask of Franko, *does he see me?* And '*what I am for him?*'

Within the context of affective labour, it is hard to justify the work of Franko B as a gift. Art is his profession; he makes a living. But the contract between artist and spectator exceeds the exchange of affective labour for coin. The relational value exceeds the admission price, and the cost of looking is an ethical exchange. The intimacy of Franko's work, even if it is refused by the spectator, cannot, due to the very nature of intimacy (or refusal), be one-sided. The spectator is called on to engage in the intimacy; she exposes herself to the work by giving in to curiosity, or desire, or by her looking, by her tears, or by her embarrassment. Alternatively, her refusal would also be relational; one refuses, the other is refused. Her refusal would constitute an exposure of the private self revealing a lack of interest or desire. Also to look away would breach the ethics of looking exposing the spectator as someone who would, or could look away. To *not* engage in the intimacy of the situation would be to receive without giving, and this again is a form of exposure.

Doyle makes the point that Franko's work tends to go beyond the representation of emotion to its actual production.

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p59. (Barthes' italics)

He shifts questions about art and emotion to the audience, moving away from the self-reflexive representation of the artist's emotional state, to the production of feelings themselves. It is a risky move if ever there was one, if only because he asks us directly if, and how, we plan to love him back.<sup>44</sup>

In *Don't Leave Me*, the feeling Franko produces, as the product of his (affective) labour is indeed risky. It is complicated by the lack of clear purpose and by the lack of closure leaving only a sense of obligation, and inadequacy, and a stain of desire that discloses an embarrassing failure of intimacy.

Like Berardi, who believes that affective labour erodes the soul, Carol Mavor has suggested that affective labour may 'come at the cost of the loss of self'.<sup>45</sup> I thought she meant that the cost was borne by the self who laboured. But, somehow, whilst I assumed Franko to be the one who laboured, because I paid him to, the loss of self, or at least the loss of a coherent self seems to have been mine.

---

<sup>44</sup> Doyle, 'Critical Tears' in Johnson, p47.

<sup>45</sup> Mavor, p414.

## Chapter Four:

### Inside Out: Confessions of sentimentality in the performance art of Adrian Howells.

What undertaking could be more narcissistically exciting or more narcissistically dangerous than that of rereading, revising and consolidating one's own 'collected works'?

E K Sedgwick<sup>1</sup>

---

This chapter considers the self that spectatorial embarrassment exposes; a self that is fractured and faceted, a self that is the subject of an on-going narrative of identity and identifications; a self that is flawed. In any given situation, when we are seen, including when we are 'caught looking', we would always prefer to be seen to be our 'best self', both inside and out, we want to be the most appropriate and coherent self, a self we can admire, we want to be 'good'. But within our inventory of self is a quality of a 'less-good' self, one that as Lionel Trilling notes; 'is less good in the public moral way', and not despite, but exactly because of its failings, we are inclined to admit that this self is 'most peculiarly' our own.<sup>2</sup> And this less-good self, which we cannot fully repress but must fully own, is the very quality of self that is inadvertently exposed by embarrassment. The less-than-good-ness of the self may refer to either the inner self of self-image, or the outer face of the public-image; it is a *quality* that may be manifested in either – or both; both have aspects that can bring us into (our own) disrepute. The unsettling experience of embarrassment is essentially a moment of self-recognition. Adam Phillips (writing of the stronger feeling of shame) comments that such moments ' . . . confront one most vividly, that

---

<sup>1</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p39.

<sup>2</sup> Trilling, p5.

is, most terribly with the picture of who one wants to be through the experience of failing to be it. One is most essentially one's self at such moments.<sup>3</sup>

The exposure of a less-good quality of self is examined here in the context of the performance work of Adrian Howells, and in particular, his one-to-one performance, *The 14 Stations of the Life and History of Adrian Howells*. The exposure that is central to Howells' work is considered firstly in terms of compromising the stability of innate concepts of inside and outside, private and public, and secondly, considered as an exposure of a particular condition of self that is potentially embarrassing; an exposure of sentimentality. Valued once as a sensitivity to 'finer feelings', sentimentality has suffered a change in status and is now in some quarters reviled and ridiculed as a cloying and tasteless sweetness.

Through examination of Howells' staged scenarios of intimacy and confession, this chapter also considers the 'other' to whom that self might be exposed, as differing 'publics' to which we, as individuals might belong, even if only temporarily, or provisionally and with varying degrees of commitment. Two particular 'publics' are considered; Michael Warner's politically engaged 'counterpublic', and Lauren Berlant's 'intimate public', notable for a tendency towards complaint *and* optimism. In particular I am concerned with the terms of belonging and the instances where those terms are in conflict with *le privé*, that is, with our private identifications, of who we think we are. In terms of identification, sentimentality is particularly a point of embarrassability for a hard-nosed, left-facing ideological *doxa* that inclines towards a view of sentimentality as an excessive and uncontrolled mawkish emotion. But an 'intimate public', invested in the value of emotional intelligence is more likely to incline towards sympathy. The intimate public will tend to embrace

---

<sup>3</sup> Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2008). p116.

both sentiment and the embarrassment of sentimentality as constituent in a narrative identity as 'romance' in the sense of both amorousness and storytelling.

Underpinning this move from 'exposure' (which threatens the stability of private/public) to 'sentimentality' is Sedgwick's observation of Captain Vere in Melville's *Billy Budd*; that he is both subject and object of sentimentality. In the character of Captain Vere, Melville dramatized the contiguous existence of an explicit, performative, public exterior and an equally convincing though always implicit private interior. Sedgwick comments that Vere is 'a sentimentalizing *subject*, an active wielder of the ruses of sentimentality for the satisfaction and needs that can be stably defined neither as public nor as private.'<sup>4</sup> Then she asks; must we not also read Captain Vere, in his embrace with Billy, as a 'sentimentalized *object*'? In this chapter, I want to consider the possibility that in his manipulation of interior spaces of privacy and *le privé*, and the public spaces of performance and address, we might also read Adrian Howells as a sentimentalizing *subject* and a sentimentalized *object*. The reversibility of sentimentalizing/sentimentalized and subject/object that the audience risks engaging in might arguably produce conditions of embarrassability due to the potential to be the object (and thus judged) and through participation (as the subject) in sentimentality as a category that is 'discreditable or devalued'.<sup>5</sup>

The extent to which sentimentality might be found to be embarrassing is configured here as dependent upon *le privé*; who we think we are, and thus subject to ideological *doxas* of left and right. Whilst either left or right-facing *doxas* might be recognised as figuring in emotional experience, it is particularly the left, that according to Barthes, is vulnerable to embarrassments relating to; 'trivial actions,

---

<sup>4</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, p121.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p143.

the traces of bourgeois ideology confessed by the subject . . . friendship, tenderness, sentimentality, delight in writing'.<sup>6</sup> And to these we might add domesticity, banality, nostalgia, and whimsy. For Barthes the exposure of these attachments is damaging in that it gives the other, to whom we are exposed, advantage over us, *because* they are private identifications. He writes; 'It is certainly when I divulge my private life that I expose myself most; not by the risk of 'scandal', but because then I present my image-system in its strongest consistency.'<sup>7</sup>

The self is not immutably fixed but might face sometimes this way, and now that, depending on the context, and at each turn, we are vulnerable to unscripted exposures of our image-system so that sentimentality might be an undesirable, indeed embarrassing attribute in only certain situations. Or more broadly, a person might have a general tendency towards sentimentality or alternatively towards cynicism; Bourdieu characterises the difference between right and left in quite pervasive terms as an attitude towards the world:

It is also an opposition between two world views, two philosophies of life, . . . the centres of two constellations of choices, *la vie en rose* and *la vie en noir*, rose-coloured spectacles and dark thoughts, boulevard theatre and avant-garde theatre, the social optimism of people without problems and the anti-bourgeois pessimism of people with problems<sup>8</sup>

This division is very much at odds with Berlant on the final point; she would say that rose-coloured spectacles are not worn (only) by those *without* problems, but particularly, they are worn by those who in spite of their problems, keep faith with the promise of the happy-ever-after. They are our intimate public.

---

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, pp82,83.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp82,83.

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu, p292.

The mind-set of the *vie en noir* is not unemotional, but prides itself on being rational; it is embarrassed by (displays of) *uncontrolled* emotion and particularly the sweeter sentiments. In his essay, 'In Defense of Sentimentality', Robert C. Solomon writes:

Philosophers have long felt uncomfortable with emotions and passion in general, but the attack on sentimentality, though an obvious symptom of this discomfort, is not an attack on emotion as such (angry indignation and bitter resentment have never gone out of style in Western intellectual life), so much as it is an attack on the 'sweet' sentiments that are so easily evoked in all of us and so embarrassing to the hard-headed.<sup>9</sup>

Sentimentality, according to Solomon, is generally denigrated by the hard-boiled and radical left-facing *doxa* of 'intellectual life', that values the capacity to maintain a critical distance, or as Rancière has it, a left-wing irony.<sup>10</sup> As I have already argued; whilst the exposures that concern a right-facing *doxa* are more easily sensationalised, or as Barthes says, present a risk of 'scandal', the exposures of *le privé* that may trouble a left-facing *doxa*, of banality, domesticity and tenderness are the stuff of minor embarrassments. The intimacy of the one-to-one encounter of performance art particularly has the capacity to foreclose the critical distance that gives protection from having feelings, showing feelings; it gets right under our skin.

One of the feelings that the performance work of Adrian Howells foregrounds, and which is absolutely central to embarrassment, is the feeling of exposure. His work explores issues of risk and intimacy, staging circumstances in which the spectator will be consensually exposed, and that exposure might be taking off her or his shoes and socks or it may take the form of a sharing of a secret.<sup>11</sup> Within the public arena of performance art, Howells creates spaces and places of banality and

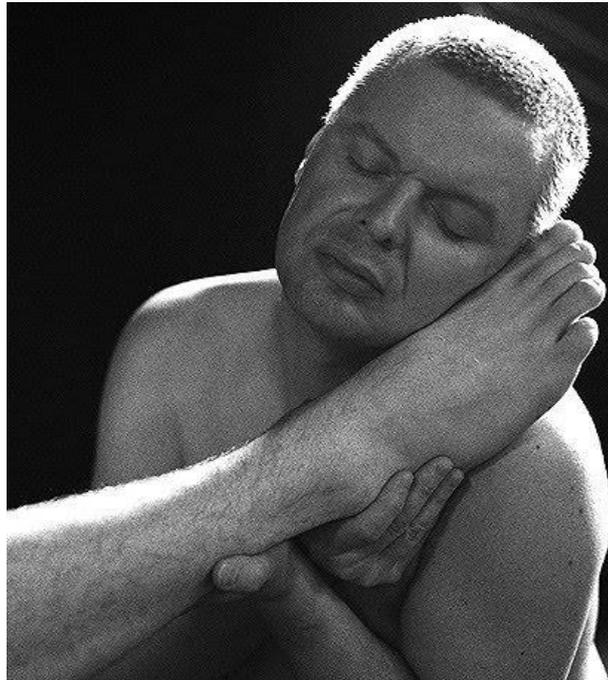
---

<sup>9</sup> Mette Hjort and Sue Laver eds., *Emotion and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p243.

<sup>10</sup> Rancière, p33.

<sup>11</sup> *Footwashing for the Sole*: Howells notes that many people feel that feet are particularly vulnerable to exposure. [www.utube.com](http://www.utube.com) Adrian Howells Interview/Footwashing for the Sole/ Kilkenny Arts Festival 14.08.10 (accessed 12.11.11)

domesticity, and of sentimental attachments, places where intimacy might be sought and found, places where he can employ a sustained strategy of disclosure which is intended to give rise to a degree of reciprocity from the audience. The domesticity of the environments, the confidences of either Adrian or his feminine side-kick, Adrienne, the atmosphere of trust, intimacy, privacy, and discretion are all calculated to elicit from the audience the exposures of confession, spoken or unspoken, as an unburdening catharsis. It is for our own good that we are encouraged to show ourselves. Whilst his exploration of risk and even intimacy might appeal to an intellectual, radical, left-facing *doxa*, the contexts of domesticity and familiarity, confession and catharsis are potentially embarrassing. They are exactly the 'traces of bourgeois ideology' that 'we' are uncomfortable with.



Adrian Howells *Footwashing for the Sole*

## INSIDE/OUTSIDE

Inside and outside are more than mere topographical locations; they are loaded with cultural significance. Inside, at least in western modernity, is socioculturally coded as a sphere of privacy and of feminine influence, associated with domesticity, with hearth and home, and with the family. In contrast, the outside is a world of politics and commerce it is a public sphere; a man's world. Inside is the domain of modesty; outside is a space of exhibition. Inside is a curtailed space; outside is a vast expanse. Warner comments on the emotional implications of the gendering of public and private; he says; 'masculinity, at least in Western cultures, is felt partly in a way of occupying public space; femininity, in a language of private feeling.'<sup>12</sup> Private signifies the insideness of feeling to public's outsideness of reason. Thus the domain of emotion is private; the things we feel are not for public consumption, they should be 'kept in', hence the embarrassment of an emotional outburst.

What is at stake in the exposure of self that embarrassment causes is felt as the opposition between outside and inside, between public and private. Even embarrassment as loss of face, a discrediting of our public image still *feels* like the exposure of something inside. Embarrassment *feels* like being naked. The private self is exposed to some sort of public, the inner self is put out; the blush of embarrassment is a public expression of private feeling. The dislocation of private and public, of private self and the publics we are exposed to is very much part of the risk inherent in the exposures of Howells' work in which he creates what Sedgwick might call 'the privacy effect'; an illusion of privacy; a privacy in public.<sup>13</sup> In his performance art, Howells appears to risk the contamination or even collapse of the borders between the outside of public and the inside of private. This can give rise to feelings of inappropriateness, of being out of place, of a lack of coherence, even

---

<sup>12</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p24.

<sup>13</sup> See Sedgwick: 'Vere suffers in private in public.' *Epistemology*, p116.

perhaps an unsettling nod towards Mary Douglas's definition of dirt as matter out of place.<sup>14</sup> Audiences, in their response, are culturally conditioned to resist the collapse of public/private boundaries and to be emotionally invested in the process of challenge and defence. As Michael Warner explains, our understanding of their difference is completely absorbed into our sense of being:

Like those of gender, the orientations of public and private are rooted in what anthropologists call habitus: the conventions by which we experience, as though naturally, our own bodies and movement in the space of the world. Public and private are learned along with terms such as 'active' and 'passive', 'front' and 'back', and 'top' and 'bottom'. They can seem quasi-natural, visceral, fraught with perils of abjection and degradation or, alternatively, of cleanliness and self-mastery. They are the very scene of selfhood and scarcely distinguishable from the experience of gender and sexuality.<sup>15</sup>

As Warner says, the naturalness of these divisions makes them difficult to challenge, easy to feel, not so easy to rationalise, or to refuse. The embodied understanding of this is woven into our sense of 'self'.

The privacy of inside is the locus of the scenes and scenarios Howells employs in his work, for example, *Held* was performed in a series of domestic locations; at the kitchen table, on the sofa, and in bed.<sup>16</sup> But the privacy he invents is always already contradicted, or even violated by the conflicting connotations of a public performance. However intimate the theatre of a small salon of twenty guests, or even the exclusivity of a one-to one performance, the domesticity, the intimacy, privacy, the very insideness is manifested as artifice. This is not private, this is performance art, and everything is on show. Howells' stock in trade is exposing his 'privates'; he shows family photos, little keepsakes, private correspondence; he shows letters he has written, and letters to him from others. In telling his story, he

---

<sup>14</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 2006 (first published 1966)).

<sup>15</sup> Warner. *Publics and Counterpublics*, p24

<sup>16</sup> Howells, A. *Held*, Performance Piece, various venues, various dates

breaches the privacy of others who populate his history. Whilst this is not a feature of all of Howells' works, where it does occur, it is ethically problematic, and a potential source of embarrassment. Where Howells breaches the privacy of others, the spectator is framed as complicit in the violation, and voyeuristically as an accessory to the exposure of a third party, not actually present, and unable to protest *their* exposure. This may, and perhaps should, make the audience uneasy on their own account, and in consideration of their own privacy. Even as we are being seduced into exposing ourselves we are cautioned that discretion may not be our host's forte. Howells is a man who will kiss-and-tell.



Adrian Howells *Held*

And sometimes *his* exposure is embarrassing for his audience. Spectatorial embarrassment may be a second-hand emotion; embarrassment *for* him, empathetically felt. It might be embarrassing that he has put himself in such a compromising position, embarrassing that he *is* exposed, vulnerable to evaluation, disparagement or ridicule. Alternatively it might be embarrassing *that he exposes*

*himself*. We live in a confessional society and are accustomed to the conventions of public forums for revealing all, but Springer-style or Oprah-esque disclosure frames the disclosing self as debased, thus allowing the audience a feeling of moral superiority. Too much confession is artistically and socially suspect. Public censure also falls on excessive self-promotion; where the autobiographical fails to interest its audience, it will be subject to the accusation of narcissism, and furthermore, tropes of confession/autobiography beg the question; is this just a case of dirty laundry being washed in public?



Adrian Howells as 'Adrienne' in *Salon Adrienne*

These embarrassments, for and of Howells would apply and be genuinely felt even if Howells himself felt no embarrassment whatsoever. In fact his total immunity to the embarrassability of the situations he engineers would prove exceptionally embarrassing for his audience. Showing embarrassment is a public acknowledgement of private feelings of failure, lack, or inadequacy, and, according to Goffman, this acknowledgement is the precondition for the promise of a 'next

time', the opportunity to 'prove worthy at another time'.<sup>17</sup> To show embarrassment is to demonstrate that we want to be seen to be 'good', and that we understand what 'good' looks like. Socially we are reassured by the appropriate embarrassment of other people, it indicates that they too value being 'good'. Un-embarrassment conversely, is somehow less human. If Howells shows no embarrassment, his audience would be embarrassed by his lack of sensitivity or his lack of modesty. If he feels no shame, we are embarrassed by his shamelessness; by the way he *flaunts* himself.

### ***THE 14 STATIONS OF THE LIFE AND HISTORY OF ADRIAN HOWELLS***

*The 14 Stations* is an autobiographical performance narrating episodes of suffering and disgrace from his past, attempting to show the darker, baser aspect of Adrian Howells that is his less-good self. In Howells' previous performances as his *alter ego*, Adrienne, he admits that some of his confessions and anecdotes were not strictly accurate and presented him in a good light, with 'a bit too much gloss', because he wanted to be liked.<sup>18</sup> *The 14 Stations* is, ostensibly at least, a move to redress this, presenting instead the worst of Adrian Howells. He reveals how he has been a callous, manipulative, self-obsessed, bitchy, little drama queen, addicted to 'patterns of suffering and self-punishment'.<sup>19</sup> The multiple perspectives of the stations builds a narrative of 'Adrian' that is episodic progressing from childhood, through awkward adolescence to young manhood. The cumulative self is very much relational to others. Throughout the narrative Howells tries to show not only

---

<sup>17</sup> The embarrassed individual finds that; 'His role in the current interaction may be sacrificed, and even the encounter itself, but he demonstrates that, while he cannot present a sustainable and coherent self on this occasion, he is at least disturbed by the fact and may prove worthy at another time. Goffman *Interaction Ritual*, p111.

<sup>18</sup> Performance notes; *The 14 Stations of the Life and History of Adrian Howells*, BURST Festival, Battersea Arts Centre, May 2008

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

the Adrian he 'sees' subjectively from the inside, but tries to reconstruct objectively the 'Adrian' that has been seen by others, which is precisely the work of embarrassment, in which we see the self as *if* seen by the other.

Whilst Howells seems to suffer no embarrassment over the blatant narcissism he displays, it is a central premise of the work that retrospectively at least, Howells evidently *is* embarrassed by some episodes of his narrative, and in some more serious cases, he is ashamed of the suffering he has inflicted on others. There is obviously a strong confessional element to the work and Howells works hard to show what a nasty piece of work he is. But ultimately, in spite of his self-abasement, the Adrian we take our leave of is flawed but human. Definitely not a monster, just a warm, generous boy who loves his mum and has crap taste in men. The performance is perhaps an act of atonement; by showing, or perhaps even embracing his darkest self, by subjecting himself to the humiliation and punishments of the stations there is a promise of redemption.

My journey with Adrian Howells began in the cafe of Battersea Arts Centre during the BURST festival. He took me on a pilgrimage through the bowels of the building, taking as our map the *Via Dolorosa* of the 14 Stations of the Cross which tells the story of The Passion, of Christ's agonies and torments on his journey to the place of crucifixion but rewritten as the *Life and History of Adrian Howells*. Pretentious? Blasphemous? Yes, yes, and intimate, risky, confessional, affirmative, cathartic, and strange.

The journey of Adrian's 14 stations includes stories of his school days, of adultery glimpsed on a caravan holiday, of stalking and infatuation, the ecstasies of unrequited love, and of the agonies of making a complete and utter fool of himself.

We must be more or less the same age and he feels the same bittersweet nostalgia for caravan holidays that I do. At one station I read his letters, it feels like prying. At another I stop to look at a rogue's gallery of all the women in his life. At other stations he dresses up, he strips off, he is punished; trial by ice; death by karaoke. He cries; I eat cake. On the stairs we stop and light a candle for his mum. Finally we end up in bed in a room filled with light, lying like spoons and I feel at peace with the world.



Station 14 BAC (photo Vikki Hill)

I went to see *The 14 Stations* anticipating embarrassment; it was billed as a work of intimacy and risk, both physically and emotionally, and whilst there was intimacy and risk, and the risk was reciprocal, and intimacy, unless it is imaginary is always already reciprocal, but yet, for this particular audience-person, the embarrassment was marginal. The work is provocative and emotionally complex, but for the most part, barely embarrassing. In spite of this, *The 14 Stations* is central to this chapter, and I offer the following reasons. Firstly, I am interested in how and why the work failed to embarrass; can this 'failure' actually be productive in generating knowledge about embarrassment? Secondly, as I have previously argued, the most marginal embarrassment, though hard to describe or analyse, particularly in a scholarly context can be the most interesting because it is the most unexpectedly revealing.

There were some embarrassing bits, but the *most* marginal embarrassment was the sentimentality of the work that affected me *after* the performance.



The women in Adrian's life (photo Vikki Hill)

## MAINTAINING COMPOSURE

Embarrassment is a very narcissistic emotion. It causes us to be the centre of our own attention and there is some pleasure in that. However minor, however fleeting, it returns us to our self, but seen from a strange and uncomfortable perspective, through the eyes of the other. And what is seen, the object of its own attention is always self. In *The 14 Stations* however, there is little room for spectatorial narcissism, you might as well check it in like a coat and collect it later. For the one hour duration of the performance, it is all about Adrian; you must give your self up to *him*, his life, his suffering his angst, grief, pain, guilt, piety, shame, lust, and on and on, from station to station. And it is a credit to him that he is able to induce an audience to maintain a suspension of self, like a suspension of disbelief, *almost* throughout the performance. (The moments when a reflexive self-awareness returned were the moments of momentary embarrassment and will be discussed further). As Adrian's audience-person, I found that I was mostly required to put my

own self on hold, and I feel sure that this effectively precluded some embarrassments. He was the focus of our attention. But the spectatorial position was not a passive one; during the performance I was required to fulfil a number of roles; witness, assistant, confessor, judge, executioner, confidante. It is in that sense a very reciprocal work. Fulfilling the various roles required of me was also a factor in mitigating embarrassment. To do and to be what is required in any given situation is to meet expectations and to affirm the normative, however queer that norm might be in other contexts.

In *The 14 Stations*, because the audience-person attends to Adrian, and is required to suppress her self for the duration, 'performing' a variety of other roles, it is perhaps inevitable that in the aftermath there is an emotional return to self. Vikki Hill describes her experience, after the show, in this manner:

I was crying. I felt completely overwhelmed and shocked that I could be caught off guard by a sudden flood of emotion. My usual barriers had breached and I was doing my best to repair them, with soggy tissues and embarrassed laughter.<sup>20</sup>

In the eventual return to self, there was for me, a wave of nostalgia, not a flood of emotion, but a ripple of sweet sentimentality as I reconsidered my history and the tensions between queer adolescence and family values played out against a backdrop of dressing-up games, those caravan holidays, school bullies and in-crowds, and most of all, the ordinary and aspirational commodities of the 1970s, once valued, long since devalued. And the sentimentality of personal histories will bear further consideration.

A further factor in the preservation of spectatorial composure is the performative care that Howells takes of his audience-person which is very much at odds with the

---

<sup>20</sup> <http://vikkihill.blogspot.com> (accessed 08.12.11)

callous and manipulative 'Adrian' he narrates. This is a cause of some ambivalence which could be said to undermine the integrity of the work, but, actually reinforces the multiplicity and sometimes duplicity of the narrative self. The care taken (of me) in the structure and execution of the work was calculated to put me at my ease, and as Barthes says, ease is an antonym of embarrassment.<sup>21</sup> During his tenure at the University of Glasgow as an AHRC creative fellow, all Howells' work, including this, was vetted by an ethics committee. He comments:

It has made me even more aware that you have to make work that is transparent, and if you are going to lock the door and lie down on a bed with people, you have to get their permission. But it can be a double-edged sword. There have been times when I've bent over so far to comply with the ethics committee that it has made me overly cautious, and the work hasn't been as challenging as it should be.<sup>22</sup>

So whilst there is a degree of risk in the work, that risk has been risk-assessed and through a duty of care, rendered safe. For example, at the fourteenth station, where I lay on a bed with Adrian; he spooned me, but first he asked if I would mind, and if I would like him to put a pillow between us.

## **THE EMBARRASSING BITS**

The bit that was embarrassing? That was when Adrian cried. At Station 6; 'Jordan Makes Him Weep' we went down to the basement where a loop of film was projected onto the wall. I stood facing Adrian able to see both him and the film of a boy he used to be in love with who was smiling and beautiful in a cock-sure kind of way. Adrian stood against the wall so that he couldn't see the film, but he was

---

<sup>21</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p45.

<sup>22</sup> Howells cited in Lyn Gardner 'How Intimate Theatre Won Our Hearts' [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) (accessed 20.05.11)

listening to something on headphones and right away I could see that it was upsetting him. His face began to crumple, his lip trembled, he was sweating. My eyes flickered between the film of the cock-sure, pretty-boy and Adrian's face, blubbing. I didn't know where to look. I took my hands out of my pockets but didn't know what to do with them. I had been told where to stand, but I didn't know how to stand, or what facial expression I should try to approximate. Should I, could I comfort him? I felt the most basic form of embarrassment; an 'aversive self-consciousness'. Just for a few moments I felt far too much of me.

Jon Cairns makes the point that what happened at this station was 'less reciprocal' than other parts of the performance and this is very true.<sup>23</sup> While Jordan made him weep, I was on my own. Adrian was not at that moment 'taking care' of me. I could not hear what Adrian heard and he could not see what I saw. We were isolated by our senses, or lack. Where at other stations there was interaction and collaboration, here, for me, there was only spectatorial passivity. My capacities to know and to act were restricted. I just stood and watched him crying, and I felt at a loss. Nothing was explained and no comfort was given.

The other embarrassing moment was similarly less reciprocal. Having given Adrian poison to drink, watched him strip, and poured ice and water over his shivering, naked body as he crouched in an inflatable paddling pool, he then led me to a small chamber strewn with rubbish and proceeded to sing, or I might say murder, the mawkishly sentimental song 'All By Myself' played on a small karaoke machine.

All by myself  
Don't wanna be  
All by myself  
Anymore

---

<sup>23</sup> Jon Cairns, "Ambivalent Intimacies: Performance and Domestic Photography in the Work of Adrian Howells," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22:3, no. (2012).

All by myself  
Don't wanna live  
Oh  
Don't wanna live  
By myself, by myself  
Anymore  
By myself  
Anymore  
Oh  
All by myself  
Don't wanna live  
I never, never, never  
Needed anyone<sup>24</sup>

It was embarrassing to bear witness to a small, cold, wet, and miserable Howells crouched amongst the debris, humbly but doggedly warbling his way through the tune. I wanted it to stop, but I was restricted. I had to hear him out. All I could do was listen, and, like a painful death, hope for it to be over quickly.

## COUNTERPUBLICS & INTIMATE PUBLICS

Howells' performance work is strongly autobiographical in content, but includes an invitation to reciprocate. His stories are the catalyst for other stories of other lives. His audience is encouraged to trade reminiscence, anecdote, and confession. His stories are the starting point for our unfinished business. In *The 14 Stations*, Howells talks about his school friends; I think about mine. He confesses his first crush; I remember mine. He tells me about his mum; I tell him about mine. The process that takes place is that through Howells' strategy of disclosure, as his spectator / feel subject to exposure and what I must show is *myself*, the innermost

---

<sup>24</sup> 'All By Myself', Written by Eric Carmen, recorded by Celine Dion.

private self and all its less-good qualities that are 'peculiarly mine'. In *The 14 Stations*, when Howells exposes himself to me, and indeed I expose myself to him, we are exposed in private. This may seem like a contradiction in terms, but, I mean that we are exposed privately as one self to another. And additionally we are exposed as fellow constituents of a public that the work addresses, and so we are also exposed in public. The nature of the public addressed by Howells' work is subject to interpretation. It could be read as a generalised 'general public', but more critically productive is the reading of either a politically engaged counterpublic, or alternatively an emotionally engaged 'intimate public'.

Michael Warner defines a public as a relation among strangers existing '*by virtue of being addressed*'.<sup>25</sup> A public does not require its members to be physically present as for example, an audience, which denotes a real-time co-presence. The relation between the strangers of a public is predicated on each being addressed by the same texts, and as contributors to the same, specific, on-going discourse. A counterpublic is a subset of a wider public, distinguished as 'counter' by its political motivation that takes the form of a challenge to the established norms of the wider public and the substitution of its own 'normative' values. Counterpublics, according to Warner, are 'defined by their tension with a larger public' and are notable for their position of criticality towards the hegemony of the larger and dominant public.

Lauren Berlant defines an 'intimate public' as one populated by individuals who though strangers, share an experience of life that is already shaped by a commonality of emotion. The intimate public she examines in detail is addressed by 'women's culture' and is notable for the way individual lives are collectively shaped by the emotions related to the suffering of the subaltern and the trajectory of

---

<sup>25</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p67.

romance; anticipation, fulfilment, disappointment, and hope. The conventions of belonging are framed in terms of the desire to belong.

Even when people speak out against the terms the intimate public sets out as normative, they are still participating in the promise of belonging that it represents insofar as they are trying to recalibrate whose experience it can absorb so that they can feel included in the mass intimacy that has promised to include them.<sup>26</sup>

Berlant's intimate public is notable for two other elements; firstly, it is a consuming public; its members are consumers of commodities and texts that reiterate and so reinforce the emotions it is predicated on. Secondly it is not particularly politically motivated.

Berlant uses the term 'juxtapolitical' to indicate that though politically aware, an intimate public is relatively inert and sees the political sphere as 'a field of threat, chaos, degradation, or retraumatization' rather than 'a condition of possibility'.<sup>27</sup>

Whilst an intimate public is defined by the particularity of its emotional repertoire, the value placed on commodity culture, and political inertia, it is specifically the political inertia that differentiates Berlant's 'intimate public' from Michael Warner's concept of a 'counterpublic'. The discursive practices of a counterpublic are; 'understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying'.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to this, an intimate public plays by the rules. Its members look for ways of being *within* the dominant protocols, and aspire to versions of emotional satisfaction that are associated with the pre-existing normalcy, and as a result they are driven to constantly accept compromise as a condition of belonging. An intimate public, exists in, or at least in proximity to the political dimension, but does not engage, so that although the intimate public may desire

---

<sup>26</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p11.

<sup>28</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p56.

change, it is more likely to hope for it than to risk the chaos of taking action to bring it about. According to Berlant, members of an intimate public seek to align their individual stories with the dominant ideological plot; the trajectory of romance. The utopia they pursue is not one of differentiation but 'normativity itself'.<sup>29</sup>

If Howells' *14 Stations* were to be read as addressing a politically motivated counterpublic (a reading entirely devoid of sentimentality) it could be argued that he aims to challenge existing ideas of normalcy, specifically, he aims to effect a transformation of ossified concepts of inside/outside, private/public, and a re-valuation of exposure as inherently negative or damaging. In short the work might be read as a challenge to the politics of exposure. Warner offers the following argument.

It is often thought, especially by outsiders [of the counterpublic], that the public display of private matters is a debased narcissism, a collapse of decorum, expressivity gone amok, the erosion of any distinction between public and private. But in a counterpublic setting, such display often has the aim of transformation. Styles of embodiment are learned and cultivated, and the effects of shame and disgust that surround them can be tested, in some cases revalued. Visceral private meaning [such as inside/outside] is not easy to alter by oneself, by a free act of will. It can only be altered through exchanges that go beyond self-expression to the making of a collective scene of disclosure.<sup>30</sup>

However, whilst this argument is compelling, and I do believe that the overarching aim of Howells work is one of transformation, in the specific context of *my* response to *The 14 Stations*, I believe that my exposure was one of emotional rather than political engagement. It may in fact be that the emotional response of sentimentality acts as a blockage to political engagement. If, as I have conjectured, the 'Adrian

---

<sup>29</sup> According to Berlant; 'Utopianism is in the air, but one of the main utopias is normativity itself, here a felt condition of general belonging and an aspirational site of rest and recognition in and by a social world.' *The Female Complaint*, p5.

<sup>30</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, pp62,63.

Howells' of *The 14 Stations* bears some resemblance to *Billy Budd's* Captain Vere, who according to Sedgwick, is a sentimentalizing subject and a sentimentalized object, it can then be argued that if 'I' *take it personally*, that is enter into a relationship with Howells and his history, then 'I', the audience-person am also sentimentalized/sentimentalizing as the two are reciprocal and interchanging.

Whilst in theory, I might be addressed by *The 14 Stations* as a member of a counterpublic, open to the transformative aims of Howells' work, that is, to challenge innate concepts of inside/outside, private/public, in practice, I found myself relating instead to subject matter, as something that mattered to me. Although I approached the work intending to be critically engaged and to observe the opportunities for embarrassment that the work offered, in the event, I found instead, and to my surprise, that I was *emotionally* engaged by the sentimentality of 'narratives and things', by the histories and the romance of a 'precarious' life and by the investment in the precious and commonplace objects that are place-holders for affective experience. In short, *The 14 Stations* addressed me as one of Berlant's intimate public, and I responded in terms of recognition and negotiation of terms of belonging (reciprocating in the theatrical sentimentalized/sentimentalizing structure of the work), and thus I was not challenging but countenancing the innate concepts of 'normal' that frame exposure as embarrassing.

### **THE SENTIMENTALITY OF ONE'S OWN 'COLLECTED WORKS'**

The salient experience that I recognise in *The 14 Stations* is the narration of a life marked by a pattern of chapters that Berlant would describe as 'disaffirming scenarios of necessity and optimism'.<sup>31</sup> The risk Howells invites us to take, is to

---

<sup>31</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p2.

take it personally; to undertake a critical re-examination of the 'self' we narrate in the chapters of our own lives. Hill comments on the tendency of *The 14 Stations* to, ' . . . mobilize the spectator/participants histories' and produce "unexpected, empathetic recollections that directly relate to one's own experience of precariousness"<sup>32</sup> Here Butler's 'precariousness' is used as a marker of experience, but we could instead say 'vulnerability' or 'contingency', an experience that is indicative of the relation between private and public and how the inside of self is acted upon by the outside of event. Precariousness or contingency is also manifested as a relation to the past; to what *has happened*. And future; the promise of next time. There is a sense of on-going narrative and both the past and future of this narrative are made possible by the present-ness of the experience, a present-ness that is repeated in the experience of embarrassment.

There is also a degree of pedagogy inherent in *The 14 Stations* and its pattern of chapters, in which Howells makes of himself and his story an exemplar to be followed. At the second station Howells played at 'dressing-up', retrospectively attributing a knowing significance to childhood role-play. I was stirred to reconsider the contents of my dressing-up box. Much of the embarrassment I felt was subsequent to the performance when I followed in his footsteps, reflecting on the inglorious self of *my* history, and how this replicates what Sedgwick calls the 'narcissism/shame circuit' in which I gaze back at myself in dismal, rapturous, erotic, appalling fascination; drowning in the image.

There is a certain strain of embarrassment that surfaces around nostalgia for the self that is quite particular in its dependence on the subject/object construction of embarrassment as a momentary objectivity felt by the subject. Whilst the aging

---

<sup>32</sup> <http://vikkihill.blogspot.com> (accessed 08.12.11) See also Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006).

process might induce nostalgia for the younger body as we recall a smoother, firmer, more energetic self, this does not seem to extend to the self as identity or its identifications. We like to think we have improved with age. The self is not (yet?) numbered among the things, like summers that we remember as being better than they are today. The prevailing tendency is to define maturation as teleological, a process, or perhaps a project of self-improvement. So the self of previous chapters is necessarily a less preferred version than the current model, but yet, one we can be fond about. The embarrassment of self-nostalgia is of *unavoidable* immaturity, ignorance, and of *forgivable* lapses of taste; an embarrassing attachment to the mores of yesterday; a youthful enthusiasm for things now quite déclassé.

Sedgwick notes a particular instance when Henry James confronts his younger self in writing a preface for a new publication of his own much earlier work. The young James is figured as potentially embarrassing or shaming to the older James and their relationship figures as a relationship, intersubjective and, according to Sedgwick, homoerotic.

The speaking self of the prefaces does not attempt to merge with the potentially shaming or shamed figurations of its younger self, younger fictions, younger heroes; its attempt is to love them. That love is shown to occur both in spite of shame and, more remarkably, through it.<sup>33</sup>

I think the same relation of narcissism/shame can be seen at work between the speaking Howells of the *14 Stations* and the younger 'Adrian' that he narrates. Although he tries to show the worst of his younger self, the story is a romance. There is a narcissistic fascination with his younger self, a fascination with the *image* and the 'image-system' of that self that he offers to share with his audience. Towards the end of the story, Adrian pinned a photograph of himself to me; a keepsake. It is an idealised image, selected for its beauty rather than truth.

---

<sup>33</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p40.

Although he presents (in narrative) a flawed ‘warts and all’ Adrian, he is still asking not only to be forgiven, but to be loved. The older ‘speaking’ Howells asks his public to corroborate the love he feels for the embarrassing younger self, love in spite of the embarrassment, because of the embarrassment.



Adrian Howells – publicity photo for *The 14 Stations*

The embarrassment that arises in the intersubjective relation between the speaking self and its previous self, though particular, is small, because what is exposed is not *me*, but yester-me; I have been perfecting myself since then. And it is the distance between that mitigates embarrassment and makes room for love. My embarrassment enfolds a certain rueful, perhaps amorous pleasure in recollecting a previous self; naive, bullish, foolish, and gauche. A previous self who despite being very image-conscious went *out* dressed in crimplene, corduroy, cheesecloth, stone-wash denim, plastic and rubber, velveteen and faux-fur. What did I think I looked like? Who did I think I was?

## THE SENTIMENTALITY OF 'NARRATIVES AND THINGS'

An intimate public, according to Berlant, is marked by 'a certain circularity' in which recognizable patterns emotional experience are replicated in commodities and commodified texts which are consumed by those who *already* recognise (and value) the emotional patterns.

Its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and, expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world.<sup>34</sup>

The commodification of emotion in 'narratives and things' provides a sub-text to *The 14 Stations* and is where we might locate the sentimentality of the work. Howells' history is told in anecdote, in song, in performance, and also through things. The stories told, and indeed the narrative construction of self builds on artefacts. The story is told by photographs, which exist as tangible things rather than merely as images of something else, and letters which are similarly things rather than merely words. Keepsakes, mementos and ephemera, artefacts and commodities, along with the sentiments they invoke are incorporated as part of the identity of a lived past.

The intimate public addressed by Adrian's 'narratives and things' is one to which both he and I (apparently) belong. It is not defined by gender or sexuality, or politics, but, as Berlant says, by the terms of belonging, by our own negotiations of proximity to a utopic okayness, and materially by a shared experience of, and value of, certain cultural commodities that are expressive of our lived histories. Perhaps inevitably, such experiences of histories and commodities expose an undercurrent of similitudes and differences by which we mark and locate ourselves as 'coming from', from a family, a community; a class. These narratives and things are

---

<sup>34</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, pviii.

expressive of habitus and of taste, and in the case of middle-class-ness with a pervasive concern for taste and legitimacy. And within the contexts of the scenarios of *The 14 Stations* they are mostly inside things; intimate and *domestic*.

Identity and belonging, in this material sense, are expressed by Madame Merle in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* who says that what we call our 'self' includes our 'shell'.

By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for *things!* One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.<sup>35</sup>

The things that belong to us, that in this sense *are us*, besides being objects, are our facticity, our history, our future and our very way of being. In *The 14 Stations*, Howells tells his story by showing us his things. He offers his audience glimpses of that 'shell' and asks us to form an attachment; to remember him. For an intimate public, attachment to these narratives and things (*already*) carries the emotional weight of experience, and is markedly sentimental.

As I tried to re-view my catastrophes, to imagine my own Stations of the Cross, I was continually side-tracked by moments of reverie, by 'narratives and things', by old fashions, the caravan curtains, by a repertoire of sea-side holidays, school photographs, family get-togethers, eavesdropping on adult conversations, casual lies, boredom, and a longing for something to happen, even if it was something bad.

---

<sup>35</sup> Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1999 (first published 1880)), p179.

The more I indulge in this nostalgia the more my criticality is eroded by keepsakes, mementos and ephemera that invoke a lived history rich in banality and domesticity; Berlant might say 'ordinariness'. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the banality of memory is significant. Seminal event memories of childhood are subconsciously omitted from our self-stories but are represented by 'the inessential elements' that texture and authenticate the narrative. According to Adam Phillips, 'the banal is a cover story' and so is one of our ordinary strategies for concealing what Howells performatively flaunts.<sup>36</sup>

A number of minor objects from Howells' *14 Stations* slyly suggest I might read them as kitsch and thus take refuge in an ironic distance from the embarrassment of sentimentality; these objects include fairy lights, a portable television, the inflatable paddling pool, the Celine Dion song, and the childhood trash-sweet delight of 'flying saucers' that Adrian offered me at Station 15: The Resurrection. But to imbue these objects with kitsch-ness would be a betrayal of my own ordinary history where my less-good self was less-than-good against a background of woodchip wallpaper. To render kitsch the memorabilia of my history would be to deny the sometimes-sweet sentiments I feel for things of the past. To render these things kitsch would be to reject a touching proximity and adopt instead the distance of irony.

Another artist who 'values' embarrassment is Gary Hume, who says; 'When I gave irony up, I took on embarrassment. And I preferred embarrassment. I thought I could hide, and I didn't want to hide.'<sup>37</sup> Irony as a strategy for creating or maintaining distance functions as a prophylactic against the embarrassment of exposure. It is a way of hiding *le privé*. Irony conceals. Embarrassment exposes. So, to render these 'things' kitsch with a left-wing irony would be a tactic to ward off

---

<sup>36</sup> Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Uncommitted Life* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). p65.

<sup>37</sup> Gordon Burn, *Sex & Violence, Death & Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009). p412.

the embarrassment of 'traces of bourgeois ideology confessed by the subject', the greatest of which is sentimentality.

In his essay, 'In Defense of Sentimentality', Solomon writes of contemporary antipathy towards sentiment:

To be called 'sentimental' is to be ridiculed, or simply to be dismissed. Sentimentality is a weakness, a personality flaw. It suggests hypocrisy, or at any rate, an exaggerated, distorted sensibility. Or perhaps it is the fact that sentimental people are so . . . embarrassing.<sup>38</sup>

Solomon identifies four counts on which sentimentality is reviled; sentimentality suggests weakness, it is excessive, it is self-indulgent and it appears to be somehow false, and these form the basis of a left-wing ideology's aversion to sentimentality as embarrassing.<sup>39</sup> In fact, these charges also apply to embarrassment, which can also be disparaged as weak, excessive, self-indulgent, but not false; if Gilbert & George are right, embarrassment is 'true'.

Howells' *14 Stations* addresses me as one of Berlant's 'intimate public' and my belonging is in itself a source of embarrassment; I didn't want to belong, or to admit belonging. But Adrian's confessions are the spur to mine; and I am called on to admit that my attachment to the 'narratives and things' of my history, is in fact, the very bones of my self-image. And so I must own the embarrassment of being sentimental, I must own it as 'true'.

Whilst it is easy to see how a hard-nosed, intellectually adventurous, radical left would want to distance itself from the fault of sentimentality, Solomon's opinion is that a left-facing ideology is fundamentally uncomfortable with sentimentality, not only for its faults but also for its sweetness. Sentimentality, as the capacity to be

---

<sup>38</sup> Solomon in Hjort and Laver, p225.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p234.

moved by the 'tender emotions', is the sign of our soft underbelly. It is the bane and downfall of our composed and critical, left-facing self. Sentiment is something that must be held in check, vigorously repressed and denied if we are to avoid the embarrassing charges of weakness, excess, and self-indulgence. And it is the fault of sentimentality that Howells most embarrassingly exposes in *The 14 Stations* (both his own and the reciprocal sentimentality of his audience person). But to disown this sentimentality would be a denial of the power ascribed by an intimate public, ascribed by Madame Merle, to 'things'; that is, the power to define the 'self'. To disown this sentimentality would be also to deny the love that the self, as the 'speaking self' may feel for an embarrassing, younger self.

## **SENTIMENTALITY AS UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

The minor but most interesting embarrassment of *The 14 Stations* is then, way the fragile self is exposed by sentimentality, and particularly by 'the unfinished business of sentimentality'. Berlant defines this as an impulse that; 'keeps people attached to disaffirming scenarios of necessity and optimism in their personal and political lives.'<sup>40</sup> This is manifested as both an attachment to the past and faith in the future, and also a tendency towards repetition, restaging previous scenarios and repeating (embarrassing) mistakes. In some sense, the reiteration and blind optimism of sentimentality as unfinished business is an inability to let go; and so it can be understood as a kind of proximity, a kind of 'touching'. As unfinished business, sentimentality is the comfort that however unsatisfactory today has been, there is always the promise of a next time; that, 'tomorrow is another day in which fantasies

---

<sup>40</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p2.

of the good life *can* be lived'.<sup>41</sup> And 'we' of the intimate public believe that it is possible to live a 'happily ever after' life in a world where emotion is valued as intelligence.

Sentimentality in this sense, as unfinished business tends to romanticise both past and future whilst accepting the lack of control of the contingency of the present, where 'shit happens'. There is a parallel here with embarrassment which also has a time-line of a hapless present but leavened by the promise of a next time, the potential to acquit oneself better tomorrow, (if only . . .). Phillips advises that the promise of a better tomorrow requires the following:

Firstly, an object of desire, an ideal, a state of the world or of oneself sufficiently separate from oneself to aspire to. So one needs to have perceived a lack, of sorts, in oneself. Secondly, one needs a belief in Time as a promising medium to do things in; one needs to be able to suffer the pains and pleasures of anticipation and deferral.<sup>42</sup>

Of the self as contingent, susceptible to the sometimes-cruel vagaries of the present, Phillips says that we experience all emotions as 'new at every moment', each feeling is experienced as unprecedented and singular, and so the emotions that we have felt in the past will always be insufficient preparation for the immediate present. The only knowledge we can gain from past emotion is 'weak', that is limited in its domain, or according to Phillips, is 'redundant and ironic.'<sup>43</sup> And this is perhaps why an intimate public is trapped in cycles of 'disaffirming scenarios', and for example why Howells feels he is addicted to 'patterns of suffering and self-punishment'. There may be, as the intimate public hopes, 'an intelligence in what we feel,' but sentimentality is evidently a poor preparation for next time.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p2.

<sup>42</sup> Phillips, *On Flirtation*, p47.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p21.

<sup>44</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p2.

In his famously radical essay 'Is The Rectum a Grave?' Leo Bersani makes an unguarded admission of embarrassment. Writing about Michel Foucault's work, he comments that 'in spite of his radical intentions' Foucault's theories are ultimately tame (and that is to say, normative, ordinary, and in proximity to okayness). Bersani recounts that when Foucault was interviewed for *Salmagundi*, he said he would not use the interview as a platform 'to traffic in opinions', but then goes on to do exactly that, declaring that, 'for a homosexual, the best moment of love is likely to be when the lover leaves in the taxi'.<sup>45</sup>

Bersani admits that he finds Foucault's pronouncement 'somewhat embarrassing'. He is troubled by the declaration that the homosexual imagination is captured by the sentimental and backward view. He is embarrassed by the inclusivity of the claim to be captivated by nostalgia for the sexual act in preference to a physical engagement in the present tense. As Bersani puts it, this sentimental re-view diverts the focus.

[It] turns our attention away from the body - from the acts in which it engages, from the pain it inflicts and begs for – and directs our attention to the romances of memory and the idealizations of the presexual, the courting imagination.<sup>46</sup>

Bersani's embarrassment is small, and he marginalises it, saying he is *somewhat* embarrassed. He is embarrassed, that Foucault should arbitrarily attribute to all homosexuals a nostalgic and overly sentimental attachment to love rather than to its embodied physicality. This is without doubt an embarrassment of a left-facing ideology. It is difficult to imagine Bersani finding any aspect of sex or sexuality embarrassing, so I was intrigued to stumble upon this embarrassment, perhaps

---

<sup>45</sup> Bersani, 'Is The Rectum a Grave?' in Goldberg, p259.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p259. Bersani's 'idealizations of the presexual, the courting imagination' refer more specifically to Foucault's other comment, that of gay S&M rituals being like medieval courtship, so that although both comments refuse the intensity of now, one refusal is by looking back, and the other forward, but both are arguably sentimental, and about 'unfinished business'.

particularly because I don't share it. I actually think Foucault is right, but my reasons for valuing that particular moment (with or without a taxi) are different.<sup>47</sup>

The lover leaving in a taxi is not, of course, the end of his story, or the end of the story of the one he leaves. In the sentimental re-view that Bersani dismisses as 'the romance of memory', there is, paradoxically, a future orientation in the promise of a next time, which is to say that the sentimentality is manifested as 'unfinished business'. And there is something embarrassing about that.

---

<sup>47</sup> For me, it is a blissful moment of re-establishing singularity after a brief excursion into coupledness. The tension between singularity and coupledness will be explored in the next chapter.

## Chapter Five:

### **Singled Out: On being interpellated by indecency and intimacy in Gilbert & George's *Sodom***

. . . every ideology has its apostates; even sacred cows find their butchers.

Except for love.

Laura Kipnis<sup>1</sup>

---

One of the ideas mooted in the previous chapter is that members of an intimate public are in pursuit of a utopia of normativity to which 'we' might belong, and that we cleave to the promissory normal and the intimacy it proffers. Central to this is a romantic trajectory of hope, impediment, and teleological fulfilment that Lauren Berlant calls 'love's plot'. The ultimate goal, the rainbow we chase is the 'happy ever after', and to achieve this we must find love, or perhaps more accurately, we must be found by love; we must love and be loved in return. The cultural dogma of life as subject to love's plot, as a progress towards a better self, one that becomes loved, or at least coupled is extensively critiqued by Berlant:

The narrative of women's culture thus shows us something about the operation of mass-mediated identity – that is, how it manages to sublimate singularity on behalf of maintaining proximity to a vague prospect of social belonging via the generic or conventional plot that isolates an identity as the desired relay from weakness to strength, aloneness to sociability, abandonment to recognition, and solitary agency to reciprocity.<sup>2</sup>

What is particularly striking in this passage is Berlant's identification of identity as a form of progress; a 'desired relay' moving from outside, in towards the social

---

<sup>1</sup> Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic* (New York: Vintage, 2004). p4.

<sup>2</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p11.

belonging that will confirm approval on us as persons. And this progress of social inclusion is at the expense of our singularity. Such is the desire for inclusion in this utopia that the compromises made in our attempt to fit can amount to nothing short of 'self amputation'.<sup>3</sup> But what if an individual can't or won't make the cut? What if they still fail to meet the criteria for inclusion? What if they are left out? What if once in they wanted out? What if they didn't ask to be included in the first place?

This chapter explores the embarrassment of being single, of being singled out and the possibilities of singularity. It explores the difficulties of being a singleton against a prevailing wind of coupledness; and of being hailed by ideology; the ideology of an intimate public. The embarrassment felt, is of course, an unwelcome exposure and an unfavourable evaluation that draws attention to the self as a stranger; one who fails to fit. Finally, this chapter addresses the challenge of singularity and how this relates to the embarrassment of being single and of being singled out but is also a mode of feeling. Embarrassment is proposed as a feeling that ensingles us, almost like love.

The starting point for an exploration of the embarrassment of singleness revisits the work of Gilbert & George, focusing on one particular piece; *Sodom*, from the series 'The Testamental Pictures' of 1997. In the mid-nineties there was a change evident in their work. Breaking temporarily with the usual mass observation project that chronicles their urban cosmos, the focus turned inwards and Gilbert and George subjected themselves, their bodies and their bodily fluids to an unflinching scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> Whilst I am normally wary of a certain insincerity, or lack of integrity in their work (it

---

<sup>3</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p169.

<sup>4</sup> The period of introspection and magnification of body fluids spans three series of works; 'The Naked Shit Pictures' (1994), 'The Fundamental Pictures' (1996), and 'The Testamental Pictures' (1997). After these three G&G turn their attention outwards once again, drawing on maps, street signs and graffiti.

could after all be an elaborate hoax) the introspection of some works from this period seems genuine, and I am genuinely moved. These works seem to speak of something 'true'.

Gilbert & George have said of their output from this period that they were the most complex works they had so far produced and that romantically, psychologically, and sexually they found them disturbing:

To take those things from inside ourselves - those thoughts and feelings - and to put them into the pictures, that is at the very least exhausting and at worst slightly damaging, I'm sure. Yes, to tear something very truthful from our whole life so far – all the thoughts and feelings that we ever had or might have – and get that out into the pictures to the viewer. It is a very struggling difficult thing.<sup>5</sup>

Some of these works are, for the spectator also, a very struggling difficult thing. Because they are so personal, they seem to challenge the spectator; they ask *me* to take it personally. Some of the works talk dirty. Their subject matters are matters that matter, and matter out of place. They are 'about' filth in its vaguest and most *double entendre* sense, at which Gilbert & George excel, testing spectatorial embarrassability, walking the line between rudeness and respectability. The subject matter of the works from this period is confrontational; nakedness, flying turds, bodily fluids, 'deviant' sexualities and religious fundamentalism. But something about them evokes tenderness, compassion, a sweet sentimentality, and most disturbingly; intimacy.

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Words of Gilbert & George*, p302. The comment was made in relation to 'The Naked Shit Pictures'.

## SODOM

*Sodom* is a large photopiece in fifteen panels; it is over three meters long and two meters high; it dominates the wall and dwarfs the spectator. The first thing that strikes me about *Sodom* is that it is a deposition.<sup>6</sup> Central to the work is an image of Gilbert supporting George's dead weight. I am captivated by the tenderness and respectfulness between the two central figures, reinforced by the iconography of deposition, a serious act of respect. Traditionally the dead body of Christ is brought down from the cross by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimethea. George has Gilbert to perform this devotional act. The 'dead weight' of George gives weight to the image. Death is no light matter and the care of the dead is a duty of care requiring intimacy and detachment; a case of being two selves at once; two good selves with no scope for a narcissistic embarrassment. On the subject of the death of lovers Barthes writes; 'We die together from loving each other: an open death, by dilution into the ether, a closed death of the shared grave.'<sup>7</sup> But George is not dead and the image besides being a deposition is also one of tenderness between two lovers. It is a tenderness that appears private, as private as death might be. This is something I find hard to see; I feel I am intruding. And George looks at me; he looks straight at me and I know that I have been caught looking.

The central figures of Gilbert and George are flanked on either side by text from *The Poor Man's Catechism*, 'Of The Sin Of Sodom'.

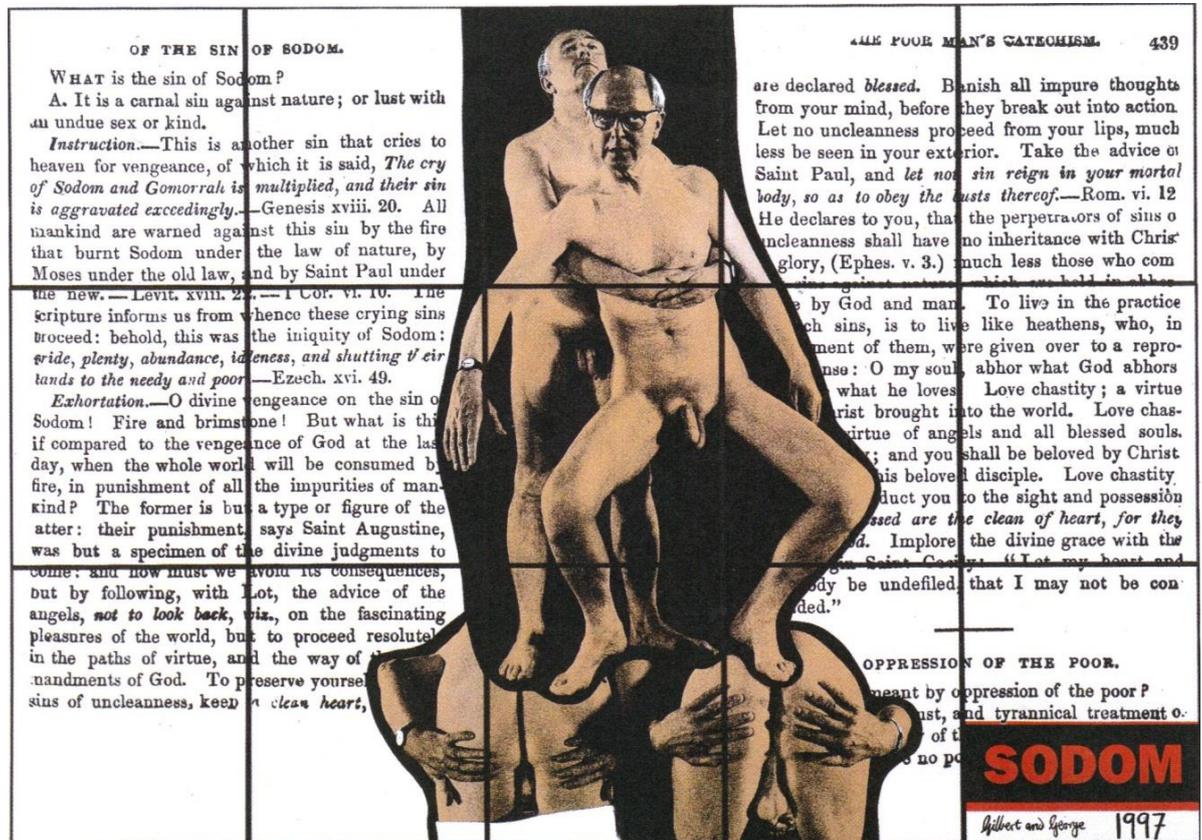
What is the sin of Sodom? It is a carnal sin against nature; or lust with an undue sex or kind. This is another sin that cries to Heaven for vengeance, [. . .] The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is multiplied, and their sin is aggravated exceedingly. [. . .] Oh divine vengeance on the sin of Sodom! Fire and Brimstone! [. . .] and now we must avoid its consequences, but

---

<sup>6</sup> Sylvester notes other examples of religious iconography in G&G compositions. *Naked Eye* mirrors Masaccio's *Expulsion from Eden*, and *Ill World* paraphrases Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà*, p319.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p11.

by following, with Lot, the advice of the angels, *not to look back*, viz., on the fascinating pleasures of the world . . .<sup>8</sup>



Gilbert & George *Sodom* (1997)

Do not look back. Do not look. Do not. I feel as if my looking were in some way proscribed, I am breaking some commandment. If I look long enough, on this fascinating, dreadful pleasure, will I turn into a pillar of salt? Below the deposition, in the central section is the familiar rear-view; the pseudo-provocative Gilbert & George bum holes.<sup>9</sup> If they were meant to shock, they don't; they are totally upstaged by the intimacy above. Apart from the lurid, tabloid red of the title, the only

<sup>8</sup> From *The Poor Man's Catechism* as reproduced on *Sodom*

<sup>9</sup> I might be taken to task over the term 'bum holes' which glosses over the image and fails to provide anatomical specificity, carelessly confusing arse cheeks with anuses. However, this section of *Sodom* forms part of a series of rear-end images that recur throughout 'The Testamental' series and I would argue that it should be read not so much as anatomical but as gestural.

colour of *Sodom* is the tinted flesh of the naked bodies. The hue is a little too pink, like pornography. The colouring of the bodies is a little too consistent, like a whitewash but in reverse, a fleshwash which un-cleanses and draws attention to the frailties of the flesh, the sins of the flesh. Gilbert's arms around George press into the flesh of George's chest as he takes the weight. The points of contact are firm and effective. The embrace connotes solidity and reality. George is wearing his glasses, both wear wristwatches. These small details are the *sous rature* erasing the faint possibility that this image could be read 'safely' within the trope of the nude, or arthistorical tradition of religious paintings. The dangerous details ensure that I am denied any such comfort; these bodies are secular, contemporary, and naked.

Looking at this work, the embarrassment I feel is not immediate but it ambushes me. According to Barthes, the *punctum* is an attribute belonging only to photographs, but I believe that this artwork, which is a mediated photograph (a 'photopiece'), contains a splinter of a past-present and a future-past, but is also something that I, as spectator bring to it, and it attracts and distresses in unequal measure, *and* it bruises me; in short, there is a *punctum*. Any other image of Gilbert in close proximity to George would not have the same effect. Another image might be tender or sentimental, its ordinary *studium* might be the coupledness of Gilbert and George, but the bruising of the *punctum* is specific to this image and to my spectatorship of this image.

The *punctum* is unspeakable, but arguably, to pinpoint what we find spectatorially disturbing is difficult, a very struggling difficult thing, but perhaps only unspeakable insofar as there a blockage; an *embaras*, the blockage of embarrassment. It is embarrassing to speak of because it entails disclosing something of our own image-repertoire, our secret identifications; we 'give our self away'. The *punctum* has no respect for taste, morals or decorum, and to say *exactly* what it is about a seemingly

insignificant detail of the image that touches in such a hurtful way compounds the hurt. If I admit what it is about this image that gets under my skin, am I saying too much? Am I declaring a taste or a perversion?<sup>10</sup> I am torn between looking and looking away, but if I am bold enough or perverse enough to court exposure, I can know *and* say what pricks and bruises. To overcome the blockage, is to admit that the cause of my embarrassment is not (only) that *Sodom* is confrontational or transgressive, but that it evokes tenderness; it is an image of remarkable intimacy between two aging queers, and how, on many levels, that intimacy excludes me.

The spectatorial embarrassment of the Gilbert & George exhibition that was the subject of Chapter One brought to mind Cleland's Fanny Hill, a woman in pursuit of pleasure, a good witness, worldly-wise and yet still shockable. Like Fanny, spying on the two young sparks in the adjoining room at an inn, my spectatorial position is one of exclusion. I am excluded from the coupledness of Gilbert & George in every possible way, but driven to look by an insatiable and prurient curiosity. And I am 'without'; without intimacy. My exclusion from *their* intimacy marks me as female, as heterosexual, and also as obstinately single. This 'marking' is a kind of outing, a putting of the self on the outside, in the same way that a blush advertises embarrassment, puts it right out there on the face. Looking at *Sodom*, I feel at first like a tourist, detached, unaccountable, snooping about the homoeroticism and homophobia of their work; like Fanny, I am driven by curiosity. Fanny was not exactly censorious of the pleasures of sodomy, but of that pleasure having been quite literally, misplaced as is evident in her account of an encounter with an eager seaman.

He leads me to a table, and with a master-hand, lays my head down on the edge of it, and with the other canting up my petticoat and shift, bared my naked posteriors to his blind and furious guide. It forces its way between

---

<sup>10</sup> 'I am less exposed in declaring a perversion than in uttering a taste:' Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, pp82,83.

them, and I feeling pretty sensibly that it was not going by the right door and knocking desperately at the wrong one, I told him of it: 'Pooh,' says he, 'my dear, any port in a storm.'<sup>11</sup>

And like Fanny, my position is precarious. The vicarious pleasure I take is one of both recognition and misrecognition.

The embarrassment that *Sodom* causes me is one of exposure; I am caught looking at something that I presume excludes me, I am 'without'. But as I look, I am drawn in. I begin with some comfortable distance from the sodomitical scene; it is not, I think, 'about me' but, as I look, I find myself thoroughly implicated. *Sodom*, as I will discuss, interpellates me as a subject, it hails me, and my response is personal and quite literally embodied; a gut reaction. And to acknowledge what disturbs me is to admit my embarrassability, to show where I am vulnerable. Looking at *Sodom* I suffer a right-facing embarrassment of the exposure of sexuality, and a left-facing embarrassment of the coupledness of the image. I feel caught, trapped between two embarrassments, neither of which do me any credit. They say far too much about me. My *doxa* is showing like a petticoat.

Sexual 'deviation' and its sociocultural condemnation, signalled by the title and the fragments of the catechism functions, I would say, as the *studium* of the image; that is, as its obvious denoted content and it unsettles my 'bourgeois' self, whilst my more 'radical' self is embarrassed by the intimacy which is the *punctum* of the image. For me, the bruise of the image is an excess that goes beyond the intended meaning of the work, and it is the tenderness evident between Gilbert and George. This tenderness, this intimacy has a quality of sweet-slime, cloying and visceral. This is my very struggling difficult thing. It is embarrassing to speak of *as if* it were sexual, as if I was admitting to a taste for necrophilia, coprophilia, or incest. The

---

<sup>11</sup> Cleland, p178.

words sit in my mouth like a stone, like a piece of human flesh. It is experienced bodily like a touch or a taste, the salty/metallic taste of body fluids. It is too close, too private, and with all the perverse pleasure of the rank smell of a lover's armpit. As a spectator, this work is for me difficult in precisely this respect; it is too near the knuckle. And as always with Gilbert & George it raises doubts. As discussed in Chapter One, there is a pervasive ambiguity about their merit and integrity as artists, about their status as a gay couple, about the viability of their claim to be a living sculpture, having *no life at all* outside art. Are they sincere? Is the whole thing a conceptual scam, or sham? These doubts destabilise my response to the work. David Sylvester commented, 'There is something deeply equivocal about what is expected of us.'<sup>12</sup> And this is so. I equivocate. Are they just leading me on, letting me make a fool of myself? I question not only, should I be seeing intimacy? But also, should I be seeing intimacy when this was meant to be just straightforward perversion? Am I perverting the image; reading into it something that isn't there?

## STUDIUM

And what is to be said about the *studium* of the image? The ordinarily, explicit meaning. What can be said about the embarrassments of a reference to 'deviant' sexuality, or perhaps more specifically, religious ideology's strict condemnation of so-called deviance? Here too there is an unspeakableness in the form of a doubt about what may be safely said without complicity. *Sodom*, in the terms discussed by Adam Philips, is excessive, and as such it excites spectatorial disapprobation.

the thrill of righteous indignation, the moral superiority of our disgust – is more complex and more interesting than it at first seems. If other people's excesses reveal the bigot in us, they also reveal how intriguing and subtle

---

<sup>12</sup> Sylvester, p316.

the bigot is. There is nothing more telling, nothing more revealing of one's own character and history and taste, than one's reaction to other people's excesses. Tell me which kinds of excess fascinate you, tell me which kinds of excess appal you, and I will tell you who you are.<sup>13</sup>

The sodomitical is evoked as occupying a territory of imaginable jeopardy and excessive, fascinating pleasures. It may be unspeakable, but its susceptibility to unruly imagination is the source of its danger and contamination. Sodom is an imaginary place of excess and of violence; of violent desires and violent satisfactions.

Michel Foucault famously asserts that the term 'sodomy' labels an 'utterly confused category'.<sup>14</sup> And that confusion extends to the spectatorial response to *Sodom* and to what is said or sayable about it. Sodomy, writes Lee Edelman; 'has come to be construed, that is, as a behaviour marked by a transgressive force reproduced, not merely designated by naming or discussing it'.<sup>15</sup> It is in that sense a very 'sticky' term, and Gilbert & George harness that stickiness to entrap the spectator, thoroughly implicating them in the transgression of the work, which is then *reproduced* rather than merely and passively looked at. *Sodom* invites a look that *feels* transgressive. The stickiness is responsible for what Edelman identifies as the impossibility of ever viewing the sodomitical scene from a position that allows spectatorial distance, and thus avoids contamination.

The sometimes-implied, narrowest definition of sodomy might be penetrative anal sex between men. This is the definition the *Poor Man's Catechism* takes, and the Gilbert & George arseholes might also be read as a gesture towards this definition, or a comment on it. With all the curiosity and disobedience of Lot's wife, I am drawn

---

<sup>13</sup> Adam Phillips, *On Balance* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010). pp7,8.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

<sup>15</sup> Edelman, *Homographesis*, p175.

to the image. As a woman, I might by some narrow reasoning feel my looking is from a safe spectatorial distance. I might feel insulated by Fanny's 'without-ness'. This is not, after all, about me. But sodomy is frequently taken as metonymically standing for homosexuality, and that is meant as *male* homosexuality. And that in turn is implied to be a passive and abject 'bottom'. And thus, by a circuitous route I have in mind the unmanly, and that does apply to me. So perhaps it is as much about me as about anyone, it is about abjection, no, it is about the *desire* for the abjection of being absolutely fucked. Leo Bersani refers to such desire as 'an unquenchable appetite for destruction'.<sup>16</sup> And just by looking, fascinated or appalled by this excess, I give myself away.

A narrow definition of sodomy is however, culturally and affectively totally inadequate. It fails to account for the conflation of perversion and pleasure, and its political bent. Sodomy stands as a deliberate subversion of the hegemonic, the potential to invert values, the breaching of boundaries; social, legal, and moral, and the confusion of public and private spaces.<sup>17</sup> It is, quite simply, 'not normal'. It is a deliberate and perverse refusal of 'normal' as a proscriptive and coercive limitation. The category of the sodomitical is in fact, essential to the hygienic maintenance of sociocultural norms which depend on the continued potency of the sodomitical as the exemplary, perverse 'other' against which normalcy can comfortably define and defend itself. Goldberg comments on; 'the *productive* role that sodomy has played and can play as a site of pleasures that are also refusals of normative categories.'<sup>18</sup> And Klossowski makes a similar point; as a gesture, he writes, sodomy is inherently political, it is construed as; 'a specific gesture of countergenerality . . . which strikes

---

<sup>16</sup> Bersani, 'Is The Rectum a Grave?' in Goldberg, p251.

<sup>17</sup> Edelman: 'Confounding the distinction between coming in and going out, between compulsion and expulsion, between the public and the private, and thereby transgressing definitional boundaries that underwrite social identities, sodomy figures in the political imaginary precisely as a *public* and not a *private* concern' *Homographesis*, p132.

<sup>18</sup> Goldberg, p1.

precisely at the law of the propagation of the species.<sup>19</sup> Sodomy is for Klossowski, an 'intrinsic perversion' that perverts the laws of family and state; laws ensuring the survival of the species and the patriarchal laws of property and inheritance. In these terms, the sodomitical is an inherently political category and as such, somewhat of an anathema to Berlant's intimate public, who would avoid the trauma of political action, and are at best, 'juxtapolitical'.<sup>20</sup>

But this interpretation of the explicit meaning of the work as sexual and political is still inadequate. *Sodom* is not just an embarrassment to a right-facing *doxa*, an embarrassment of the exposure of sexuality and so-called 'deviance', nor a hoarding-sized advertisement for the potentials of sodomy as a counter-normative trope. *Sodom* manages to embarrass both a bourgeois and a radical self. It gets us coming and going. Addressing a left-ish, gallery-going public, the stickiness of *Sodom* cannot be just about sodomy as kinky sex. Its *studium* is also a comment on religious ideology's narrow and prescriptive morality as handed down in *The Poor Man's Catechism*. It is about prejudice and the circumscription of liberties and specifically that we cannot, or do not speak in defence of those liberties. According to Gilbert; 'Everything hinges on the question of liberties. Those we are entitled to and those we are not.'<sup>21</sup> The crux of the *studium* of *Sodom* might be seen then as a shift between the literal reading of biblical condemnation and the wider social significance it implies. So *Sodom* is about homosexuality, yes, and sodomy, yes, and it is about bigotry, and intolerance. And it is about how embarrassing it is to belong to a society, which still curtails liberties and authorises one 'straight arsefucker' to pass judgment on another.<sup>22</sup> *Sodom*, potentially explores the feelings

---

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Klossowski, "The Philosopher Villain," in *Reclaiming Sodom*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 1995). p223.

<sup>20</sup> Berlant, *The female Complaint*, pp10,11.

<sup>21</sup> Jonquet, p155.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Jarman wrote somewhat prosaically in his autobiography; 'Sodomy is straight. Sarah [Graham] says forty percent of women have practiced anal sex; statistically there are

we might have about being 'normal', about belonging, or not belonging to the utopia of normativity. And so besides all the 'struggling difficult things' that entrap the spectator, making it personal, *Sodom*, more broadly is about the systemic and institutional safeguarding of hegemonic normativities.

## PUNCTUM

It is odd, perhaps, or perhaps not, that such a confrontational work ostensibly about sexual 'deviance' should be so much 'about' tenderness. George said:

Someone was saying to us recently that, in art criticism, no one talks about the tenderness in our work. And I think that's true. They never speak about gentleness, delicacy. They all think our art is aggressive, yet some of our works are gentle and extremely sentimental.<sup>23</sup>

The *punctum* of *Sodom*, which I am trying both to avoid and to articulate, *because* it is embarrassing is in the firmness of the touch, the grasp of flesh upon flesh, Gilbert's arms around George, and in naming this I must 'give myself up'. In *Sodom*, I find the tenderness, the sentiment more embarrassing than the reference to so-called deviant sexuality. The tenderness in *Sodom*, evident in the relation between the two figures, proved to be 'true' in the solidification of that clasp is expressive of a remarkable intimacy.

There is something embarrassingly indecent about intimacy. It is a breach of boundaries between one self and another. And the embarrassment it causes is twofold; one folded within the other. One strand is sexual, the other is social. They

---

more straight arsefuckers than queers. Kinky sodomy as subversion, it transgresses all notions of Judeo-Christian family values; pleasure without responsibility.' Derek Jarman, *Smiling in Slow Motion* (London: Vintage, 2001). p169.

<sup>23</sup> Jonquet, p343.

are not equal, but equally subject to the ideology of love's plot. It is difficult to separate them because the social legitimacy of coupledness authorises the sexual, sheltering it and creating a private space for it, even in public. The fact that the image I am staring at is of a couple of (probably) gay men admittedly complicates matters, but, does not entirely deny them the public privacy to be legitimately intimate, though it makes them a curiosity.<sup>24</sup> What it also does of course, is to underscore the *really* legitimate legitimacy of the 'normal' heterocouple.

I am bruised by Gilbert's arms around George. Bruised by the intimate physicality of their touch. Bruised by the breach of boundaries. Bruised by the indecency of their touch. Ricks crystallises the sexual strand of the embarrassment of intimacy:

It is hard, when contemplating the loving physicality of others, to let the inevitable sense of a possibility of the distasteful be accommodated within a full magnanimity. The ambivalence of such physicality (ambivalent within oneself, and ambivalent because others are not oneself) involves a recognition of the need for such generosity.<sup>25</sup>

To acknowledge what I witness and how I feel about it does indeed require 'such generosity' for it puts me in a compromising position. It requires me to tolerate the 'possibility of the distasteful' of the physical display of intimacy, and yet I cannot just turn away from it; I am required to respond to the image by acknowledging my exclusion from it.

I am bruised by Gilbert's arms around George. He supports him; he will not let him drop. The trust between them is palpable; Gilbert looks up and away into an infinite and amorous coupledness. They are joined by their touch, and their joining is legitimated. The ampersand is a sign that within their coupledness they are safe, accepted and acceptable. The rupture of this work, for me at least, is the accidental

---

<sup>24</sup> Gilbert and George have always spoken in favour of a multiple sexuality that requires no divisions. They have declared themselves to be 'post-gay'. Bourner.

<sup>25</sup> Ricks, p93.

glimpse of tenderness between two middle-aged persons who have each other, who each have his 'other'. And I cannot just turn away from this either; I am required to respond to the image by acknowledging my exclusion from it. I am required to admit that I am without intimacy, without the intimacy of coupledness. And here, within the fold of coupledness, the embarrassment that was about a physical intimacy becomes social, and public; it is about belonging and not belonging, safety and exposure.

The intimacy publicly expressed here, large on the gallery wall, points out that however satisfied I may privately be with my choices in life, with the way things turned out, there are times when being single, being one rather than half of two, is to be disadvantaged; practically, socially, and perhaps emotionally, and furthermore, and most importantly it is publicly perceived as disadvantaged. I am embarrassed that my choice, to be single, should be categorised by others as failure.

## **BEING SINGLE**

The singleton is peripheral, side-lined, a wall-flower, not dancing, but yet hyper-visible, subject to comment, speculation, ridicule, or worst of all, encouragement. I don't want to hear that there is someone special for everyone, plenty of pebbles on the beach, or fish in the sea. I am not looking for Mr Right, or Mr Good-Enough or even Mr Goodbar.<sup>26</sup> But a single person's single status seems to be public property; it is a problem to be solved. I am a cliché, and until I grow old enough to be considered 'past it' I am assumed to be in need of an 'other half'. And so the most

---

<sup>26</sup> Mr Good-Enough is something like the vernacular, i.e. non-clinical understanding of Winnicott's 'good-enough mother'. He is the husband who is not perfect but he is the one on offer and the one with whom we could have a good marriage if we are prepared to work at it. And he is real; he actually exists in contrast to Mr Right who is a figment of our imagination, and so he is the better of the two. See Lori Gottlieb *Mr Good Enough: The case for choosing a Real Man over holding out for Mr Perfect* (2010)

embarrassing thing about being single is the (perhaps paranoid) knowledge that other people think, believe, assume, *know* that I feel incomplete. They pity me.

The point raised by a number of writers, including Berlant, Cobb, and Kipnis, is that such pity is founded upon a cultural assumption that a single life is no life at all, that we should 'get a life'. There is an assumption that without love we are incomplete, and lonely, lacking, desperate, failed, and sad. It is unthinkable that a single life should be a matter of preference. According to Laura Kipnis; 'Saying "no" to love isn't just heresy, it's tragedy: for our sort the failure to achieve what is most essentially human. And not just tragic, but abnormal.'<sup>27</sup> To choose to be single, to refuse to subscribe to the intimacy of coupledness is associated with a jack-the-lad freedom that we are supposed to grow out of, not in to. Freedom should be replaced by respectability, and pleasure by responsibility. These moves constitute proof of maturity and of worth to our community. They guarantee that we observe the rules, that we are useful and safe.

And the expectation that we will be useful and safe seems to apply particularly to women.<sup>28</sup> Women have no business being jack-the-lad. Denise Riley explores the censure of the single female in her essay, 'The Right to be Lonely'.

Such common solitariness may be willed and decidedly preferred by its bearer, or it may be barely tolerated, enforced: yet a taint of vice always clouds it. [ . . . ] And does to live alone render a woman not only wicked, but desexed; need everyone be descriptively drawn into the meshes of the social, especially women, as if these owned a naturally greater emotional existentiality, had more tentacles?<sup>29</sup>

The single female, she says, is framed as in some way unnatural or blameworthy.

---

<sup>27</sup> Kipnis, p26.

<sup>28</sup> Berlant. *The Female Complaint*, p172.

<sup>29</sup> Riley, p58.

Her solitariness is detected as subversive, undermining the hegemony of coupledness, potentially eroding the governance of love. As Riley indicates, it is the habitual association of women with emotion that is the root of the social demand that we women must love and be loved; *especially* women.

Berlant blames love for the cultural hegemony of the couple, which has now replaced the family as the foundational unit of society. Where once the solidity of family structure was evident across all social classes and provided our sense of belonging; indeed of 'normative personhood,' in the twentieth-century this was supplanted by a new story, a love story, placing the couple at the heart of social structure and thus 'at the heart of social being'.<sup>30</sup> And Adam Phillips makes the point that the narrative of love is systemic; 'the whole of Western literature is about what people do for love; for love of something or someone. For love of love.'<sup>31</sup> And to accept a role in love's plot, to seek and find the norm of coupledness, to become useful and safe cocoons us giving protection from the embarrassment of being single, of being singled out. As Barthes writes: 'To want to be pigeonholed is to want to obtain for life a docile reception.'<sup>32</sup> And so the story of love, of coupledness is a move towards okayness. The couple is enfolded within a protective normalcy, free from the embarrassment of being single.

The intimacy of coupledness in the image of Gilbert and George, for me, triggers thoughts of the enduring stability of marriages and other relationships within my family. In fact, Gilbert & George remind me most, and most peculiarly of my

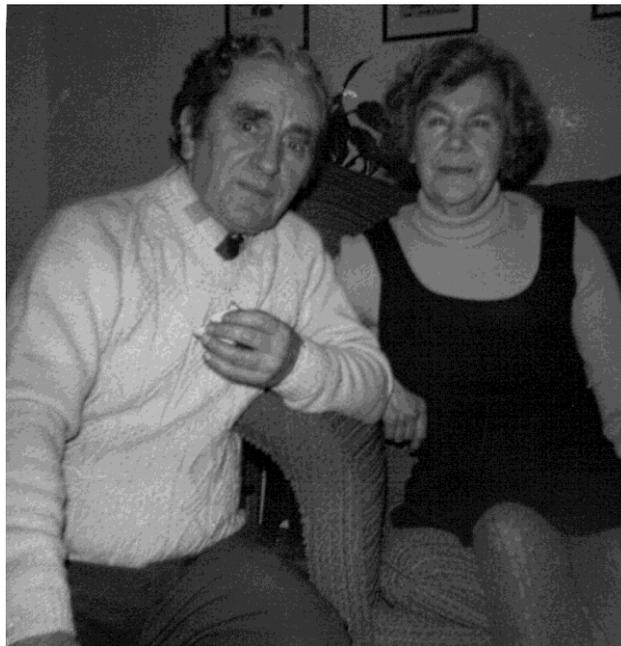
---

<sup>30</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p171. See also Suzanne Leonard's essay, 'Marriage Envy' in Jane Gallop, ed. *Envy*, ed. Cindy Katz and Nancy K. Miller, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 34 (New York: The Feminist Press, 2006). Leonard argues that; 'the web of fantasy, consumption, competition and false promise that inflect popular definitions of marriage ensure that the institution retains a stronghold in popular culture and, especially, in the female imagination.' p45.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, *On Balance*, p21.

<sup>32</sup> Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, p46.

grandparents, an odd couple if ever there was one, often at odds, but a set, like salt and pepper, who were referred to by my brothers as 'G&G'. They were unimaginable, one without the other, and were together for over fifty years. My parents were, and my brothers are, the marrying kind, the kind that stays married, sticking together through thick and thin. My family, like swans, tend to mate for life.



My grandparents; G&G. Lyn & Agnes Jones

*Sodom* points its finger at me. It requires that I give an account of myself and of my obstinate singleness (which is not so exhilarating as singularity). It refers me to my own back-story. As Butler writes:

I am interrupted by my own social origin, and so have to find a way to take stock of who I am in a way that makes clear that I am authored by what precedes and exceeds me, and that this in no way exonerates me from having to give an account of myself.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). p82.

There is a sense in which Butler's 'social origin' might, perhaps ought to be read as pertaining to class, and within this enquiry to the lived experience of middle-classness that shapes the art encounter with its *concern* for legitimacy and taste. But whilst such social origins have indeed authored who I am, in this instance, class is merely background information to the event-driven biography as 'an account of myself'. In public, in the large, quiet, airy space of the gallery, feels like no place to have to give this account. I am embarrassed by what the image asks of me. It asks me to account for how I turned out not to be a swan after all.

There is an old joke that marriage is an institution, and who wants to live in an institution anyway? Berlant proposes that coupledness is institutional and specifically, that it is an institution of privacy. Coupledness safeguards the social acceptance of our private lives. Inside the framework is a protected space; a safety zone, a comfort zone. Inside is under cover, outside is out in the open, a place of exposure; dangerous and uncomfortable. Berlant proposes the public intimacy of coupledness as a place of safety; 'safe from the world, in the world and for the world'.<sup>34</sup> That coupledness protects us, 'against the spectre of utter exposure that is experienced by those who live their lives in public, outside of an institution of privacy'.<sup>35</sup> Berlant enumerates those who live outside the institutions of privacy:

The failure to achieve privacy is still a charge that defines gays and lesbians, as well as single people, adulterers, and the stereotypical family on state welfare. People who are unhinged or unhitched, who live outside the normative loops of property and reproduction.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p171.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* pp171,172.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p172.

See also Munoz; ' . . . the Bowers v. Hardwick U.S. Supreme Court decision, which has efficiently dissolve the right to privacy of all gays and lesbians, in essence opening all our bedrooms to the state,' Jose Esteban Munoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). p1. See also Michael Warner on queer politics being; ' . . . alert to the invidiousness of any institution, like marriage, that is designed to both reward those inside it and to discipline those outside it: adulterers, prostitutes, divorcees, the promiscuous, single people, unwed

It is evident that I too fall into the categories of those who fail to qualify for institutional privacy. We 'outsiders' are the ones who not only decline to perpetuate normative loops of property and reproduction, but also, in Althusarian terms, are not reproducing the conditions of (re)production. We are rejecting an ideology of love that is culturally systemic, and is also endorsed and underpinned by the state, the church, the law, and the economy. By not properly constituting the subjects addressed by the ideology of institutional love, we fail to qualify for the privacy accorded to those who do. Those who meet the criteria, by becoming coupled achieve privacy in public. Those who don't are exposed; open to scrutiny and thus vulnerable to embarrassability.

Berlant's generalisation that 'gays and lesbians' fail to qualify for the institutional privacy of coupledness perhaps glosses over a more complex reality. *Sometimes* it is true. However, some gay couples are amongst the most married people I know. They are so deliberately and emphatically a couple that they are ambassadors for coupledness, and the term 'heteronormative' has been used to express their conservative assimilation into mainstream-normal.<sup>37</sup> They perform a coupledness that, though to some extent counter-normative, reinforces coupledness *per se* with all the zeal of a convert. So that, although still an object of curiosity (and perhaps worse), they are in the process of vigorously negotiating their inclusion in the utopia of normal. As Warner says; 'In the right social quarters, if you behave yourself, you can have a decent life as a normal homo – at least up to a point.'<sup>38</sup> From the admittedly limited horizon of my family, they pass as normal.

---

parents, those below the age of consent – in short, all those who become, for the purposes of marriage law, queer.' *The Trouble with Normal*, p89.

Other states in which the individual is denied privacy include celebrity, pregnancy, bankruptcy, being in police custody or in prison (and to some degree, death).

<sup>37</sup> See Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, pxii. Also Warner, M., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993)

<sup>38</sup> Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, p40.

Gilbert and George somehow pass as normal eccentrics; they readily admit that being two-as-one enables 'being normal and being weird at the same time'.<sup>39</sup> They have developed a bizarre life together that is both utterly exposed and quite inscrutable. Adhering to the principles of being a living sculpture and 'art for all', Gilbert & George are accessible; their address is well known and they are in the phone book. Unless they are abroad setting up an exhibition, they are to be observed going to a local café for breakfast, walking to their favourite restaurant for dinner, sometimes George takes the bus. If their claim that they have no life outside art is to be believed, then this is all there is. There is no secret, nothing hidden, nothing to be exposed, or everything is always already exposed.



Gilbert & George

As a living sculpture, Gilbert and George are always matching, always in step. They are in this way, despite standing out as 'not normal', paradigmatic of coupledness.

---

<sup>39</sup> Bournier. Berlant makes a similar comment in relation to the central character of *Now, Voyager*. She says of Charlotte Vale; 'Conventionality was her object choice. This is how she can seem queer and normative simultaneously.' Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p189.

Their coupledness is explicit; singly they are unthinkable. In his study on monogamy Phillips writes:

Coupledness is a performance art. But how does one learn what to do together? How to be, once again, two bodies in public, consistently together, guardians of each other's shame, looking the part? Where do the steps come from?<sup>40</sup>



In step

Gilbert & George live like Bakhtin's rogue, clown and fool, out 'on the square' where all deeds and discourse are in the public domain.<sup>41</sup> And yet they remain unknowable. Because of their synchronicity, their strict coupledness, always in step, always in agreement, neither George nor Gilbert is exposed or exposable. They are in this way also paradigmatic of coupledness as an *institution of privacy*. Their very mode of being is a paradox notable for what Sedgwick calls 'the privilege of unknowing'. It is as if they are visible, but only to a blind eye. For psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, love itself is a source of paradox. 'In love the paradox occurs that two

---

<sup>40</sup> Adam Phillips, *Monogamy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996). p5.

<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin in Holquist.

beings become one and yet remain two.<sup>42</sup> This paradox is evident each time Gilbert & George are interviewed. What everyone wants to know is; do they ever argue, either professionally or on a personal level? The answer is always the same; 'Oh no we never argue. And if we did we wouldn't tell you.'<sup>43</sup>

Returning to Berlant's account of those who fail to achieve the institutional privacy of coupledness, I am immediately struck by how the condition of those subject to exposure as 'outside the normative loops of property and reproduction' exactly mirrors Goldberg's description of the countergenerality of sodomy's refusal of normative categories and Klossowski's account of the sodomitical refusal of patriarchal institutions of property and reproduction. This notable parallel between singledness and the sodomitical is indicative of the social stigma of being 'without' intimacy; 'without' as lack, without 'the other half', and without as outside; beyond the pale. This reflection returns me to my initial reaction to *Sodom*; 'I begin with some comfortable distance from the sodomitical scene; it is not, I think, about me.' But I am mistaken. It is very much about me, and my comfortable distance collapses into an embarrassing proximity. Too close. Too near the knuckle. And like Cobb, I reflect that being single sometimes feels like 'one of the most despised sexual minority positions'.<sup>44</sup> And I wonder, how much more sodomitical could I be?

---

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.thinkexist.com> (accessed 02.01.12)

<sup>43</sup> Bourner.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Cobb, "Lonley," in *After Sex?: On Writing since Queer Theory*, ed. Janet Halley and Andrew Parker (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007). p446.

## BEING SINGLED OUT

Within the context of an intimate public, avoidance of embarrassment is often less violent than might be imagined. It is often just about not standing out, not drawing attention to oneself. It is, according to Berlant, about passing for normal:

To desire belonging to the normal world, the world as it appears, is at root a fantasy of a sense of continuity, a sense of being generally okay; it is a desire to be in proximity to okayness, without passing some test to prove it.<sup>45</sup>

*Sodom* is all about *abnormality*, aberration, anomaly, deviation, and to devote to it enough time to read the text, to work out the word endings obscured by George's knee, Gilbert's elbow, is to stray too far from okayness. Like Lot's wife, I should be looking away. The safest thing to do would be to glance at it, a non-committal look of brief duration and then move on. But something, something sticky holds and even returns my gaze. I am embarrassed to invest in this work, but too late, it has buttonholed me with its excess, its deviance, its abjection, its tenderness, its intimacy. And it asks me to account for myself, to account for my ambivalence; to account for my generalised desire for okayness and my distance from it. *Sodom* requires me to *own* my interest in it.

Art, it is widely agreed, communicates. But there is something faintly ridiculous about the idea that this artwork, *Sodom*, singles me out and embarrasses me in this way. Jeanette Winterson embraces the ridiculousness of conversations with art. She says that we should spend time with artworks, to get to know one another; 'supposing we made a pact with a painting and agree to sit down and look at it, on our own, with no distractions for one hour. . . What would we find? *Increasing discomfort*.'<sup>46</sup> She suggests that besides feeling uncomfortable, we might find ourselves to be increasingly distracted, inventive or irritated. Winterson allows for

---

<sup>45</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p9.

<sup>46</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Vintage, 1996). pp8,9.

the relation between artwork and spectator to be reciprocal when she writes of one such exchange; 'He still has not discovered anything about the painting but the painting has discovered a lot about him. He is inadequate and the painting has told him so.'<sup>47</sup> What *Sodom* seems to have discovered about me is that I am *interested* in its intimacy. Although, or because I am without, I am fascinated, appalled by the excessive intimacy of the image. Just as Edelman has written that it is a tricky thing to maintain any sort of spectatorial distance from the sodomitical scene, so too the work as a scene of intimacy entraps me. Doyle has written about the effect of intimacy and how it sometimes conscripts the spectator, demanding that they take it personally. She says of her response to Tracey Emin's work; 'I found myself interpolated by the work, as a spectator, in a manner that was both uncomfortable and exhilarating'.<sup>48</sup> And it is uncomfortable; the embarrassment of being singled out, the exposure of declaring a taste or a perversion, the strangeness of the self. And it is exhilarating; it is not the shock of the new, but the thrill of recognition, the rush of affirmation. As Gilbert & George have said; 'When it hurts then its true for us.'

It is perhaps a question of address. The image as a text can address a public, or perhaps a counterpublic, or even an intimate public, but it would address us all. My encounter with *Sodom* feels less general, more direct; it is personal, *because I take it personally*. Warner says that a public address has a 'necessary element of impersonality', and that even a direct address; 'in singling us out it does so not on the basis of concrete identity but by virtue of our participation in the discourse alone and therefore in common with strangers.'<sup>49</sup> But *Sodom's* address doesn't feel as if it addresses me as a stranger. I feel as if it recognises me, it knows that I am interested, so it must know something about me; I am exposed to the image, or

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.(p10)

<sup>48</sup> Doyle, *Sex Objects*, p109.

<sup>49</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, pp77,78.

perhaps more fundamentally to the ideology of the image that addresses me, not as a stranger, but as an individual. And although Warner argues that as an individual, my singularity, in common with others, must always retain a trace of strangerhood, yet I feel sure that *Sodom* addresses *me*. Or, as Althusser might put it, *really me*. I am interpellated.

In 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', Louis Althusser uses the term interpellation to describe how ideology effects the conversion of individuals into subjects. He explains this by way of an almost anecdotal example; the individual is walking down the street and ideology calls out 'Hey, you there!' Althusser describes this incident as being 'along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing'.<sup>50</sup> He notes that this form of communication is effective because the subject is expecting the call; because he recognises that the hail was addressed to him; and most people apparently do. Althusser admits this is a strange phenomenon that lacks adequate explanation. He offers that in part it may be due to 'guilt feelings', that most of us have something on our conscience and so expect to be hailed. But besides, or in place of, the guilt of this encounter, might it be that the individual also feels embarrassment? She may feel embarrassed at being so peremptorily addressed; embarrassed that the other of ideology sees and judges her. Perhaps our feelings of guilt or embarrassment relate not to something we have done, but to our very being, to something that we are, or alternatively, to something that we are not. The individual might quite simply be embarrassed at being, and at being singled out.

When *Sodom* asks me to account for myself, to account for not being a swan, I know it is speaking to me. This is not a public address, although it addresses me in

---

<sup>50</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans., Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001). p118.

public. This is private because it is personal; because I take it personally. When the image of *Sodom* interpellates me, as an individual, I know that the call is precisely *for me*, and I turn around, embarrassed, subjected, and always already aware that I *misrecognise* the hailing and know that as one of the ‘unhinged and unhitched’, I don’t quite ‘fit’. And here, Warner’s ‘trace of strangerhood’ is important, I am strange to myself. In that moment of the one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn, as I turn to face the ideology that has stopped me in my tracks, shouting ‘Hey, you there!’, I ask, instinctively; ‘who me?’ And just for a moment, I am a stranger to myself in the idiom of, ‘it takes one to know one’, and this stranger-me, is an identity I have to account for, I have to say ‘yes, she is who you think she is’, or, ‘I am she’.

Alternatively, I could deny this identification, I could disown it, perhaps disown myself, saying; ‘no, that’s not me’. Warner touches on the feelings of disconcertion that arise when we are addressed, he writes; ‘It isn’t just that we are addressed in public as certain kinds of persons or that we might not want to identify as that person. We haven’t been misidentified exactly.’<sup>51</sup> But yet, in being interpellated, there may be a feeling of misfit, or perhaps a reluctance to foreclose the possibilities of other selves or other versions of self. In my case, despite making a choice to be single, I am still susceptible to the desire for at least proximity to okayness, to be safe in the utopia of normal. I still entertain the idea of intimacy.

In responding, ‘yes, that’s me’, the individual accepts the identification and is, in Althusser’s terms, a ‘good subject’, who is; ‘a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission’.<sup>52</sup> A ‘bad subject’ on the other hand, resists the call of the ideological apparatuses and turns against the hegemony. The bad subject denies the identification and the subjectivity it calls for. In the case of the hegemony of

---

<sup>51</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p78.

<sup>52</sup> Althusser, p123.

coupledom, the good subject either is already coupled, or alternatively desires to be part of a couple. The good subject feels drawn by love's plot and subscribes to a belief in the happy-ever-after. The bad subject is obstinately single, rejecting the promise of the happy-ever-after. The bad subject is the restless one, the one who won't settle down, or the one with the itch, the one who strays, like an alley cat, or the one who is too lazy to work at it, or perhaps, the one who right from the start has no intention of being a significant other to anyone.

There is a possible third subject. Whilst good subjects choose the path of identification and bad subjects reject it outright, the third possibility is one of *disidentification*. A position of *disidentification* would be one in which the individual recognises the hailing as being for them, *really* them, but cannot, or will not freely submit to subjectification, yet neither will they reject outright the ideology that hails them. According to Muñoz, *disidentification* is a way of negotiation a provisional inclusion in a public that has not only *not* promised to include us, but that is also disparaging or condemnatory about people 'like us', who may be, for example, outside 'the normative loops of property and reproduction'.

Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.<sup>53</sup>

Disidentification might then be practiced by an individual who negotiates a place within an ideology that for them, is a bad fit. It is a means of mitigating the embarrassment, or even shame of failing to be 'good', a means of accepting 'normal' as something desirable whilst not embodying it. And the cost of such disidentification is an ambivalence about belonging. It is a feeling of discomfort; a

---

<sup>53</sup> Muñoz, p4. see also pp11,12 on Louis Althusser and Michel Pêcheux

prickliness that is endured for the sake of *appearing to* fit in. It is a prevarication; the ideology is *entertained*, but not adopted, or not yet adopted.

Disidentification is also a way of avoiding the political implications of counter-identification that are the responsibility of the bad subject. Judith Butler explores the potential of *disidentification* and asks; 'What are the possibilities of politicising disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?'<sup>54</sup> Butler's questioning of the political potential of this *discomfortable* state, suggests that it is a state that is not, or *not yet* political. But for an intimate public, no more than 'juxtapolitical', this question is mere rhetoric. Disidentification is not a call to arms but an acknowledgement that we don't quite meet the terms of inclusion. It is a means of being in proximity to okayness, though not actually okay. For the singleton navigating the world of couples and coupling, it is a way of avoiding the embarrassment of other people's interest in our difference. The embarrassment of being singled out by an ideology that we live within but do not identify with is a feeling of restricted political agency, so disidentification may be a feeling of subversion, but it remains covert rather than seditious.

Butler's account of an 'uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong' effectively describes the relationship of the ambivalent singleton to love's ideology and to how that ideology legitimates the visibility of intimacy. I am aware that don't belong in a personal and literal sense but I do belong in a general, cultural sense. So yes it is personal, and yes it is general. The intimacy of Gilbert and George in *Sodom* excludes me; me personally. I am excluded from the intimacy of two, neither of whom are me, excluded from the

---

<sup>54</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p219. Her question is in response to Žižek's political interrogation of identity and subjectivity.

intimacy of two men, from the intimacy of two gay men, from an intimacy between old people, from an intimacy that endures, from an intimacy of two who are figments, an intimacy that may exist only in my imaginary relationship to it (but perhaps all relationships are imaginary?)

And yet the intimacy of two is something to which I *am* culturally conditioned to aspire. My swan family extols the virtues of two-ness, of coupledness. Fairy tales, and other such romantic cant has preconditioned me to accept the teleological tow towards the happy ending as normal and desirable, and conversely, its rejection as abnormal, undesirable, perverse even. In the intimate public sphere, lies the general rule that in the trajectory of life (particularly for women) there *should be* what Berlant calls 'a plot of love's unfolding'. Intimacy *should be* the teleological end, the happy-ever-after that makes us safe; 'safe from the world, in the world, for the world', no longer a 'threat to the general happiness'.<sup>55</sup> To reject the happy-ever-after, is, it would seem, sodomitically perverse.

## SINGULARITY

In a short story, 'A Family Man', the writer V S Pritchett says of his female protagonist, Berenice, that, 'among the married she felt her singularity'.<sup>56</sup> This is a particularly rich use of the term singularity that sustains the exposed and singled-out singularity of embarrassment, drawing together a number of threads running through this, and other chapters of this thesis. Pritchett's use of the term 'singularity' is readable as multiple layers of meaning beginning with the prosaic 'quality, state, or

---

<sup>55</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*.

<sup>56</sup> V S Pritchett, "A Family Man," in *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories*, ed. Malcom Bradbury (New York: 1988).

fact of being singular' as a unique but yet substitutable being (OED). It reduces singularity to a condition of being, held in common with all other beings.

The uniqueness of the other is exposed to me, but mine is also exposed to her. This does not mean that we are the same, but only that we are bound to one another by what differentiates us, namely our singularity. The notion of singularity is very often bound up with existential romanticism and with a claim of authenticity, but I gather that, precisely because it is without content, my singularity has some properties in common with yours and so is, to some extent, a substitutable term.<sup>57</sup>

We might furthermore ascribe to Pritchett's use of singularity the properties of eccentricity; 'an exceptional or unusual trait; a peculiarity' (OED). This is a singularity that is exemplified by Gilbert & George who are notable for their eccentricity. There is an awkwardness about singularity that is not framed as admirable exactly. It is redolent of square pegs in round holes and sticking out like a sore thumb with an assumption that what it sticks out from is a harmonious norm, complete in itself; congruent, regular, faultless. Gilbert and George have studiously practiced singularity but from within their coupledness; always matching, always in step, and always peculiar. For them, singularity is a praxis.

In the context of Pritchett's narrative, singularity also brings into play the sense of being single, of being (as yet) unmarried, as Berenice's single singularity is made to stand in direct opposition to the married status of her friends and acquaintances.

The two conditions of being unmarried and being peculiar are entwined in 'singularity', as if being single were a caprice or perversion. As one who stands apart from the norm, the norm of coupledness, Berenice is an oddity. Her friends are entertained by her but feel it would be better all-round if she settled down. They

---

<sup>57</sup> This is Butler's interpretation of Cavarero's definition of singularity, which Butler then builds on to outline an ethics of accounting for one's singularity. *Giving an Account*, p34. See also Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans., Paul A Kottman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

seek to normalise her by enfolding her in love's plot. Her friend, Mrs Brewster says; 'She's getting old. She ought to get married, [ . . . ] I wish she wouldn't swoosh her hair around like that. She'd look better if she put it up.'<sup>58</sup> As Berlant notes, the single woman is considered to be a threat because her perverse and wilful singleness has the capacity to unsettle the social equilibrium. Berlant suggests of deliberately single persons:

[They] are frequently seen both as symptoms of personal failure and as threats to the general happiness, which seems to require, among other things, the positioning of any person's core life story in a plot of love's unfolding, especially if that person is a woman.<sup>59</sup>

So, there is something singular about being female that marks being single as the refusal of love's plot, and as particularly reprehensible.

But Berenice doesn't want to settle down, she doesn't want to be enfolded in love's plot. She feels resentment towards 'the slapdash egotism of young men trying to bring her peculiarity to an end.'<sup>60</sup> She is defensive of her peculiarity and holds herself apart from 'the married'. They interest her, she spends her time with them and she likes to listen to their endearments and their bickerings, but they also appal her; 'How awful married people are, she thought. So public, sprawling over everyone and everything,'<sup>61</sup> She is appalled by their sense of entitlement; to carry on their marriages in public, whilst in contrast, for her to 'carry on' must be a matter of discretion. She refers to herself as a secret, 'a necessary secret' and this gives to her singularity a faint sense of the unknown, of something that *could be* exposed in contrast to the publicity of coupledness, as an institution of privacy that protects or

---

<sup>58</sup> Pritchett, 'A Family Man'.

<sup>59</sup> Berlant. *The Female Complaint*, p172.

<sup>60</sup> Pritchett, 'A Family Man'.

<sup>61</sup> Pritchett, 'A Family Man'.

covers up what it endorses, or alternatively has no need of covering because paradoxically it is always already exposed as a privacy that goes on in public.<sup>62</sup>

We might also read into Pritchett's singularity a sense of self as both embodied and lived, such as Judith Butler might use the term.

*This exposure that I am constitutes, as it were, my singularity. I cannot will it away, for it is a feature of my very corporeality and, in this sense, of my life. Yet it is not that over which I can have control.*<sup>63</sup>

This singularity is cultivated by Berenice as her identity and that is most evident in the relational. In her dealings with others, her singularity is the outward face, the image of self, as shown to the other, as a mask, but at the same time it is the self-image of her inner self. And there is a certain incongruity between the two; between the self-image and the image of self with the outer only ever an approximation of the inner and the slip between the two is a space of embarrassment.

But furthermore, and most tellingly, when Pritchett writes that Berenice 'felt her singularity', there is a sense in which the reader must understand singularity as a mode of feeling. And as a mode of feeling, singularity is the initial prickling sensation of embarrassment as an aversive self-consciousness, and whilst singularity is intrinsic to the embarrassment of exposure, it is *not yet* an embarrassment of evaluation. At this point the self is exposed, 'singled out' and thus presented for evaluation; it anticipates evaluation, it is on the brink of evaluation. Singularity is, in this sense, an exceptional feeling of an exceptional self. And this is exhilarating. But the anticipation of evaluation must inevitably also include a feeling of self as *not normal* and thus not good-enough, for the terms of 'normal' and 'good' (or at least good-enough) are indivisible. Ahmed describes the

---

<sup>62</sup> As Philips remarks; 'When it comes to sexuality we seem to forget that privacy can only go on in public.' *Monogamy*, p72.

<sup>63</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account*, p33.

'queer feelings' that are the uneasy sensation of being not normal; in her case, from perspectives of race and sexuality.

Discomfort is a feeling of disorientation: one's body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled. I know that feeling too well, the sense of out-of place-ness and estrangement involves an acute awareness of the surface of one's body, which appears as a surface, when one cannot inhabit the social skin which is shaped by some bodies and not others.<sup>64</sup>

Singularity, as an acute awareness of self, exposed to the other who has the power to judge, is a momentary sensation, a transient feeling of potential. But it is also a feeling of being on the brink of being engulfed. Roland Barthes gives a description of the *feeling* of love as an amorous subjectivity. This is also the *feeling* of singularity, and of embarrassment. Barthes writes of a kind of panic which is like a blush; the whole body is engaged in an insistent present that encompasses predictions and precedents, the whole body is a 'space of reverberation', rationality is abandoned and the body, at this very instant is both trivial and necessary.

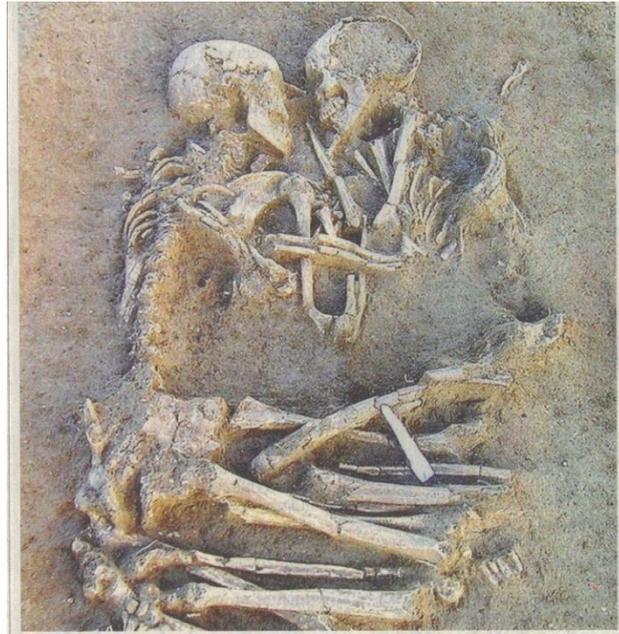
The space of reverberation is the body – that imaginary body, so 'coherent' (coalescent) that I can experience it only in the form of a generalized pang. This pang (analogous to a blush which reddens the face, with shame or emotion) is a sudden panic. In the usual kind of panic – stage fright which precedes some sort of performance – I see myself in the future in a condition of failure, imposture, scandal. In amorous panic, I am afraid of my own destruction, which I suddenly glimpse, inevitable, clearly formed, in the flash of a word, an image.<sup>65</sup>

And in this feeling of reverberation, my singularity embarrasses me and the embarrassment in turn, ensingles me, almost like love.

---

<sup>64</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p148, see also p152 on discomfort.

<sup>65</sup> Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, pp200,201



Happy ever after?

*Sodom*, in the final analysis, is a contradiction. It says one thing and means quite another. The work is 'about' abnormality, countergenerality, and the fire and brimstone consequences of such outright refusal of normality. And yet in the accidental glimpse of tenderness between the figures, is the sign of a remarkable, and remarkably conventional intimacy; an ordinary, everyday intimacy of being at ease; one with an other. *Sodom's* public airing of private intimacies is an unsettling möbius loop of indivisible ideological insides and outsides, inclusions and exclusions that are perhaps best understood in terms of Edelman's definition of sodomy as 'a disturbing emblem of dis-closure'.<sup>66</sup> The embarrassment of *Sodom* dis-closes far more about the spectator than about the artist. In the end, *Sodom* exposes and embarrasses most, not through its tabloidesque staging of 'perverse' sexuality, but through inversion, through the substitutability of indecency and intimacy. The representation of intimacy interpellates precisely because it draws attention to me as single, excluded from its institutions. The intimacy of Gilbert and George points me

---

<sup>66</sup> Edelman, *Homographesis*, p131.

out as 'unhinged and unhitched'. And I am embarrassed, not because I am single, but because I am defensive about being single.

Do I envy them? In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes describes the congregation of coupledness as the *sistemati*, meaning that they are pigeonholed, and asks, from his perspective of just outside, as one who loves but is unhitched (and perhaps in his love for X even a little unhinged). In his singularity, Barthes asks;

How is it that the *sistemati* around me can inspire me with envy? From what, seeing them am I excluded? Certainly not from a 'dream', an 'idyll', a 'union': there are too many complaints from the 'pigeonholed' about the system, and the dream of union forms another figure. No, what I fantasize in the system is quite modest: I want, I desire, quite simply, a *structure* (. . .). Of course there is not a happiness of structure; but every structure is *habitable*, indeed that may be its best definition.<sup>67</sup>

The point Barthes makes is, that for those of us who are outwith the institutional privacy of coupledness, what we lack is not intimacy, or even love, but structure. We have no habitable structure, no place of comfort, of ease and privacy, no space to be intimate, or not.<sup>68</sup> Or as Ahmed says, we have no 'social skin'. We have no skin or structure to cover us, giving protection from the exposure and evaluation of embarrassment, to escape the opinions and optimism of those others who think it is time we settled down. And yet, we must live within the ideology of love's plot. The emotional cathexes and trigger images of soap opera, romantic comedies, fairy tales, and a million love songs all follow the well-worn trajectory of love overcoming obstacles, advancing towards the promised happy-ever-after. And love's plot is assumed to apply particularly to women. It is posited as 'what women want'.

---

<sup>67</sup> Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, pp45,46.

<sup>68</sup> Berlant makes a similar point, noting that love's plot of coupledness is not just structurally dominant, but uncontested – there is no alternative plot; 'desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable places of culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them.' Lauren Berlant, ed. *Intimacy* (Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000). p5.

The modern love plot requires that, if you are a woman, you must at least *entertain* believing in love's capacity both to rescue you from your life and to give you a new one, a fantasy that romantic love's narratives constantly invest with beauty and utopian power.<sup>69</sup>

Those who think they don't require rescuing are an anathema. To perversely, sodomitically reject the norm of coupledness and all it promises is to be singled out; to be 'the odd man out'. Though frequently, the odd man out is a woman.

---

<sup>69</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p171

## Chapter Six:

### Face Value: The discrediting of self-image in Sarah Lucas's self-portraiture.

One of the reasons I was interested in the feminine was that I wasn't successful.

Sarah Lucas<sup>1</sup>

In her disappointment with herself she displaced her wishes onto objects who she felt were better qualified to fulfil them.

Anna Freud<sup>2</sup>

---

Is embarrassment gendered? Does the genderedness of looking and being looked at also apply to exposure and evaluation, and to contexts of display and spectatorship that might engender embarrassability? This chapter explores the contention that embarrassment *is* gendered and that it is female. The femaleness of embarrassment does not in any way preclude men from being embarrassed, but rather, when a man does feel embarrassed, he is in some sense, unmanned. Embarrassment does not in the same way disturb my sense of femaleness. When I am exposed, awkward, disprised, and feel that I am on the back foot, my femaleness is not denied, but on the contrary, is confirmed and corroborated by this foolish feeling.

Emotion generally, is culturally coded as female. Women, who are allocated a position that is closer to nature and further from God are assumed to have the greater affinity with emotion, whilst reason, as emotion's binary opposite, is the province of men. Berlant comments on the correlation of women and emotion:

---

<sup>1</sup> Mathew Collings, *Sarah Lucas*, Modern Artists (London: Tate Publishing, 2002). p22.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Anna Freud: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). p129.

The identification of women with affect and emotion is a complex thing, not just a projection of the view that women feel more powerfully than they think, a cliché that can make women seem both trivial and magnificent. In the intimate sphere of public femininity the passionate irrational attachments of affect and the normative transactions of emotionality shape women's psychic and social lives and their responsibility to other people's lives.<sup>3</sup>

Emotion is inextricably bound with concepts of femaleness in intricate shades of duty and capriciousness, strength and weakness, but all too often, trivial manages to trump the magnificent. And besides this, there is a hierarchical differentiation within the spectrum of emotions, and some are calibrated as *more* female than others. Envy for example, is categorised by both Freud and Ngai as female, whilst paranoia, according to Ngai is a male feeling, but Sedgwick makes a reasonable case for it being female, or more narrowly feminist.<sup>4</sup> Broadly speaking, the stronger and more dignified emotions such as anger and pride are the most male, and the more trivial the feeling, the more it is likely to be a woman thing.

Embarrassment as a weak or minor emotion figures as particularly female. It is a silly, superficial emotion. It has no weight, stature, gravitas or nobility. It is not one of the grand passions and it lacks moral depth. It is the emotion of small failures, incompetence, accident, and inadvertency. It is a passive emotion, a temporary paralysis; the embarrassed one, according to Goffman, is 'out of play'. Whilst it lacks an active dynamic, embarrassment is often accompanied by little apologetic gestures, an ineffectual fluttering of the hands, touching the face, averting the gaze. It often results from matters of modesty which is popularly a female province. It is concerned with appearances; yet another female province.

---

<sup>3</sup> Berlant, *the Female Complaint*, p170.

<sup>4</sup> See Ngai, pp298-331. And Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.

Mary Russo captures a particularly negative evaluation of women by women. She evokes a commonly felt embarrassment that is also an embarrassment in common, as if through inadvertent exposure of an unheroic femaleness, we are all disadvantaged.

There is a phrase that still resonates from childhood . . . . It is a harsh matronizing phrase, directed towards the behaviour of other women: “She” [the other woman] is making a spectacle out of herself. Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of exposure. Men, I learned somewhat later in life, “exposed themselves,” but that operation was quite deliberate and circumscribed. For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, ageing, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap – a loose dingy bra strap especially – were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy.<sup>5</sup>

The embarrassment conjured up by Russo is coextensively of exposure – of being a spectacle – *and* of evaluation; the woman suffers an ‘inadvertency’ but it is one she should have guarded against. She has not just become a spectacle but has *made* a spectacle of herself; she is ‘blameworthy’. This chapter advances embarrassment as a particularly female feeling, and also, refocuses on embarrassment as composed of two strands; of exposure and evaluation. In particular, this chapter is concerned with the way that exposure and evaluation are difficult to read separately, and most particularly, that in the lived experience of femaleness, the two are tightly knotted.

There are a number of truisms that have a bearing on the evaluations we make and are made of us; despite being urged not to, we judge a book by its cover, and this is true especially when the person being judged is a woman. A man’s value is more

---

<sup>5</sup> Russo, p53.

likely to be connected with achievement whereas a woman's value is immediately exposed, that is; open to evaluation, simply by being seen. It is sometimes said of a beautiful woman that her face is her fortune. Women, (at least in Western modernity) are in some essential way considered to be on display; as Mulvey has it, woman connotes 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.

In the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Lorelei Lee, the dumb blonde with a sharp mind, played by Marilyn Monroe expresses this disparity perfectly. She is accused by her prospective father-in-law of being a gold-digger, but puts him straight saying that wealth is a desirable attribute for a man much in the way that being pretty is a desirable attribute for a woman, and surely he would prefer his son to marry well, that is, marry a woman with desirable attributes.

Lorelei Lee: Don't you know that a man being rich is like a girl being pretty? You might not marry a girl just because she's pretty, but my goodness, doesn't it help? And if you had a daughter, wouldn't you rather she didn't marry a poor man?

Mr Esmonde: Say, they told me you were stupid. You don't sound stupid to me.<sup>6</sup>

The scene is still funny and still relevant, we, women, try to look our best; to make the most of our assets. And we are still far too often taken at face value.

A preliminary task of this chapter is then to restate the twofold nature of embarrassment, giving particular attention to the problematic of the coextensivity of its parts. A theory of embarrassment as twofold, consisting of exposure and evaluation is expounded by Lewis who uses evidence gathered in studies of child development to define the distinct and separate emergence of the two types.<sup>7</sup> The

---

<sup>6</sup> Howard Hawks, "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," (Twentieth Century Fox, 1953).

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, p198-218. Other researchers have concluded that the capacity for embarrassment develops considerably later; perhaps around five years of age and is still developing in early

first, exposure embarrassment, is the feeling of an aversive self-consciousness. It is a feeling of visibility, of being seen, and causes us to experience quite literally too much of ourselves. The second is a feeling of inadequacy, of having failed to meet expectations; not only failing to meet the expectations of the other who sees but also a failing of self, a failure to be a good or good-enough self. Evaluation embarrassment is perhaps best understood as a minor shame, a shame about something of only minor importance.

Lewis acknowledges that as adults we are acutely aware of, and sensitive to evaluations; 'Because adults utilize evaluation in all of their actions, the belief that embarrassment has to be related to some failure of the self is widespread.'<sup>8</sup> Once both strands of embarrassment are fully developed in adulthood it is difficult, if not impossible to separate the two; we imagine that the other who sees us also judges us. Lewis suggests that as adults we tend to attribute a disproportionate part of our embarrassment to evaluation. In our narcissistic investment in self we overestimate our interest to the other. In our paranoia, we imagine ourselves to be judged, forgetting that that other is busy with her own narcissism and paranoia; too busy to judge.

Lewis is able to give a full account of the primary embarrassment of exposure, but when it comes to evaluation he is less forthright. He comments that evaluation is not only second but also secondary to the role played by exposure. Once the capacity to experience both exposure and evaluation embarrassments are fully developed the two are inextricably linked and interdependent. It is never simply an embarrassment of 'some failure of the self' but of that failure *being seen* by some

---

adolescence. For an overview of several studies on the development of embarrassment, see chapter 6 in Robert J. Edelman, *The Psychology of Embarrassment* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, p214.

other even if the other is imagined. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre theorised exactly this; the judgement of the other is embedded in the context of being seen. He wrote; 'To be looked at is to apprehend oneself as the unknown object of unknowable appraisals – in particular of value judgements.'<sup>9</sup> Sartre argues that being seen is contiguous with being judged. In his explanation, the other who sees me has the advantage; he is the subject. When he looks at me I am, for him, an object, and he has the freedom to judge. His look and his freedom to judge enslave me and I am embarrassed to be objectified.

The evaluation embarrassment that is the subject of this chapter is not predicated upon normative, masculine criteria of worth that we might fleetingly fail to meet, or believe the other has seen that we fail to meet. The focus here is on the discrediting of one's image and in conjunction with this, an ambivalence towards being (seen to be) female, and thus so exposed, so vulnerable to evaluation. This is deliberately superficial, placing the value of evaluation not in being good, but in giving good face. Superficiality is not here indexical of importance; in the context of embarrassment, surface matters and there is nothing more deeply important to the self-image than its image.

The image of self that I will explore here in relation to the secondary embarrassment of evaluation is the deliberate and paradigmatic image of self of the self-portrait. Taking a self-portrait as the subject enables a reading of the self as quite explicitly and always already exposed, and so, in theory at least, allowing a more narrow focus on the embarrassment of evaluation. Looking at Sarah Lucas's self-portrait, *Got a Salmon On # 3*, I will explore how her work mitigates exposure and also might

---

<sup>9</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p291. Sartre contends that shame-embarrassment results fundamentally from the objectification itself rather than the real or imagined negative evaluation of the other's actual judgement.

displace embarrassment by frustrating the immediate evaluation of her image in hackneyed terms of femininity.

The image Lucas projects in her self-portraits is generally described in terms of its 'mannishness'. In some respects this is a gun-jumping response to what is there, or more accurately, to what is not there. Lucas actually declines to portray herself as 'womanish'. There is nothing much in her self-portraiture that can be read in terms of culturally constructed femininity, essential femaleness, or even womanliness as a masquerade, but poverty of language and imagination forces an either/or reading of 'not-woman' as man, mannish, or at least 'man-ish'. I would define 'man-ish' as an approximation of man, without the burden of cultural masculinity or essential maleness, and hardly troubled at all by anything seriously phallic.<sup>10</sup>

Lucas's 'mannishness' is, I will argue, both symptomatic of embarrassment about femaleness as always already exposed and available for evaluation, *and* a strategy to mitigate that embarrassment by wrong-footing the spectator, calling into question orthodox criteria for seeing and sexing. Lucas is also questioning the extent to which we might rely on the authenticity of the normative categories 'woman' and 'man' as displayed in the image of self. This brings to mind the work of Joan Riviere; 'Womanliness as Masquerade', and adds a further level of uncertainty.

Riviere theorised a super-womanliness that women project in order to compensate

---

<sup>10</sup> If embarrassment can be considered to be essentially 'a woman thing', perhaps the weightier feeling of shame is male. See Steven Connor on male shame: Still, I am though. I am ashamed of being a man. . . . I am ashamed, for example, of the advantage of having been a man, and of its arrogant privilege and prospects. I am ashamed of the will-to-manhooood involved in being a man. I am ashamed of the stupidity and selfishness and certitude and pettiness of being a man . . . I am ashamed of the things men carry on agreeing to want and ashamed as well of what men have done, and what I believe being a man continues to entail doing, to women and to other men, and not just accidentally but systematically, as part of the long, and now almost comprehensively rumbled, plot of patriarchy. Steven Connor, "The Shame of Being a Man," (2000) (accessed 11.12.2011). <http://www.stevenconnor.com/shame/> (accessed 11.12.2011)

In the context of male shame, I would suggest that if being a man can be a cause of shame, then being 'man-ish' causes *not* shame but embarrassment. 'Man-ish' is manly-lite in the same way that embarrassment is sometimes understood as shame-lite.

for their 'manliness'; that is, for their competence, strength and success, and the compensatory 'womanliness' although 'put on' is no less real than actual womanliness; both are cultural constructs.

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she were found to possess it [ . . . ] The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.<sup>11</sup>

Lucas does not put on a mask of womanliness. In fact, as her appearance in the self-portraits is most often read as 'mannish', we are left quite unsure whether this is a cover-up for 'genuine' womanliness or a refusal to masquerade as woman in order to soothe male anxieties, and if as Riviere says, there is no difference, then is Lucas in fact masquerading at all? I would argue that she is; that she is seeming to be *not-woman*, or *not woman-ish*, *not womanly*. But this is not the same as masquerading as a man in a serious inversion of gender codes. It is more like a game of hide-and-seek. As Riviere puts it; 'she has to treat the situation of displaying her masculinity to men as a 'game', as something *not real* as a 'joke'.<sup>12</sup> Not like a man, exactly, but *manish*.

Lucas is by no means the first female artist to complicate gender categories. She and others before her have sought to negotiate the term 'woman artist', which is *almost* an oxymoron. Previous gender strategies employed by women artists (Hesse, Krasner, O'Keefe) are explored by Anne Wagner who details the extent to which these artist have worked within a cultural assumption that the term 'artist' as creative genius, is coded as male. Wagner notes that although a female artist may not take a feminist stance in her work, she nevertheless is an agent for the

---

<sup>11</sup> Athol Hughes, ed. *The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers 1920-1958* (London: Karnac Books, 1991). p94.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p96.

feminisms of her time. She too sees 'woman' as a negotiable cultural construct; 'Femininity can be assigned as well as claimed, avoided as well as celebrated, with an act of negation potentially as eloquent as affirmation. Or an individual's relation to feminine gender may definitively escape her control.'<sup>13</sup>

In particular, Wagner's account of Lee Krasner's projection of self as an ambivalent relation to gender prefigures the avoidance of womanliness that I read in the self-portraiture of Sarah Lucas. Professionally Krasner quite abjures womanliness, as if it were incommensurate with being an artist, or being successful. Or perhaps, as totally irrelevant, or as a quality that made her vulnerable to evaluation in terms she didn't accept as pertinent to her work. Wagner comments:

Although Krasner's art is 'that of a woman,' the autobiography it inscribes invents its subject (its 'self') as the bearer of a fictional masculinity. Or at least that's what Krasner hoped to imply. The invention is strategic, meant to master the feminine, since for Krasner femininity was the more complex and threatening term. In trying to circumvent that oppressive fiction, she embraced its opposite as a kind of antidote to a social condition.<sup>14</sup>

Wagner suggests that Krasner saw being female as 'an oppressive fiction', as a masquerade she was expected to collude with, and attempted to escape that through a 'fictional masculinity'. This strategy, in its approach to gender as something that might be stage-managed has been reinvented by Lucas, but where Krasner's gender congealed in her social and canonical persona of Mrs Jackson Pollock, Lucas's gender as far as it does appear in her work, is displaced onto objects.

For an artist, even a 'woman artist', there can be an advantage in being seen.

Greater visibility, building a brand, is advantageous commercially, if not critically.

---

<sup>13</sup> Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'keeffe* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1998). p27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p189.

The artist is now frequently operating in a celebrity culture where she or he is exposed and evaluated alongside those who are famous for achievement, and those who are famous only for exposure. Lucas has made herself visible by producing a number of photographic self-portraits which have been exhibited as a series and published as a set of prints. The self-portraits have been widely used for publicity and promotion of the brand, 'Sarah Lucas' and in the same way that the use of beautiful women in advertising is so often vacuous, so too these images are empty of real subjectivity. In making her image available in this way, Lucas deliberately offers that image up for evaluation, and the response of critics and commentators is as much the subject of this chapter as is the critique of the image itself. What is said, and what is unsaid is intrinsic to the embarrassment inherent in Lucas's work.



Sarah Lucas, *Self-Portraits 1990-1998* (installation view)

Each image in the series has about it a certain blankness, and an ambivalence about gender, gestures that seem to be rooted in embarrassment. The series of images show Lucas in a variety of poses and situations. They have a self-referential, almost tautological quality, referring only to the cliché of 'Sarah Lucas' that they create. It may be that embarrassment is, in some circumstances, connected to a withdrawal of the personal. At the point where the subject feels that too much of her self is exposed or given, her embarrassment will effectively derail the situation. The embarrassed self is 'out of play', and marks time with small ineffectual gestures and an averted gaze. Yet at the same time, the display of embarrassment is not an effective withdrawal. Although the embarrassed person may dearly wish to be protected from exposure by a show of impersonality, in fact, the public display of embarrassment reveals a remarkably private aspect of the person. In the intimacy of the blush, the person inescapably gives themselves away to the 'other' who can see something of their image-repertoire and see what it is that they find embarrassing. Perhaps the most that can be said is that embarrassment signals a *desire* for the withdrawal of the personal *and* simultaneously, the public thwarting of that desire.



Billboard commissioned for Chanel 4, London 1999

Lucas's self-portraits suggest an acute awareness of what Russo has termed the 'specifically feminine danger' of being subject to exposure and evaluation. Lucas asks: How to avoid this exposure? How to avoid being pejoratively seen? How to avoid being flesh, having a size, being of a certain age, being female? Her self-portraits suggest a dread of evaluation, a dread of the loss of agency, a dread of the loss of boundaries that are implicit in displays of her own sexuality; not the erotic fantasy kind of sexuality, but the everyday biological reality of it, of being woman, of being magnificent and trivial at the same time, of being excessive. Her images of self could then be said to express refusal, or perhaps wilful confusion of conventional signs of femaleness, or womanliness and certainly of the more dainty notion of femininity. In Lucas's self-portraits, the refusal of conventional signs of womanliness might be understood to offer some protection from 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.

More generally, Lucas's work is not an outright rejection of femaleness, but establishes a pattern of the displacement of femaleness from Lucas herself and images of Lucas, on to other objects. This might be interpreted as a form of *disidentification*, such as Muñoz identifies as a survival strategy enacted by minoritarian identities. The previous chapter discussed disidentification as applicable to the dilemma of the single woman negotiating social institutions of intimacy, here 'woman' is posited as minoritarian, and the specious category 'woman artist' certainly is. Muñoz defines disidentification thus:

Disidentification is about recycling, and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded meaning of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalising and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include and empower minority identities and identifications.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Muñoz, p31.

Lucas's avoidance of womanliness *in her own image* is a disidentificatory double move of acknowledgement of *and* resistance to the ideological norms of self-image 'as a woman'. Her images suggest an elusion of femaleness as a defensive move to avoid it; to avoid being caught out, to avoid being embarrassed. But if elusion is the act of deluding someone; then who? The embarrassment she shrugs off loiters around the edge of the image available to be picked up by the spectator.

## GOT A SALMON ON

*Got a Salmon On # 3* is like a joke that I don't quite get. It invites ridicule, but it also makes the spectator feel slightly ridiculous. In this self-portrait, Lucas appears to usurp the masculine; standing outside a men's public toilet, in a man's jacket (the sleeves are too long, the shoulders too broad).<sup>16</sup> This gives rise to a spectatorial ambivalence; to what Judith Halberstam identifies as a widespread indifference to female masculinity and even that ' . . . this culture generally evinces considerable anxiety about even the prospect of manly women.'<sup>17</sup> Lucas poses as fisherman with her 'catch'. There is no feminine category; fisherwoman, but only fishwife. She further usurps a masculine position in suggesting a blokish jokiness about sexuality. Fisherman's tales always involve estimations of size, bragging and exaggeration

---

<sup>16</sup> The toilet is customarily referred to as 'men's' and the sign 'men' can actually be seen on other photographs taken at the same time (e.g. *Got a Salmon On # 1*). However, the sign directly above Lucas's head in # 3 refers to a disabled toilet which is not specifically gender designated and so is both male and female. The sign reads:

'DISABLED PERSON'S CONVENIENCE The key for the Convenience can be obtained from the Park Attendant in the play area at the rear of the Convenience.' This is, without doubt an interesting point. Foucault, and then Garber are among those writers who have commented on the fact that we are offered a limited choice of facilities; we must be 'men' or 'women' and need to choose which toilet door to enter. Having made a choice, there is still the question of the extent of our accommodation within. The fact that the disabled toilet is *not* gender specific could be read as relevant to Lucas's work, and indeed to this thesis, as embarrassment could be read as a disabling condition. Restrictions of time and space have prevented me from following this curious point.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1998). pxi.

that are equally applicable to sexual equipment and exploits. Whilst the salmon may be considered to reference female genitalia, it is also symbolically and formally phallic. The title puns on 'hard on' and Lucas, po-faced, offers the spectator her big erection.



Fishwife? Sarah Lucas *Got a Salmon On # 3* (1997) from *Self Portraits 1990-1998* Iris print on Somerset Velvet paper: 74x50cm

The unassuming image of Lucas and the fish is a site of conflict between a sexless neutrality and an alternative reading of a ridiculously overdetermined reference to sex and gender that resists clarity and is trapped in the nudge and the wink of innuendo. The fish, plus the punning title seems to be the cause of some embarrassment among commentators. For *Got a Salmon On # 3* Lucas has

recycled the title of an earlier work; *Got a Salmon on (Prawn)* a work that is completely *unambiguous* about gender and refers explicitly to a male erection and ejaculation. 'Salmon on prawn' is, apparently, rhyming slang for 'on the horn'. The syntax and the rhyming slang lend to the titles a salt-of-the-earth working class sentiment, but without the prawn, it seems that the manliness becomes suspect.

Unusually for Lucas's work there is consternation over the clarity of the signs of gender, but it is obviously a sexual reference; that much is abundantly clear. The eponymous salmon, like Lucas, reads as both male and female, and also as just sexual. Comments made on *Got a Salmon on # 3* tend to be brief; Amna Malik notes its maleness.<sup>18</sup> For her, the salmon is ' . . . evoking a sexual innuendo through the image of an erect penis' and Mathew Collings relates it to a previous Lucas fish, the notoriously smelly (and much more working-class) kipper used in *Bitch* (1995) which, in the place of genitalia, hangs from the table-body of a big meloned 'female' figure.



Sarah Lucas *Bitch* (1995)

---

<sup>18</sup> Malik, p35.

Yet another commentator thinks the salmon is 'a pun on the idea of a female erection'.<sup>19</sup> Robecchi, who genders by smell, offers the following peculiarity;

The viewer is not asked to dwell at length on the oddity of a young woman strolling with a salmon past a men's public lavatory . . . It is the combination of smells that brings out the artist's true objective. . . Fish had already made a number of appearances in Lucas's work, but in *Got a Salmon On # 3* its visual function is subordinated to the olfactory. It is an intelligent provocation.<sup>20</sup>

For Gordon Burn, the fish is just ugly; 'Sarah is carrying a heavy ugly grey fish, its tail on her shoulder, its slack mouth suckling her finger.'<sup>21</sup> His comment seems both to transfer the ugliness of the salmon to Lucas and to establish a peculiar and unsettling physical intimacy between the artist and the fish.

Salmon arguably reads as over-sexed but also elite, raising questions of value. The exclusivity of salmon in terms of quality and cost stands apart from the working-class culture sentimentally referenced in much of Lucas's work.<sup>22</sup> Salmon has a prowess and a flashiness that is quite different from, for example, the proletarian hum-drummery of kippers or fried eggs. Natural history programmes have made a convincing case for the virility and fecundity of salmon as creatures who are intensely energetic and single-minded about the need to spawn. For me, this National Geographic image of indomitable fish driven by a deadly sexuality leaping upstream to their spawning grounds overlaps a childhood perception of salmon as something costly that came in tins that were only opened if we had visitors.

---

<sup>19</sup> Manchester, E., [www.londonfoodfilmfiesta.co.uk](http://www.londonfoodfilmfiesta.co.uk) also on [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk) (accessed 31.08.11)

<sup>20</sup> Michele Robecchi, *Sarah Lucas*, ed. Francesco Bonami, Supercontemporary (Milan: Electa, 2007). p57.

<sup>21</sup> Burn, p368.

<sup>22</sup> See Malik's comments on 'Lucas's engagement with a certain moment of post-War English society that was nostalgic for a by-then obsolete working-class culture.' p3.

Lucas looks determined not to spawn. Her expression is not quite blank, she looks a little fierce, a little quizzical. As Collings says, she puts on ‘a look of abstracted anxiety, or frowning blankness instead of looking fluffy or glossy or pleasing.’<sup>23</sup> Her clothes are not just masculine but rather ugly, and unnecessarily thrift-shop utilitarian, without being chic. Gordon Burn writes of the first time he met Lucas:

She was the most concentratedly, even obsessively, dressed-down person there. Not un-fashion or non-fashion or junior bohemian or just fashionably grungy, like many of the others surging around us, but aggressively anti any notion that clothes might do more than provide a cover in which to walk out in public.<sup>24</sup>

But he was entirely wrong in this; clothes for Lucas are not merely a serviceable covering of the naked body, but a sign system, a language that expresses subjectivity. Her clothes are, as Burn later realized; ‘. . . part of her armour – part of the personal mythology she was in the process of constructing for herself’.<sup>25</sup>

Lucas is well aware of the power of dressing and has discussed this in a number of interviews:

Everyone makes his or her appearance into a bit of a language. You know what you mean and you know what you’re avoiding. I’ve always been quite tomboyish. And I’ve always been quite squeamish about what’s intentional and what’s not intentional, with the way clothes are worn, and the potential embarrassment in what you’re saying with them – especially sexy clothes. But even things like shirt-collars and ties – I used to have an aversion to collars and I still don’t wear them much.<sup>26</sup>

In the salmon self-portrait, Lucas’s oversized jacket and polo neck block all signs of femaleness; she is swamped by a drab blokish practicality that in contrast to the

---

<sup>23</sup> Collings, p66.

<sup>24</sup> Burn, p367.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p367.

<sup>26</sup> Collings, p66. See also Burn who quotes Lucas saying: ‘I’ve always had this idea about what people mean by how they dress. I mean, in the detail, men included – like whether they have their shirts done up or not done up, how their collars are, how their tie is in relation to their shirt, and all the nuances about how anybody’s dressed, and what they’re trying to say about themselves.’ Burn, pp378,379.

salmon, is totally sexless (but also like the salmon, is ugly). This image deliberately avoids the gender-bending lad/ladette suggestive appeal of other self-portraits such as the iconic *Fighting Fire With Fire* (1991), which quite knowingly, has a kind of James Dean sexual allure to it, or as Burn puts it; 'boy slag'.<sup>27</sup>



*Fighting Fire With Fire* (1991)



*Self-Portrait with Skull* (1999)

The confusion of gender signage evident in *Got a Salmon On # 3* is not unique. Another of the self-portraits *Self-Portrait with Skull* (1999), for example, has also caused confusion. Lucas has referred to the skull between her open legs as a symbol of female sexuality, Malik and Collings however, read the two eye sockets as testicles. It is particularly telling that her self-portraits can be *misread* in terms of gender when so much of Lucas's other work is about signs of gender, signs that are often hilariously crude but certainly not open to misinterpretation. Lucas explores

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p370.

the difference of sex not as a subjective experience of maleness or of femaleness as a lived condition, not as a performative practice, but rather of the outward signs, that express us in terms of the restrictive either/or gender binary as either 'man' or 'woman'. This has all the subtlety of toilet door pictograms, yet because of their economy, her signs also have the practical elegance, precision and purposefulness of engineering terms of male and female parts.



Sarah Lucas *The Old Couple* (1992)



Sarah Lucas *Au Natural* (1994)

Paradigmatic of Lucas's clear gender signage are works such as *Au Natural* and *The Old Couple*. Lucas uses a selection of natural and man-made items to sex the assemblages in a way that manages to fuse poignancy and black comedy, producing a depiction of the enduring ordinariness of being clearly and definitively gendered. *The Old Couple* is a couple of old chairs, not a matching pair but similar. On the seat of one chair is an erect penis object, actually a wax model of a dildo. This chair is male. Its companion has a pair of false teeth on its seat, and as the 'other' of the couple, the false teeth, open and pink gummed, represent female genitalia. It is impossible to *not* think 'vagina dentata', even as we mentally cross off the anxiety this represents; for these are the teeth of a toothless old woman. And in

the ordinariness of the objects, gender seems stripped of eroticism; it fails to be sexy. It hardly even tries. Its sexuality is of routine and mechanical couplings, redolent of long-stale relationships that are the reality of much of our lives.

*Au Naturel* slumps against the wall. It consists of an old mattress picked out from bed-sit land, or a junk shop, or even found discarded in the street. 'He' is two oranges and a cucumber, 'she', two melons and an old bucket. There is no room for misinterpretation. Malik comments on the un-sexiness of the sex we read in *Au Naturel* and its refusal to depict a 'natural' sexed body.

The absence of any 'self' or 'selves' in *Au Naturel*, . . . destroys any emotional or sentimental connection to the body. The mirroring of a 'self' frequently determines the representation of the body, forging an unconscious identification in the spectator, who sees a distorted image of him or herself in it. *Au Naturel* forces the spectator into a condition of seeing 'sex' only to refuse it, to collapse the categories under which sex, sexuality or gender might be placed.<sup>28</sup>

In 'refusing' sex, or more bluntly refusing the arousal that sexual imagery so often expects of its spectators, the gender signage of works such as *Au Naturel* is almost without emotional weight. Malik finds this troubling, she resists the objectification of the image, declining to find any 'self' in the work, refusing the misogynistic jibe that she has 'a fanny like a bucket'. In her refusal to be represented she conflates morality and feeling; for her, both are absent from this work.

Perhaps what is troubling about Lucas's work, and particularly *Au Naturel*, is that it inserts us into a position of spectatorship that makes us see 'sex' and suggests a chauvinistic objectification of the sex act that lacks any moral opprobrium, There is no implication of guilt or shame, or even embarrassment.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Malik, p7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p23

In this work, the embarrassment, which I would argue is far from entirely absent, is a mild and quite comfortable chagrin. Softened by the humour of the image, embarrassment comes from the all too clear representation of gender as functional; pragmatic rather than erotic.

Why then, given her erstwhile bluntness, are Lucas's images of herself so ambivalent about gender? She has said; 'I never liked being in photographs and I avoided it if at all possible. I thought I looked masculine in a way I didn't always find palatable.'<sup>30</sup> Given Lucas's acknowledged discomfiture with her self-image, the self-portraits are all the more interesting. Discomfiture notwithstanding, she exposes her image (which is quite different from exposing herself) and her expression is primarily one of defiance. She declines to be fluffy, or glossy, or pleasing. She declines to 'give good face'. In this series of images, Lucas acknowledges but also resists the evaluation that is predicated on her exposure, and in this gesture of resistance she resists evaluation not only of self-image, as a woman, but also evaluation of the self-portrait; that is, she resists the evaluation of her work, and in so doing, resists the spurious category, 'woman artist'.

Another comment made by Lucas is provocative when considered in the context of the self-portraits: 'One of the reasons I was interested in the feminine was that I wasn't successful.'<sup>31</sup> Do these images of self explore a particular failure; a correlation of failure and femaleness? The biographical back-story to this comment relates to a period when her then partner Gary Hume's career was flourishing while Lucas's was faltering, and her reading matter at the time was hard-core feminism, notably Andrea Dworkin. Feminism is certainly relevant to her work, but importantly does not drive it. Lucas has said that she did not want to be the one on the

---

<sup>30</sup> Collings, p72.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p22.

soapbox.<sup>32</sup> As Malik notes, Lucas's work is hard to read in terms of a feminist canon; it just doesn't slot in.<sup>33</sup> Whilst her images of self disidentify with womanliness or femininity, her body of work as a whole appears to disidentify with a recognisably feminist position. Her work, particularly in its larky laddishness appears to turn its back on feminism as if refusing to take it seriously, but nevertheless, her work is certainly informed by feminist discourse. Lucas has commented:

I quite like insinuating myself into blokishness, definitely [ . . . ] I do love it. I love all the banter. That's why I would say something spurious, like 'I'm a better bloke than most blokes.' But it adds so much to the work that I do that I'm a woman doing it. And that fascinates me, why it should be so much more powerful because I'm gender-bending, in a way. But it is.<sup>34</sup>

Malik comments that Lucas's assumed 'blokishness', brings 'a self-reflexivity to a masculine working-class culture that is unreflectively enacted by her male counterparts.'<sup>35</sup> If (some of) her works were produced by a man, they might be derided as crass, but *her* gender adds a layer of ambiguity to the sexism that reads as displaced meaning, even if that meaning is not entirely clear. It is perhaps left to the critic or the spectator to supply a feminist reading of their own. Lucas herself, and by proxy the female parts of her sculptures seem to decline to take the feminist position, preferring instead to revel in their own dirty jokes.

Lucas's work has always exploited the tendency to anthropomorphise both natural and man-made objects; she imbues them with life, personality, sexuality, and humour. Some of it is rather sad; it has the tawdry abjection of misogyny, but

---

<sup>32</sup> 'Lucas read all the standard feminist texts . . . and then believing that they could be restricting, or at least overly prescriptive for an artist, abandoned them. 'I've decided I don't want to be the individual who is harping on continuously about a particular issue' she announced more than a decade ago. 'I know someone's got to do that job. I just don't want it to be me.' Burn, p383.

<sup>33</sup> Malik, p38.

<sup>34</sup> Burn, p383.

<sup>35</sup> Malik, p38.

some of the sexuality is very funny in a sea-side postcard way. Lucas commented on the humour aroused by vegetables;

Yeah, that's the way I think most people think a lot of the time. If I go down the Chapel market one day and buy a cucumber, the guy I'm buying it off winks when I'm buying it. Life's imbued with this continual innuendo, especially here. If you're walking along with this bloody great marrow, especially in the summer, people will be winking left right and centre, nudging the person they're with.<sup>36</sup>

The humour of Lucas's work is easy, it exists in the vernacular, and being 'small-time and low-brow,' as if from a music hall heritage, it resists intellectualisation.<sup>37</sup> It also refuses to take the moral high ground on the objectification of women. Her female figures are at times as abject as the archetypal butt of a dirty joke or locker-room jibe. However, in Lucas's oeuvre; misogyny is recycled just as lightly as old tights.

The spectator, historian or critic is of course free to be upset or outraged. Malik, writing 'as a feminist' is uncomfortable with some of Lucas's 'negative' images of women and tries hard to argue a case that her works 'complicate how we understand both cultural and intellectual shame'.<sup>38</sup> She struggles with her own spectatorial embarrassment, and finds that she cannot look *without* evaluation from a feminist and intellectual standpoint. She asks:

How can I write about these images [the tabloid works] without appearing condescending and patronising towards the readers of the newspapers from which they come, and exposing my prejudices about what being a woman means? [ . . . ] In acknowledging my prejudices I must admit to my shame at being faced with the limitations of my liberal politics as a woman and as a feminist.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. pp64,65.

<sup>37</sup> Collings, p19.

<sup>38</sup> Malik, p59.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp59,60.

Malik's discomfort exemplifies how Lucas successfully displaces evaluation embarrassment onto the spectator. Unless we are able to shrug-off the larky-misogyny the seeming-shalowness of meaning goads the spectator or critic into a *more* political, *more* feminist, *more* moralistic standpoint that seems to miss the humour of her work

James Putnam asked Lucas in interview:

JP: Do you think that the way that people appreciate your work is linked to that slight embarrassment or repression about open sexuality?

SL: Yeah, I do definitely.

JP: 'Do you see people's embarrassed reactions to some of the sexual references in your work as also having a humorous element?'<sup>40</sup>

Her answer is that yes, she sees both embarrassment and humour in the making of her work and then in other people's reactions to it. Her account of the embarrassment of artistic production, the self-doubt, the hesitation and the misgivings about artistic integrity echo the comments made by Gilbert & George on their work. They are sometimes embarrassed by its daftness and pointlessness, but they do it anyway, and once done, it *is* art and the embarrassment dissipates.<sup>41</sup>

Lucas recounted her feelings of being watched at work at an art fair where she was making sculptures using vegetables. She felt self-conscious at being observed, and filled with doubt about whether or not the work was 'any good', and also disconcerted by the vulgarity of the vegetables. She said:

---

<sup>40</sup> James Putnam, "The Freud Museum: Sarah Lucas in Conversation with Curator James Putnam" (accessed 29.08.11). [www.freud.org.uk/exhibitions/10019/the-pleasure-principle/](http://www.freud.org.uk/exhibitions/10019/the-pleasure-principle/) (accessed 01.09.11)

<sup>41</sup> Gilbert & George describe their working methods; 'So when we have an idea such as doing the *New Horny Pictures* (2000) or drinking sculptures, if you think about it for four or five minutes, you'll reject the work because it's awkward, silly or embarrassing. But if you do it, if you drag yourself out there and the pictures are done and they've been coloured and then they're being exhibited, suddenly they become the most normal things in the world.' Obrist, pp72-74.

Just the rudeness of it became excruciatingly embarrassing for me. But then I observed some of these people's, particularly women's, immediate reactions to the finished works. They just laughed their heads off, with both embarrassment and enjoyment. So my reaction is just the same as anyone else's.<sup>42</sup>

This comment is unexpectedly revealing. I have argued that Lucas's *dis*identification with the ideological category of woman is evident in her self-portraits. And that in refusing the category 'woman', she also refuses the dubious label of 'woman artist'. And, that her 'blokieness' manifests as a refusal to occupy a feminist position. And that, cumulatively, these refusals are a strategy of self-protection, of making herself unreadable, and thus impervious to evaluation and evaluation embarrassment. However, in the comment quoted above, Lucas registers that her reaction to the embarrassment sometimes generated by her work is on a par with the response of others, and particularly other women. In the ability to mitigate (and even take pleasure in) embarrassment through a shared sense of humour, there is a form of female solidarity, perhaps even of feminism in evidence. But it is a feminism that relies on neither politics, nor militancy, nor intellectual credentials to establish its position. Despite Lucas herself being knowledgeable on feminist discourse, her work appears to reject the feminism of the well-read, white, middle-classes in favour of a more proletarian solidarity. In its uncomplicated pleasure it is perhaps the mother of laddish humour.

In the way that Lucas portrays femaleness, displaced on to objects which are self-deprecating, sometimes abject, sometimes 'game for a laugh' she totally reverses the defensive position of the self-portraits and the elusion of gender they project. Works such as *Bitch* and *Au Naturel* are unequivocal; here there is no masquerade, no mask, no hide and seek. Her portrayal of femaleness in the objects is

---

<sup>42</sup> Putnam. (accessed 01.09.11)

unguarded, without glamour, apology, or explanation, and has nothing to do with what Malik terms 'cultural and intellectual shame'.<sup>43</sup> For Lucas 'female' may be a site of embarrassment, *but not of shame*.



Sarah Lucas *Fat, Forty and Flab-ulous* (1990)

This is particularly evident in the case of her tabloid works, such as *Sod You Gits* and *Fat, Forty and Flab-ulous*, where she exhibits enlargements of pages from low-rent red-top the *Sport*. Whole pages are reproduced by photocopying, without intercession or mediation, resulting in works that are deceptively cheap and lazy. The 'only' things Lucas changes are size and context. The articles are frequently about women; the women are objectified, and commodified, and yet they *also* joyously, defiantly, outlandishly, *shamelessly* celebrate female sexuality. Lucas's intentions are obscure; comment, critique and interpretation of these works are the province of the spectator. The only thing certainly up for evaluation is spectatorial response, and Lucas, unlike Freud, never spoils her jokes by explaining them.

<sup>43</sup> Malik, p59.

## CODPIECE

The gender ambivalence of Lucas's self-portraiture has some correspondence with cross-dressing as an overlaying of one sign on another, thus compromising legibility. In *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber writes on clothing as a system of signification, which declares associations and affiliations to certain groupings of gender, class, occupation, taste, and political allegiance. They can of course just as well proclaim *dis*association. Some 'vestimentary codes' are easily legible, some are self-consciously discrete; a matter of being in the know. Garber is largely concerned with cross-dressing as part of a gay or lesbian identity, but as she acknowledges, some instances 'seem to belong to quite different lexicons of self-definition and political and cultural display.'<sup>44</sup> In Lucas's case, this is straight but far from straightforward. Her mannishness does not exhibit the 'category crisis' that marks the true cross-dresser, but it is sufficient to derail binary concepts of 'male' and 'female'. The spectator is refused the comfortable basis on which to make customary evaluations.

Garber draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis to suggest that; 'the transvestite is the equivalent of Lacan's third term, not 'having' or 'being' the phallus, but 'seeming', or 'appearing', and that such 'seeming' acts both to mask reality and also to protect it.'<sup>45</sup> A Lacanian 'seeming' is immediately recognizable in the impulses that produce Muñoz's 'disidentification' as a strategy to negotiate hegemonic norms; both masking and protecting the subject by destabilizing normative evaluations. In the spectatorial response to Lucas's refusal of conventional signs of womanliness, and

---

<sup>44</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997). p5. See also Halberstam, *Queer Masculinity*, p9. 'Sometimes female masculinity coincides with the excesses of male supremacy, and sometimes it codifies a unique form of social rebellion; often female masculinity is the sign of sexual alterity, but occasionally it marks heterosexual variation; sometimes female masculinity marks the place of pathology, and every now and then it represents the healthful alternative to what are considered the histrionics of conventional femininities.'

<sup>45</sup> Garber, p121.

the spectatorial failure to see beyond a normative and naturalised gender binary, is there is a tendency to inflect 'seeming' with a pejorative meaning of deception? Is the spectator inclined to accuse Lucas of deception; of meaning something more, something else, so that if there was more meaning, we might 'get it'?

Is Lucas using her salmon as a codpiece? Is she 'seeming' to have something she lacks in order to protect herself from a potentially embarrassing evaluation of her worth 'as a woman'? She displays her salmon as a sign of phallic potency, but it smells fishy, suggesting that her fish is a sign of sex *and* suspicion, and this salmon, as Lucas's codpiece signals not only the psychoanalytic convolution of lack *and* lack of lack, but also the importance of humour in diffusing embarrassment. Collings makes a similar point: 'The fish is a derogatory comment on femininity as well as a classic phallic symbol. But a woman is making the joke, plus the fish is a whopper, and look – she isn't even horrified!'<sup>46</sup>

Garber riffs on the multivalent readings of the gender signage of the codpiece. Its meanings include cock and balls, but also; 'hoax, fool, pretence or mock.'<sup>47</sup> So the codpiece is a sign of overdetermined phallic ostentation, but also a piece of tomfoolery, a ruse, a pun, a prosthesis, a joke-shop phallus, a nod and a wink towards a theatrical masculinity. The salmon, like a codpiece, is 'for show' and like my mother's tinned salmon, for showing off. The codpiece, like the salmon, invites *and* complicates (e)valuation. Each is a mark of Lacanian 'seeming' without meaning much. Interestingly, the gender ambivalence of the codpiece is not a

---

<sup>46</sup> Collings, p68.

<sup>47</sup> Garber's etymology of cod: "Cod' – as in codpiece. *Eric Partridge's Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* defines 'cod' as 'the scrotum', or in plural, 'the testicles'. Since 1690 (that is after Shakespeare) 'cod' has also meant 'a fool'. In its verbal form, 'to cod' is 'to chaff, hoax, humbug; to play the fool'. Adjectivally, it connotes 'burlesque; especially *cod acting*, as in acting a Victorian melodrama as though it were a post-1918 farce or burlesque.' Since 1965, Partridge adds, 'it has been used colloquially for 'pretence, or mock' – e.g., *cod German, cod Russian.*' *Garber*, p125.

source of anguish. Perhaps due to its theatrical heritage, it is more of a piece with comedy than with tragedy, thus it plays to the minor emotions rather than the grand passions.

## **FREUD AND THE MASCULINITY COMPLEX**

The salmon, in *Got a Salmon On*, both dead and oversexed seems to invite a Freudian reading. It is as if this fish has appeared in a dream and requires interpretation.<sup>48</sup> It is as if it *must* mean something; as if it has perhaps some repressed association that we are 'too tightly laced' to bring directly to mind. Despite his synonymy with a patriarchal world view, Freud is an important thinker on gender difference, even and especially for feminists. And I would argue that Freudian psychoanalytic theory offers a productive approach to Lucas's work, not with the intention of 'teasing out a hidden neurotic content' or of applying some cod-psychoanalysis to decoding either the art or the artist, but as a framework to further examine the embarrassment of gender suggested by her work, and also to consider embarrassment as a female complaint.<sup>49</sup>

'Freud' is not without its own difficulties. The failure of psychoanalytic theory to demonstrate any sound basis is, according to some, a far-reaching intellectual embarrassment. Accused of phallogentrism, dubious scientific credentials, and being no more than specious fair-ground hooey, the long running, extremely wordy

---

<sup>48</sup> It brings to mind the butcher's wife: "I wanted to give a supper-party, but I had nothing in the house but a little smoked salmon." Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans., A. A. Brill (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997 (first published 1932)).

<sup>49</sup> An objective account of psychoanalytic theory as a resource for feminist art history is given by Griselda Pollock who recommends it as uniquely suited to 'thinking with and about sexual difference'. Griselda Pollock, ed. *Psychoanalysis and the Image* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006).(p4) The extended preface is available at [www.leeds.ac.uk/cath/publications](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/cath/publications) (accessed 12.09.2009)

and ill-tempered arguments have been dubbed 'the Freud wars'. Although the principles and techniques of psychoanalysis and its histories have been subject to a thoroughgoing dismantling, yet *still* its hold on us is strong and Freud is not easily dismissed. Psychoanalysis has informed a great deal of twentieth-century thought and many prominent thinkers from Althusser to Žižek have been analysts and/or analysands making it disconcerting to speculate that much of the intellectual structure of the twentieth-century turns out to be a house of cards based on fiction and fraud. We continue to cite Freudian theory out of habit, or intellectual hubris; 'masters by association, we are encouraged by a culture of theory to rub our intellectual projects against Freud or, even more likely nowadays, against 'Freudians' like Jacques Lacan.'<sup>50</sup> So firstly, there is the legacy of intellectual investment that we cannot afford to discard, and secondly, a sentimental attachment to therapy; we want to be cured. We cannot seem to shake off the persistent belief that there is something about the self, some hidden core that can be revealed, and is worth revealing, and that psychoanalysis is the key. So, an attachment to Freud or at least Freudiana survives because both the theory and the therapy satisfy an embarrassing narcissism.

In 2000, against a background of the skirmishes of the Freud Wars, the relationship between Lucas's imagery and Freud's imaginary was cemented with an exhibition at the Freud Museum called, after Freud's text and Lucas's sculpture; 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. This juxtaposition suggests how Freudian psychoanalysis might prove useful in relation to Lucas's work because of its potential to theorise the displacement of gender that is intrinsic to Lucas's work as a source of *displaced* embarrassment.

---

<sup>50</sup> Todd Dufresne, *Killing Freud: Twentieth Century Culture and the Death of Psychoanalysis* (London: Continuum, 2003). pviii.



Freud



Lucas<sup>51</sup>

Freud did not actually cause embarrassment to be female, but the concept of woman as excessive and feeble is something he is credited with authoring. The science he invented, or perhaps more emotively, the pseudo-science he fathered rationalises the 'failure' of woman as a failure that originates in sub-standard genital equipment; we are born faulty. Many of the problems, the discontents, the dissatisfactions, *the embarrassments* of being female, according to Freud, stem from being, and being seen to be quite literally without a phallus. Furthermore, Freud's 'invention' of penis envy is, or so he argued, the root cause of women's tendency to be ruled by their emotions. Character traits attributed to penis envy include 'narcissism, vanity, and shame, as well as jealousy and envy itself.'<sup>52</sup> Freud almost never used the word embarrassment (save only in relation to parapraxis),

---

<sup>51</sup> Lucas, S., *Prière de Toucher* (2000) C-type print 297x178mm

<sup>52</sup> Frederick C. Crews, ed. *Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend* (New York: Viking, 1998). p137.

dealing instead in the heavier and more moralistic 'shame'. But it seems self-evident that he would, if it were not beneath his notice, have included embarrassment in his list of women's emotional foibles.

In his essay 'Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man', Malcolm Macmillan, an anti-Freudian and psychoanalytic dissenter, writes:

No aspect of Freud's work has aroused more objection than his treatment of female psychology. And understandably so, since the burden of his theory was the self-evident superiority of male to female sex organs, once perceived by little girls, sends them into a lifetime's worth of devious and dependent behaviour that can only retard the true (masculine) work of civilization. Freud apparently never budged from that position or worried about its suspicious congruence with the misogyny of his time.<sup>53</sup>

Freud was inconvenienced by women; they did not fit his theory. He had to write around them to produce convoluted and unconvincing 'girlish variants' of the Oedipus complex in an attempt to account for the development of female psychosexuality. Macmillan comments; 'Not even Freud himself was altogether proud of the result, but the embarrassment has long since become general and far more extreme.'<sup>54</sup>

Within a schema that considered women as congenitally inferior in both physical and mental capacity, Freud theorised a wishful *displacement* of (female) gender. He observed and recorded a clinical condition amongst some of his female patients (including his youngest daughter Anna) that manifested as the adoption of a masculine persona, not in real life, but in their imagination. Through this fantasy of being not a man, but man-ish, 'the girl' was able to evade the impediment of her

---

<sup>53</sup> Crews, p129

<sup>54</sup> Crews, ed.(p129)

own sexuality. He theorised that this condition, which he termed 'the masculinity complex', was symptomatic of a restless dissatisfaction with the incompleteness and inadequacy of the female gender as a faulty copy of the masculine.

Freud did not connect the female patients' assumption of a masculine role in fantasies and daydreams with masculinised behaviour or homosexuality. On the contrary, he saw it as an escape from sexuality; 'the girl escapes from the demands of the erotic side of her life altogether. She turns herself in fantasy into a man, without herself becoming active in a masculine way, and is no longer anything but a spectator at the event which has the place of the sexual act.'<sup>55</sup>

In Freud's 'masculinity complex', we can identify a prototype for Lacan's 'seeming' and even Muñoz's 'disidentification', and might furthermore draw some connection with Riviere's 'masquerade' as an act of compensation for the lack of 'normal' female attributes of incompleteness and inadequacy. Each strategy, albeit in differing ways, addresses the perceived biological and sociocultural shortcomings of the female gender and its negative evaluations as a *negotiable* obstacle, one that might be escaped (even if only in fantasy), and I would argue that Lucas's elusion of female gender, or more precisely the image of her own femaleness, characteristic of her 'mannish' self-portraits, is just such an act of escape.

In Lucas's self-portraits, mannishness is an escape from gender and by extension from sexuality as criteria for evaluation, and thus it is a prophylactic against embarrassment, the embarrassment of being female; incomplete and always available for evaluation by means of 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. In her self-portraits, Lucas appropriates 'mannishness', not in order to appear as a man, but to overwrite the signs of femininity by which a woman is summarily judged, that is, judged 'by her cover' on the basis of appearance. Lucas's gender ambivalence, generally

---

<sup>55</sup> Young-Bruehl, p107. In her account of this complex Young-Bruehl cites Freud's 1919 Essay "A Child is Being Beaten".

evident in her series of self-portraits and, in particular fronted by her codpiece, (the salmon) suggests that we cannot evaluate her in terms of *either* male achievement or female appearance. She declines to give good face.

Relating to the subject of the 'masculinity complex' Anna Freud wrote the following:

The patient felt that the fact that she was a girl prevented her from achieving her ambitions and, at the same time, that she was not even a pretty enough girl really to be attractive to men. In her disappointment with herself she displaced her wishes onto objects who she felt were better qualified to fulfil them.<sup>56</sup>

Whilst Anna Freud writes here of a patient she was analysing, there is evidence that she was referring *also* to herself, and her two sessions of analysis with her father, Sigmund. And whilst Anna Freud intends 'objects' to refer to other persons (both male and female), in Lucas's work, the 'objects' fulfilling displaced wishes are quite literally objects, but objects that are saturated with anthropomorphic meaning and gender signage. The conflation of femaleness and lack of success that Anna Freud writes of reverberates with the comment made by Lucas that her interest in the feminine is directly related to her (then) lack of success. In each statement, the two categories; femaleness and failure are tightly knotted, as are exposure and evaluation, and hurt and 'true'.

It is my contention that in her self-portraits, Lucas both draws attention to, and perhaps comes to terms with, the particularly female embarrassment of exposure, of 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. Lucas in fact 'faces up' to the exposure that is the lot of 'woman' (and also of celebrity) of being taken at 'face value'. But her evasion of womanliness in self-portraiture is also a strategy that refuses the embarrassment of evaluation. The gender ambivalence denies the spectator the capacity to know and

---

<sup>56</sup> Freud, A. *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936) cited in Young-Bruehl, p129.

so to act; to judge. This ambivalence might be said to function not so much as a carapace that protects her exposure, but as a void that suspends evaluation. The embarrassment that Lucas evades becomes displaced; in the case of the self-portraits, some of the displaced embarrassment may become the embarrassment of the spectator. Elsewhere in her work the embarrassment of being sexed is *already displaced*, that is, displaced onto her objects. Objects and assemblages such as *Bitch*, the female half of *Au Naturel*, and the passive, leggy, bunny chairs present femaleness as always already compromised by negative evaluations.



Sarah Lucas *Bunny* (1997)

## THE MISSING PIECE

One comment on Sarah Lucas's work is made over and over. There seems to be something missing as if there were an ellipsis somewhere in the image. Lucas's work has furthermore been described as 'withholding' and 'aphoristic'.<sup>57</sup> This is not a reference to death, or absence. It involves no sentimental longing for something

---

<sup>57</sup> 'Sarah Lucas's approach to her work is similarly withholding, equally aphoristic:' Burn, p369.

to complete it and make it, or her, whole. It is more a case of 'it' being not all there. If 'it' was not missing, the spectator, or especially the critic, who is conditioned to find meaning in art might be more secure in their claim to 'get it'. It can be an embarrassment to not get it, betraying a lack of 'cultural capital' that may manifest as naivety, stupidity, poor education, poor taste, social *faux pas*, or lack of street cred; it leaves us *feeling foolish*. As Phillips writes:

We know when there is something we are not getting even if we don't always know what it is. But whatever the 'it' is – the joke, the point, the poem – we would rather get it. And this definite preference is a clue about the ways we want, and the ways we are educated to want.<sup>58</sup>

What exactly is missing in Lucas's work is unclear, but there is a feeling that the missing piece would have, could have, supplied critical information enabling the spectator or the critic to make more sense of the work, enabling them to confirm their uncertain reading and to ascribe to the work some intellectual depth. If the work is merely shallow, then spectatorial investment is intellectually embarrassing, but if we believe it to have depth, to have meaning and therefore value, the spectator may be equally embarrassed by the fragility of her claims to knowledge.

In search of depth, Lucas's work is frequently discussed in arthistorical frames of reference, notably *arte povera*, minimalism and surrealism, comparisons are also routinely made with Warhol and Duchamp. All of these comparisons furnish seemingly valid connections that turn out to be critical dead ends. Perry suggests that Lucas's work; 'has been seen by some as gesturing towards postmodern and feminist concerns, but ultimately saying nothing and resisting serious analytical exploration.'<sup>59</sup> And Stallabrass asks; 'Why does critical theory bounce off this

---

<sup>58</sup> Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012). p37.

<sup>59</sup> Gill Perry, ed. *Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's Practice* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004). p16.

work?'<sup>60</sup> As each of these commentators suspect, it is certainly not because of a lack of critical input. Lucas's make-do, low-rent materials, tabloid-style vernacular, and philistine attitude are balanced by a thorough, but thoroughly invisible theoretical backbone.

There 'seems' to be, in the Lacanian sense, with that 'seeming' suspended somewhere between 'being' and 'having', a great deal of theory at play in Lucas's work. A string of isms; feminism, post-modernism, deconstructionism, and symbolism are invisibly present. Stallabrass concedes that; 'Despite appearances, then, theory is certainly not absent from Lucas's work: indeed, her entire oeuvre would be impossible without its insights.'<sup>61</sup> But the spectator is frustrated; the capacity to know is restricted, the spectator is 'without' knowledge. Knowing, *really* knowing, is withheld, and to not know is experienced almost as a sexual frustration, or a state of incapacity and inferiority, like a child, or a woman. ' . . . and not getting it here means being confounded, being undone, being diminished . . . he is left feeling that his agency, or rather his desire, is confused or compromised, or even stolen from him . . .'<sup>62</sup> To not know, to not be 'in the know' is to be unmanned; embarrassed.

The evasion of meaning in Lucas's work reads as symptomatic of the degree of embarrassment that she feels about being exposed and evaluated through the critique of her work. This is a problem that is compounded in the customary confixing of art and artist; both are exposed, both are evaluated. The something-missing-ness of Lucas's work in general, operates in the same way as the genderlessness of her self-portraits; it rebuffs evaluation, transferring the

---

<sup>60</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite* (London: Verso, 1999). p95.

<sup>61</sup> Stallabrass, p94

<sup>62</sup> Phillips, *Missing Out*, p52.

embarrassment of being seen/judged back onto the disadvantaged spectator whose capacity to know is restricted. And Lucas is giving nothing away.

I'm not trying to put forward something. I'm trying to avoid a lot of things. I try to be fairly neutral, in the same way that I try to find a neutral table for a piece of work.<sup>63</sup>

And yet another comment from Lucas;

In the end an important part of making those pieces for me was deciding not to be judged. That decision actually freed me. I'm not judged and I don't have to be limited even by my own judgements.<sup>64</sup>

In looking for the missing piece, the spectator and the critic scan the iconography in a game of hide and seek that is schooled in Freudiana if not actually in Freud.

There is a spectatorial inclination to 'see' something missing as a hole or gap that has meaning. The spectator is inclined to 'see' what isn't there, to read something into the gap, to uncover 'hidden' meaning. The spectator sees the gap, the ellipsis as somehow concrete assigning to it a greater intentionality and significance than that of mere nothingness. In this attribution of import, the spectator must take some responsibility for the gap, for what they *don't* see; it is their gap and their missing piece that they imagine filling it and thus it is their exposure that is now vulnerable to evaluation.<sup>65</sup>

Lucas's tactics of ambivalence, and neutrality, and withholding, her habitual economy of gesture, effectively turn the tables on the spectator, who must, in the final account, take responsibility for interpretation and meaning, and perhaps, for feeling something. If exposure and evaluation are the twin peaks of embarrassment, they become *our* problem not hers. If Lucas's objects, the fish, the light bulbs, false teeth, fag ends, and fruit make us think we see sex everywhere,

---

<sup>63</sup> Burn, pp378,379.

<sup>64</sup> From an interview with Marco Spinelli, Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, Brilliant! New Art from London (1995) cited in, Stallabrass, p95.

<sup>65</sup> See also a similar point made by Mieke Bal in Pollock, p53.

Lucas-as-object in her self-portraits cautions that maybe we don't actually see sex or sexuality; it's all in the head. The last word on finding (any) meaning in her work must go to Lucas; 'I'm saying nothing. Just look at the picture and think what you like.'<sup>66</sup>



Sarah Lucas at work

---

<sup>66</sup> Stallabrass, p64.

## **Chapter Seven (Conclusion):**

### **Outcome: Towards a critical epistemology of embarrassment**

Whenever I attempt to 'analyse' a text that has given me pleasure, it is not my 'subjectivity' I encounter but my 'individuality', the given which makes my body separate from other bodies and appropriates its suffering or its pleasure.

Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup>

---

Through the analysis of a series of loosely connected encounters with contemporary art, this thesis cumulatively builds a critical epistemology of embarrassment. Piece by piece it accrues a particular and contextual knowledge gained through attention to the marginalia of spectatorship and a sometimes imaginary rapport with the subject matter. The encounters have for the most part been personal and based on my own experience; in fact, the very personal and indeed subjective nature of embarrassment has been acknowledged as a productive limitation, and adopted throughout as a praxis. My encounters with art, which I offered from the outset as a romance, leave me bruised. Each in its own way is a one-off; each encounter is like a one-night stand, and as Ridout remarks; 'Is not the pleasure of a one-night stand always bought at the cost of a certain embarrassment?'<sup>2</sup>

The episodic nature of the various encounters has formed the framework of chapters; each an exploration of the feelings aroused, and an engagement with the various theoretical and critical discourses that underlie such feelings. The romance

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans., Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975). p62.

<sup>2</sup> Ridout, p79.

of the episodes, suggested as a romance by Tomkins, has been an ill-matched affair between the slight and imprecise feeling-ness of embarrassment and the abstract power of theory, supposed as having more strength and authority than feeling.

Because embarrassment hurts, all our natural impulses are to avoid it, so when Gilbert and George claim this to be a 'good feeling' there is a suggestion of perversity that this research project has sought to understand. A further aim has been to validate, not embarrassment itself, which must remain disprised, but the subjective 'truth' of the knowledge, and indeed self-knowledge that embarrassment imparts. The embarrassment of the text has proved to be elusive and unpredictable, but this series of studies has shown that it might be found in the peripheral, the overlooked, the disavowed, in attending to the unintentional. Embarrassment has been found not to reside exactly in the text, nor in its spectator (though either may be predisposed towards embarrassment or embarrassability), but to be found in and around the moment of the encounter; perhaps in a moment of stickiness, unscheduled and inappropriate. And at first glance, this moment is seemingly unproductive because it interrupts and displaces the conventional spectator-text response. But its value lies precisely in its disruptiveness, a quality that is neither easily anticipated, nor amenable to theorisation. It is in the nature of embarrassment to be personal, to be marginal, and to be singular. These qualities make embarrassment resistant to an orthodox project of generalisation, but contribute to a remarkable form of embodied criticality.

Embarrassment is personal. And the critical epistemology of embarrassment returns always to instances of the singular. It is a form of knowledge that resides in the empirical and is resistant to the broad sweep of theorization; it is non-transferable, and unsuited to the collectivity of politics. It is about an inimitable

moment of aversive self-consciousness, when the self is singled out; exposed and evaluated. In its singularity embarrassment is positioned as being in opposition to inclusiveness. The feeling of embarrassment is experienced as a sense of exclusion from communities of competence and composure. It is a feeling that manifests as being 'without'; and I have adopted 'without' as a Barthesian amphibology; a word that means two things and insists on meaning both at once, 'as if one were winking at the other and as if the word's meaning were in that wink'.<sup>3</sup> And so, embarrassment, as a feeling of a 'withoutness', of both 'outside' and 'lack' is a feeling of an *inadequate* singularity.

This final chapter draws together the strands of knowledge generated in the preceding episodes; knowledge of a weak theory, a weak method, and an uncomfortable embodied truth and how each underpins the singularity of embarrassment. The conclusion offered by this thesis is that embarrassment, as an embodied criticality, is critical of coercive ideologies at work in the construction and constructedness of situations of 'withoutness'; such as without competence or without composure. I am embarrassed by my exclusion from institutions of intimacy, from coteries of cultural competence, from spaces of gay male pleasure. I am embarrassed by my lack of clear understanding; I am not '*in the know*'. Such situations may be experienced quite literally as exclusion from some form of collectivity, but embarrassment may also be perversely present in uncomfortable situations of inclusion, and this in no way eradicates the feeling of singularity; of being singled out. Embarrassments of being and belonging, and of not being, and not belonging, though seemingly contradictory, are actually of a piece. Sometimes belonging is only provisional, or it is restrictive, or too costly to maintain. Sometimes it is embarrassing to belong. I am embarrassed to be counted in, amongst the sentimental, although I *am* sentimental (and Bersani is embarrassed to be counted

---

<sup>3</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p72.

as sentimental because he is not). The feeling is sometimes about being on the wrong side of some seemingly arbitrary fence or boundary as if there were a lack of resolution over the terms of inclusion, perhaps even the very terms of subjectivity.

## A BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

A critical epistemology of embarrassment is in a sense, not a theory of knowledge, but a 'body of knowledge'. The body (in a non-Cartesian sense)<sup>4</sup> is the scope and subject of embarrassment. What can be known is generated here, and grounded here. The body enfolds our inner self of *le privé* and frames the public face of our image, but the outer limit of this body extends beyond the skin that can blush to encompass what might be termed the 'social skin', an interface between the self and all that it encounters.<sup>5</sup> 'Social skin' is sometimes too tight, or itchy, or out of fashion, mine has no pockets. The encounters with art detailed in the previous chapters have attended to the thinking and feeling body and provided a microcosm of the experience of 'social skin'. Art has the capacity to get right to the nub of the matter; it has the capacity to matter to us, to get right under our skin.

In *Thinking Through the Body*, Gallop posits that the splitting of mind and body is a 'cruel disorganisation' and tries repair this division and also to reconfigure 'the split between public and private which keeps our lives out of our knowledge'.<sup>6</sup> Within a

---

<sup>4</sup> I understand 'body' in this context to be whole rather than split into the thinking mind and its carcass of the unthinking life support system.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase 'social skin' is borrowed from Sara Ahmed who uses it in the context of being uncomfortable; she writes; 'I know that feeling too well, the sense of out-of place-ness and estrangement involves an acute awareness of the surface of one's body, which appears as a surface, when one cannot inhabit the social skin which is shaped by some bodies and not others.' Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p148.

<sup>6</sup> Gallop here cites and builds on the work of Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born; motherhood as experience and institution* (1976) Jane Gallop, *Thinking through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). p4.

project of predicating knowledge on bodily experience, she considers a psychologically inflected art criticism that my approach has approximated.

To face a work of art, or any other sort of object, with the identity of a psychoanalytic critic, is to offset one's sense of uncertainty, ignorance and insufficient understanding with the authority of a body of knowledge, a history of connoisseurship that traces back to Freud's knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

And whilst Gallop seems initially to invoke the 'body of knowledge' of all of Freud's psychoanalytic theory and its continuation in the work of Freudians, suggesting that we might offset feelings of ignorance or uncertainty by relying on the authority of a 'body of knowledge' as a corpus of theory, in another sense, to trace back to 'Freud's knowledge' is to acknowledge its origination in the body of Sigmund, so that the 'body of knowledge' might be considered to be subject to the limitations of embodiment, and how and what 'Freud' knew was limited to what Sigmund felt and what Sigmund thought.

In fact, Gallop goes on to propose that we might 'read Freud not so much for his knowledge of subjectivity as for the imprint of his own subjectivity upon his pursuit of knowledge.'<sup>8</sup> So perhaps 'Freud's knowledge' should call to mind an empirical knowledge, an experiential knowledge that, takes into account the linked seeing/knowing (*voir/savoir*) that is *personal*, subjective and embodied. This of course, suggests a limited knowledge, but one that we can count on to be, within its limited context, 'true'. That limitation of what can be known, of a 'body of knowledge' and indeed the limitedness of embarrassment as something brief in duration and minor in register have been considered here as a form of marginalism envisaged as a productive limitation that confines attention to the empiricism of thinking-feeling.

---

<sup>7</sup> Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, p136.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p3.

*But what of the body that can't be known, or the body that denies all knowledge? The ambiguity of gender of Sarah Lucas's self-portraits has been considered as a cause of some embarrassment. Not an embarrassment of ambiguous gender per se, but specifically, it is the not-knowing that is spectatorially problematical. The spectator is not 'in the know'. The hyper-gendered/ultra-neuter nature of her work leaves the spectator feeling the necessity to read something into a perceived ellipsis; to fill in the gaps. But in doing this, I stumble over a moment of knowing/not-knowing, and leap to conclusions that I can't quite make. Rather than enjoying what Sedgwick terms the 'privilege of unknowing', I suffer the privation of (not)knowing too much. I am embarrassed by the fragility or even fraudulence of my claims to knowledge.*

## **BODY OF KNOWLEDGE: (i) WEAK THEORY**

This thesis has proposed that although embarrassment is broadly resistant to theorisation, a 'theory of embarrassment' can be envisaged in so far as it meets the criteria established by Silvan Tomkins for a 'weak theory' of negative affect. In Chapter Two attempts to theorise the embarrassment of Jemima Stehli's *Strip* using existentialism and anecdote both failed on their own terms due to their blind-spots, but both managed to account for some of the embarrassment of *Strip* precisely though their limitations. The idea of a limit that curtails generalisation is central to 'weak theory' which is restricted in its application and not extensively transferrable. What a weak theory of affect achieves is a narrative of event that accounts effectively for the feeling it causes, its circumstances and implications, and what truth it tells. The theory is weak only in its extent. As a weak theory, it does not account well for other, different events, which each have their own tale and their own truth. The connection we can draw between separate incidents is tentative. There

may be a likeness that Sedgwick refers to as 'textured analogy' but the threads of similitude are fragile and not able to sustain the generalising tendencies of a stronger, more abstract theory.

A weak theory of embarrassment can be seen to have been effective throughout the chapters; it both connects them and holds them apart. Each event requires its own detailed description and evaluation; threads of similitude can be drawn, but the knowledge gained is limited in its transferability. Adam Phillips argues that from a psychological perspective, all emotional experience is limited in this way;

The contingent self is a weak epistemologist because it knows only one thing, and it is a paradoxical kind of knowledge. It knows that all emotional experience is new at every moment, and since all our equipment to prepare ourselves for the future comes from the past, it is redundant and ironic.<sup>9</sup>

Each separate encounter demonstrated that I was unable to anticipate embarrassment (and so avoid it) using previous knowledge.

*I approached Howells' 14 Stations expecting to be embarrassed by issues of risk and intimacy foregrounded by the performance, but I was not embarrassed. And then unexpectedly, awkwardly I experienced a quite different embarrassment that was located in another dimension altogether. I was unmoved by the nudity, confession, pain and participation, but the sentimentality of the work caught me with my pants down, causing me to confront my own narrative history and a younger self that haunts it. The embarrassment was slight and slippery. It was not at all what I had expected and not where I expected it to be.*

---

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, *On Flirtation*, p21. The claim made by Phillips is however, not necessarily true. Tomkins considers that some emotions actually build strong theory; he gives the example of humiliation which produces a strong negative affect theory which marshals the experience of humiliation in extensive anticipation of further humiliations. See. Tomkins cited in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p134.

To be effective then, a theory of embarrassment *must* be weak. It needs to be loose, porous to event, and above all tentative. To capture the singularity of the feeling, it must be rooted in individualism and empirical particularity. Weak theory may be absolutely effective, but only in singular instances. The truth it offers to tell is not one of typicality or generality, but is nevertheless 'true'.

## **BODY OF KNOWLEDGE: (ii) WEAK TRUTH CLAIMS**

One of the values that might be ascribed to embarrassment is that of telling, or perhaps exposing something that is true. In Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, Hotspur invokes an old maxim that links truth to shame;

And I can teach thee, coz, to shame the devil  
By telling truth: tell truth and shame the devil.<sup>10</sup>

If embarrassment is a minor shame, then its truth is a minor truth; not less true, but true in a minor context. It is a subjective truth, singularly true, and experienced bodily. Gilbert & George have stated; 'We are very embarrassed sometimes at what we are doing, and that's a good feeling. When it hurts then its true for us.'<sup>11</sup> In the embarrassment they feel, the conditions of 'hurt' and 'truth' each stand as guarantor for the other. If it wasn't true then it wouldn't hurt, and if it didn't hurt it wouldn't be true. And so, through this equation, embarrassment and its epistemology might be presumed to have a contiguous relationship to truth. Sometimes the disclosure of truth is inadvertent; embarrassment is forced upon us and we give ourselves away by blushing. Other times, the equation of embarrassment with truth relates as much or more to its narrative as it does to the event. The truth of embarrassment is a disclosure, an admission, a confession, and this has been explored here through the use of anecdote. And furthermore, the relation of embarrassment to truth has been

---

<sup>10</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works (the Alexander Text)* (London: Collins, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> *The Words of Gilbert & George*, p136.

considered here through concepts of 'objectivity'; a presumed general truthfulness, and 'subjectivity' which though partisan, comes closer to the embodiedness of embarrassment's truth as something 'real' and something that can hurt.

*Taking part in Howells' 14 Stations caused me to consider sentimentality as a feeling that is more embarrassing to some than to others. For Berlant's intimate public, the sweeter feelings may be embraced and accepted. For Leo Bersani, in contrast, the assumption that he might value the sentimental 'romances of memory' was declared to be 'somewhat embarrassing'. My embarrassment was unexpectedly about the sentimental attachment I feel for an unlovely younger self and her 'narratives and things'. I was, in truth, moved not by the political agency of the work, but by the romances of memory. Irony would have spared my embarrassment, but in order to remain 'true' to myself, I needed to fully own my sentimentality. Rather than a case of being 'without', my embarrassment was experienced from within. I find that I am to be counted in as one of Berlant's 'intimate public', and not quite the hard-boiled, left-facing intellectual of the 'social skin' I affect to inhabit.*

The truth of embarrassment is visceral; like Barthes' *punctum* it pricks, it bruises. It is not only a corporeal truth but also personal, in the sense of a private truth and limited to the person. Embarrassment is not concerned with general truths or truisms, but only with a truth that is pin-point accurate. Lee Edelman captures the particularity of truth that I have argued can be ascribed to embarrassment and its resistance to the broad sweep of generality.

Truth [ . . . ] irreducibly linked to the 'aberrant or atypical', to what chafes against 'normalization', finds its value not in a good susceptible to generalization, but only in the stubborn particularity that voids every notion of the general good.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Edelman. *No Future*, p6.

This thesis, although not conceived as a project of revalorisation, has proposed that the stubborn, particular, hurtful truth of embarrassment could be considered to be of 'value', albeit a perverse value, and furthermore, that the value of embarrassment as truth-telling should be accepted as singular, as belonging to a singular self without the need to ascribe its value to some wider project, such as 'the general good'. It is my contention that embarrassment in fact voids the notion, or perhaps, the delusion of generality.

### **BODY OF KNOWLEDGE: (iii) WEAK POLITICS**

Although embarrassment can be a present moment of inaction, a blockage when the self is out of play, a freeze-frame, a moment between moments when time seems to stand still, it is also always marked by its futurity. This indicates a 'weak politics' of embarrassment that originates in the temporary blockage of *embaras*, and is a promise of other potential outcomes and so, in effect, a mandate for change. The appalling present moment of embarrassment is mitigated by the potential to remedy the fault *next time*. It is an overdetermined experience of the lived present moment, but yet it desires the sliding doors of other outcomes; 'if only we could pull ourselves together'. Embarrassment is in fact a feeling of 'if only . . . '.

As Sedgwick puts it:

Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it did.<sup>13</sup>

So as a feeling of 'if only . . . ', embarrassment assumes a promise of different potential outcomes, of being better than this, of competence, composure, okayness, of possibilities. And the critical potential of embarrassment, and its pause lies, at

---

<sup>13</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p146.

least in part, in entertaining such possibilities, and entertaining them in a bodily way as hurtful and true.

However, embarrassment is weak in a political sense because the possibilities of 'next time' notwithstanding, the urgent project of the embarrassed self is the reinstatement of composure. Nothing beyond this matters, or matters enough, or matters *now*. As an emotion, embarrassment is only weakly political (anger for example is stronger) and in this weakness there is a likeness to the politicality of Berlant's 'intimate public' which she terms 'juxtapolitical', inhabiting a political environment, acted on by political factors, and politically aware, but not *engaged*. Berlant comments; 'Politics requires active antagonism, which threatens the *sense* in consensus; this is why, in an intimate public, the political sphere is more often seen as a field of threat, chaos, degradation, or retraumatization than a condition of possibility.'<sup>14</sup> Embarrassment is averse to antagonism. Embarrassment wants mostly to put its own house in order, it is consumed with the need to restore equanimity to its own internal chaos. Embarrassment is not quite inert, but tends towards inactivity, it looks away, thinks inwardly and waits for the moment to pass, the predicament to ease.

The cathartic potential for change that emotion augers is also noted by Probyn in relation to shame. She declines to claim that the experience of shame makes us better people, that, she says, would be hubris. She writes:

I won't go that far, but shame undoubtedly makes us feel temporarily more fragile in ourselves. And that acknowledgement of fragility may serve as a basis from which to re-evaluate one's existence. . . . the rupture and loss of assurance, or cultural capital, when one is thrust into another field may begin the process of change.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p11.

<sup>15</sup> Probyn, p64.

In its imagining of other outcomes however, embarrassment is wishful rather than dynamic (perhaps *less* dynamic than shame). Commenting on the minor, dysphoric emotions, Ngai describes the political aspect of her 'ugly feelings' as a 'restricted agency', a form of passivity or suspended action; action that is blocked by ambivalence. She characterises minor negative affect as generally *noncathartic* in that it foregrounds 'a failure of emotional release' but also these nasty little feelings are circuitous, it is irritating to feel irritable, anxiety makes us anxious, being embarrassed is embarrassing, so not only is there no emotional release, there is no release; we are trapped.<sup>16</sup> Embarrassment as a political force is then weak, and it is isolating; it avoids contact, even eye contact; and so acts against collectivism. It lacks motivation and is characterised by the modesty of its ambition. Embarrassment is typically a 'restricted agency' and though it aspires to be 'good' it is risk averse and will gladly settle for being good-enough.

*Walking round Tate Modern at the Major Exhibition of the work of Gilbert & George, I felt a peculiar sense of being in the wrong place; of not belonging. 'Art for All' proclaim Gilbert and George, declaring me welcome, a welcome that might declare classlessness. But despite this, I was overwhelmed by self-consciousness, on the brink of embarrassment. I suffered a feeling of a lack of competence; a failure to master the cultural competence of 'the gaze', and a feeling of restricted agency of the spectatorial position; 'without' the capacities to know and to act. Furthermore, their work made me feel hyper-gendered in a place where my gender has no value. I have no place in their world, my sex and my sexuality are not 'liked'; neither admired nor represented. I was a ghost, a shadow, a snoop. I felt excluded from imagined spaces of gay male pleasure, relegated to outside the frame; I was marginalised, isolated, and disenfranchised.*

---

<sup>16</sup> Ngai, p9.

## **BODY OF KNOWLEDGE: (iv) WEAK METHOD**

In these encounters with art, single two-dimensional works, exhibitions, and performance art there is in the nature of the reading of these texts, something relational, perhaps overly invested in subject matter, perhaps perverse in its fixation on the spectating self. In the attention to the smallest of affects, the drawing out of The spectatorial response to the minutiae of the image, the situation, you could say to the syntax of the moment, there is a correlation with a somewhat outdated branch of literary criticism that deals with 'reader response'. Like anecdotal theory it seems to invite the mild embarrassment of being unfashionable. Reader-response criticism attends to the singularity of the relation between a text and its reader in a level of critical detail that may indeed (still) be missing in the analysis of the spectatorship of art, even the one-to-one performance. Reader-response criticism sees meaning as something that happens between the text and its reader:

Meaning . . . is not something one extracts . . . like a nut from a shell, but an experience one has in the course of reading. Literature, as a consequence, is not regarded as a fixed object of attention but as a sequence of events that unfold within the reader's mind. Correspondingly, the goal of literary criticism becomes the faithful description of the activity of reading, an activity that is minute, complicated, strenuous, and never the same from one reading to the next.<sup>17</sup>

In its privileging of the description of experience that unfolds at its own pace, and the focus on the smallest of signs, and the acceptance that this is an inimitable event, but one that might be alike to some others, reader-response criticism correlates with weak theory and is an effective method to analyse an embarrassed spectatorial response to art. Stanley Fish disputes the idea that reader-response criticism can actually be considered to be a 'method', and his reasons reinforce the likeness to a weak theory, dissolving any lingering equivalence between extent and

---

<sup>17</sup> Tompkins, pp xvi,xvii.

effectiveness. 'Strictly speaking,' he writes, 'it is not a method at all, because neither its results, nor its skills are transferable.'<sup>18</sup>

Fish advocates that the effectiveness of this 'weak method' hinges on a change in pace in the spectator-text encounter; 'Essentially what the method does is *slow down* the reading experience, so that 'events' one does not notice in normal time, but which do occur, are brought before our analytical attentions.'<sup>19</sup> When an embarrassed response is a factor in the spectator-text relationship, the change in pace is effected by embarrassment as a blockage; the *embaras*. Like twigs and debris accumulating, damming the flow of water, the blockage is a temporary intensity of feeling, a pause, a moment of inertia, a building of cathectic force; a change of pace that *will change*. And the experience is restrictive, self-reflexive, analytical, wishful, and above all, critical. The critical potential of embarrassment rests in harnessing the pause, intensity, and flow of the blockage; noticing the marginal, unrepeatable 'event' and being able to bear its feeling of 'truth'.

*When I looked at Sodom, I thought this work is not about me, and I was about to move on. But compositionally, it is reminiscent of a deposition, and I looked again. One figure supporting the other's dead weight. Naked. Two men, naked. But not quite; the wristwatches undo the biblical association. The work is secular. And I looked again, unsettled by the consistency of the colour of flesh, itching with curiosity to read the text that the bodies separate. Reading the partially obscured text is an investment in time; the words delay my progress. And always with my eye returning to the points of contact between the bodies; flesh touching flesh, generous and effective in its touch; in its embrace, in its intimacy. An intimacy that I am 'without'. I am outside the institutional intimacy of normative loops of property and*

---

<sup>18</sup> Stanley Fish in Tompkins, ed.p98.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley Fish in Ibid. p74.

*reproduction, 'one of the most despised sexual minority positions'.<sup>20</sup> And I know that actually this work is very much about me.*

In adopting the weak method of reader-response criticism, the whole envelope of the encounter should be considered relevant. This has proved to be a productive strategy, for example when I described my visit to the Gilbert & George 'Major Exhibition' at Tate Modern. Not only the works themselves, but the building, ideologies of cultural consumption, curatorial practices, the genderedness of looking, the encumbrance of 'the gaze'; all these things contributed to the experience of self-consciousness that ruled my spectatorial response. Gallop proposes that in order to access the meaning, truth, or value of art, the spectator should attend to what is marginal; 'to peripheral, insignificant trivia where it might appear in a way that surprises, embarrasses, and overwhelms the observer.'<sup>21</sup> And I would add that besides giving attention to the marginalia of the art work, we should allow the feeling of what Barthes terms 'the perverse body'; ' . . . ready to fetishize not the image but precisely what exceeds it'.<sup>22</sup> It is in the disruptive and distracting marginalia that the origins of the embodied truths of embarrassment are to be found. These things slow the experience down and allow critical focus on the feeling of event.

## **SINGULARITY**

In my encounter with Gilbert & George's *Sodom*, I compared the initial moment of embarrassment to an experience of being singled out and knowing that I don't quite 'fit'; that in some way I cannot fully identify with the self being interpellated. That

---

<sup>20</sup> Cobb, p446.

<sup>21</sup> Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, p148.

<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans., Richard Howard (Berkeley LA: University of California Press, 1989). p349.

experience, on the brink of embarrassment is an experience of being exposed and differenced, revelling, momentarily, in difference but with the dawning realisation that my difference will be pejoratively evaluated. That is a feeling of singularity. And singularity as a mode of feeling resonates with the personal praxis of my methodology, and singularity is also integral to the outcome of embarrassment. It is integral to the true-ness that I ascribe to embarrassment, to the restricted agency of a weak politics, to the weak method by which we might examine the spectator-text relationship, and to its theoretical limitations; that is, a resistance to the generalisation of 'theory-proper'.

Singularity as a word is uncomfortable. It has a burden of other applications that might say something I don't want to mean. For Deleuze singularity is an event, a point, a density; 'Singularities are turning points and points of inflection; bottlenecks, knots, foyers, and centres; of fusion, condensation, and boiling';<sup>23</sup> But these points do not sustain the investment of the fragile self, the self that feels itself to be everything. For Deleuze, a singularity is pure, mobile, and untouched. When I feel singularity as the brink of embarrassment, it is sticky with touch, compromised by a self that is never as whole or as wholesome as I imagined. Deleuze says, in complete antithesis to my understanding, that singularity should never be confused with 'the personality of the one expressing herself in discourse' because 'It is essentially pre-individual, non-personal and a-conceptual. [ . . . ] Singularity is *neutral*.'<sup>24</sup> And to my embarrassment I cannot reconcile this disinterest with the disorder of self that brims in me any more than I can gaze on an artwork without bringing with me the affairs of life. For me, singularity is *exactly* the self (inadvertently) expressing herself. My singularity is never neutral.

---

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: Continuum, 2004). p63.

<sup>24</sup> Deleuze, p63.

Singularity and the experience of finding oneself unexpectedly ensingled by embarrassment are full of possibilities, but come at a cost; embarrassment can be diminishing, undignified, uncomfortable. Sartre captures this:

There is no one who has not at some time been surprised by an attitude which was guilty or simply ridiculous. The sudden modification then experienced was in no way provoked by the irruption of knowledge. It is rather in itself a solidification and an abrupt stratification of myself which leaves intact my possibilities and my structures 'for-myself', but which suddenly pushes me into a new dimension of existence<sup>25</sup>

The self, he says, 'solidifies', which I take to mean an intensity of self-ness, an embracing of what is definitively self, the differences, *and* the possibilities of that self.<sup>26</sup>

Singularity as a particular mode of feeling that must be accountable to and for itself is characteristic of the later work of Barthes. If Roland Barthes had not been run over by a laundry truck he might have made good on the promise of individualism made in 'The Crisis of Desire', an interview for *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1980. In the context of a series of questions about intellectualism and militancy, Barthes expressed his belief that at that time, there was a lack of desire; 'A man without desire atrophies' and that in place of an earlier radicalism there was then a trend towards conformity, towards becoming part of a herd, that he believes should be countered.

People on the margins of society flock together, become herds, small, it's true, but herds just the same. At that point I lose interest, because conformity reigns in every herd. [ . . . ] I believe that the only truly consistent

---

<sup>25</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p292.

<sup>26</sup> This is echoed in recent work by Berardi who defines singularity as an emergent consciousness of difference, and 'the ability to be in good stead with his being different and his actual possibilities.' Berardi, p216.

marginalism is individualism. But this idea should be taken up again in a new way.<sup>27</sup>

The interviewer then asked; 'Are you optimistic about individualism?' And Barthes replied:

No, not really. Because anyone who lived his individualism in a radical fashion would have a tough life. . . . Even if it's just 'thinking' my body until I realize that I can think nothing *but* my own body – this is an attitude that runs up against science, fashion, morality, and so on.<sup>28</sup>

Individualism is evidently not envisaged by Barthes as a comfortable thing to inhabit. But yet he prefers it to being part of 'the herd', which is mildly disparaged as conformist and uninteresting.

*The accidental glimpse of a remarkable intimacy in Gilbert & George's Sodom called on me to account not only for my singularity but more prosaically for my singledom, which Berlant terms as a state of being unhinged and unhitched. My family, like swans tend to mate for life, and it was expected that I would too, but I continue to disappoint. For me, a pair of swans is a small herd, grazing complacently alongside other small herds, and I prefer to retain the uncomfortable individualism of my singular singledom. My rejection of the herding instinct, of the swan-like pairing has a cost; I suffer an embarrassing exposure of 'withoutness'. As a singleton, and thus outside the institutions of intimacy, I fail to qualify for the institutional privacy accorded to coupledness; the privacy to be in public.*

Embarrassment is one of the minor discomforts encountered by individualism and the work of Erving Goffman typifies it as personally uncomfortable but socially

---

<sup>27</sup> 'The Crisis of Desire', for *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1980. (Phillip Brooks) in Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans., Linda Coverdale (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009). pp361-365.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

beneficial. Goffman presents embarrassment as a hygienic impulse to conform and to be 'good'. He argues that it acts as a mechanism to preserve principles of social organization and is a deterrent to disorder. Embarrassment, he writes; ' . . . is not an irrational impulse breaking through socially prescribed behaviour but part of this orderly behaviour itself.'<sup>29</sup> Embarrassment occurs in a moment of exposed non-competence when the self fails to fit, fails to 'fit in' in a particular context, or when the self fails to be 'good'. What we crave most at that point is for our failing to pass unnoticed, that we might slip back into the protective mass-intimacy of okayness (for the ground to swallow us). As a social regulator that exposes and discourages difference, embarrassment can be understood to expose the inadequacies of singularity and endorse the conformity of the herd. Even on 'the margins of society', even where difference is prized, the herding instinct prevails and embarrassment is one of the mechanisms that underpins it. Because embarrassment is unpleasant, and also disprised as weak, incompetent, and risible, we do what we can to avoid it, so the discomfort of feeling embarrassed and the stigma of being embarrassed work to extend and maintain standards of 'goodness', standards of conformity, competence and composure. In this sense, embarrassment can be understood to be very conservative.

Besides being conservative, embarrassment, as a feeling of inadequate singularity is insistently and overwhelmingly embodied. In the process of thinking, thinking through the blockage of the embarrassment, the self is quite literally overwhelmed by its body, too warm, too indifferent, everything but nothing. And possibilities; other manifestations of self that might be possible, (if only . . . ) but not limitlessly possible. Miller suggests that such embodiment is a useful antidote to abstraction;

One's own body can constitute an internal limit on discursive irresponsibility, . . . The autobiographical act – however self-fictional, can like the detail of

---

<sup>29</sup> Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, p111.

one's (aging) body, produce this sense of limit as well: the resistance particularity offers to the grandiosity of abstraction.<sup>30</sup>

This confirms that the singularity of embarrassment, when harnessed as a mode of critical thinking ('thinking' my body), insists on staying true to the lived experience. Like weak theory, it is curtailed by a productive limitation and is effective only within its own domain. It will not indulge in speculative generalisation.

## CRITICALITY

Singularity then, as obstinately not neutral, but as possibility, and as an uncomfortable mode of feeling is the cathectic intensity that fires embarrassment as criticality. Embarrassment *feels* like criticality. This derives directly from the two parts of embarrassment; firstly, of exposure, that is, an exposure to inspection and review, and secondly, evaluation; a judgement that is empirical in the sense of being experiential rather than speculative or derived from theory. The evaluation offered by embarrassment is always at heart subjective but with an eye to objectivity as (a version of) what is 'true'. And the evaluation offered by embarrassment is always immediately negative; its business is with the *not* good-enough. But it is never wholly negative; its seed is *interest*, perhaps even desire.

*Looking at Franko B, I was obliged to account for my desire to look at the monster. When I looked, my embarrassment was hardly visible, but I confess, I was embarrassed to want to look at him, embarrassed by my curiosity, my desire, and I was embarrassed that my desire was not reciprocated. Most hurtfully, I was embarrassed that he didn't acknowledge me; 'what was I for him?' I felt I was*

---

<sup>30</sup> Miller, *Getting Personal*, pxiii.

*nothing. Other spectators have felt intimacy and even love inspired by Franko B's performance work. Doyle openly cried when she saw 'I Miss You'. She was moved to tears by the intimacy of the piece. She felt that she was the 'you' that Franko's 'I' was missing. Abramovic speaks of the 'unconditional love' of his work, and Miglietti of 'an intimate relationship of the unexpressed'.<sup>31</sup> I, on the other hand felt much less; I felt disregarded and discredited. I felt diminished.*

The criticality of embarrassment mediates between 'not good-enough-ness' and 'if only . . .' so that it has an inherent cathexis that is both, but not equally, critical and desiring. This is activated in response to the object of its look, the contingency of event, the predicament, and especially to the self that is compromised by these things. Embarrassment is perhaps intrinsically critical because it stems from self-criticism. Its primary concern is always with the 'not good-enough-ness' of the self. But whilst the starting point may be self-criticism, the criticality will not stop at our skin.

If we are able to persevere with the discomfort of embarrassment, to examine its causes and outcomes, what it draws attention to is our 'social skin'; something we are not always comfortable in that mediates between the interior self and the exterior world. Whilst embarrassment, as an aversive self-consciousness disrupts a sense of self, importantly it is also indicative of a friction between the self and its 'social skin' which as Ahmed observes 'is shaped by some bodies and not others.'<sup>32</sup> Embarrassment points out that however much we might revel in our singularity, we also and often crave a sense of belonging as a site or structure of ease, a comfort zone, a place where we are 'good'. And as Tomkins says, we mostly aim to be

---

<sup>31</sup> Marina Abramovic (2006) in Miglietti, and FAM in Ibid. p23.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p148.

'good' in the sense of competent rather than morally 'good'.<sup>33</sup> And importantly, we crave a place where we are *seen to be* competent, where we are *seen to be* 'good'; where our competence and goodness are acknowledged and endorsed.

In our desire to be at ease, and to belong we are willing to moderate and modify ourselves, we will, as Berlant says, 'amputate' those parts of self that do not fit. As a conservative mechanism of social regulation what embarrassment generally inclines us towards, is to fit in, and in order to fit, to avoid being hurt, we manage our differences. We negotiate the terms of belonging, and the structures to which we do and don't belong are fabrications of cultural and counter-cultural ideologies; they give consistency and okayness to matters of facticity, to taste and perversion, to allegiance or non-alignment, and as structures, they are more and less habitable.

Barthes writes:

I can perfectly well inhabit what doesn't make me happy; I can simultaneously complain and endure; I can reject the meaning of the structure I subject to and traverse without displeasure certain of its everyday portions (habits, minor satisfactions, little securities, endurable things, temporary tensions)<sup>34</sup>

Habitation of structures of being and belonging is negotiated in skirmishes along the borderlands that mark the outer limits of self; the points at which we encounter our limitations and our embarrassability. But belonging is rarely fully resolved, in part because it is a fugitive state, elusive in its orientation, differently mobilised, contingent, and our belonging is repeatedly traded against our singularity.

Terms of belonging are socially and culturally prescribed; they are embedded in cultural conditions of normativity and what Félix Guattari calls 'systems of submission'. 'Mass culture produces individuals: standardized individuals, linked to

---

<sup>33</sup> Tomkins, *Exploring Affect*, p397.

<sup>34</sup> Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, p46.

one another in accordance with hierarchical systems, value systems, systems of submission'<sup>35</sup> And for Guattari, the subjectivity we experience as standardized individuals is hegemonically authored even when we dream, or daydream, or fall in love. In a similar vein, Warner argues that all publics, and all communities of persons populate an axis of normativity. At one extreme is absolute conformity, at the other, absolute non-conformity. He borrows from Goffman the terms 'stigmaphobe' and 'stigmaphile' to denote the extremities. The stigmaphobe is the model of the standardized individual who endorses normative values and inhabits what Warner terms the 'world of normals'. 'The stigmaphobe world is the dominant culture, where conformity is ensured through fear of stigma.'<sup>36</sup> The opposite position is that of the stigmaphile who learns to value what is different, queer or disprised. And the point Warner makes is that these two poles are far from equal. They are hierarchically organised in favour of the conformity of 'normal'. Normal is a powerful force that is posited as indivisible from 'good' (it is normal to be 'good'; being 'good' is normal) and the stigma of embarrassment is conscripted as one of its control mechanisms. Even the queerest of counter-cultures, outsider cults, and the smallest of herds discipline those who belong, or aspire to belong by endorsing 'normal' (whatever that might be) and stigmatising not-normal as 'withoutness'.

And yet . . . and as I have already remarked, there is always an 'and yet' with embarrassment, a supplementary cause or outcome, something deeper, or disavowed, camouflaged by the blush. And yet, as embarrassment insists on returning the embarrassed self to itself, and its difference from the prescribed standard of normal, it is potentially quite subversive. The 'good feeling' of embarrassment that Gilbert & George claim to value is produced not by being at ease, but through discomfort; by being 'true' even if that means being not 'good', not

---

<sup>35</sup> Felix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, trans., Karel Clapshow and Brian Holmes (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008). p22.

<sup>36</sup> Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*,p43.

okay, not good-enough; yet, it is true. So the perverse value of embarrassment, lies in its singularity as something 'true', even when it is not good-enough, and perhaps especially when it is not good-enough; it lies in resisting the desire for conformity, the desire to be okay enough for the herd.

If we are able to suspend the inclination to be absorbed into the ease of belonging, and the comfort of the comfort zone, embarrassment might be redefined, not as Goffman's conservative impulse to be 'good' that belongs to our 'systems of submission', but instead, as a vibrant state of (self-)doubt, which is to say, an embodied criticality. In parallel with its hygienic, conservative function the supplementary (and subversive) role of embarrassment is to draw attention, not only to the individual and her flaws, but to the submission that is expected of her. Embarrassment might be understood to be a radical and individuating pulse of feeling that is critical of institutional okayness and the coercive structures of normal that we are supposed to belong to, or at the very least, aspire to belong to. If we can bear the feeling, embarrassment might free us from the tyranny of normal, because embarrassment is in fact, the emergent and uncomfortable consciousness of a flawed individualism.

## **'SOMEWHAT' EMBARRASSING**

But the cathexis of critical-desiring turns out to be an accommodation rather than a will to act. Embarrassment is theoretically weak, politically weak, cathectically lazy. Even though in the moment of embarrassment, in the heat of the moment when the self is everything, and we are privately consumed by it, it is publicly marginalised; disprised, unvalued, a minor discomfort. The feeling is side-lined, covered up, and not valued.

I have argued that embarrassment is an experience of singularity that is inconsistent with normative terms of inclusion, and that it is a form of embodied criticality, critical of the sometimes coercive terms of being and belonging, but perhaps it is only *somewhat* critical. Like Bersani demoting the embarrassment he felt about being included in Foucault's sweeping homo-sentimentality, claiming to be only *somewhat* embarrassed, I too feel compelled to mitigate the strength of the claim I make for embarrassment. This mitigation is in no way meant to diminish critical authority, but does reflect the fact that embarrassment and its critical epistemology is limited (productively limited) to a minor register. I find that I too am emasculating it through language to say that embarrassment is 'somewhat critical' of the coercive terms of institutional okayness. Embarrassment is marginal and always marginalised and also tautological; it is embarrassing to be embarrassed, and in accord with this, the criticality offered by embarrassment has its own embarrassments. Embarrassment as criticality is embarrassed by its complicity in the very coercive ideologies it is critical of; the embarrassing truth is that embarrassment has always already been conscripted to endorse what it critiques.

The 'good feeling' of embarrassment arguably comes from defining it not as a conservative impulse, but instead, as radical and individuating, but because embarrassment is implicated in the coerciveness of social and ideological structures, it cannot be a thoroughly radical impulse, nor can its effects be thoroughly individuating in a radical way. It is in fact, embarrassing to claim the insistent singularity of embarrassment as a radical individuation when the claim is so vulnerable to accusations that singularity is no more than a petit-bourgeois liberalism. Embarrassment, fickle and Janus-faced is thus undermined by ambivalence, and perhaps by what Barthes might identify as 'traces of bourgeois ideology' that present such a risk of 'scandal'. Embarrassment, like an

amphibology, persists in meaning in both directions. To redefine embarrassment as a radical and individuating thinking-feeling will spare no blushes; it will still hurt.

When we look at art we look within a framework that places normative value on critical distance. But if we are willing to get right up close, exposing what we are, and risking feeling, and indeed, looking foolish, the spectator may find that she is open to other possibilities besides. Among the range of possible emotional and cognitive responses that the spectator might experience, embarrassment is slight, never flashy or outspoken. It is quite subdued, quite muted, and almost mute. It is more than indifference, but considerably less than the exaltation of Bell's 'aesthetic emotion'. To be embarrassed by looking, by being caught looking, is likely to be only to be *somewhat* embarrassed. It is a condition of minor dissatisfactions, with the self, with the encounter, with the conditions of social skin that frame the experience. It will entertain tentative connections; between the work and its viewer, between the symbolic world of art and the real world, between thinking and feeling, between the present moment and other time frames, between cultural aspirations and more prosaic lived experience of the individual person.

When we look at art, we are conditioned to have certain expectations of the encounter, preconceived ideas of spectatorial response predicated on tropes of value; of knowledge and taste. Spectatorial response is freighted with expectation. Not least, there is an anticipation of the encounter being potentially transformative; if the art is good-enough, if the spectator is good-enough. When we look at art, we accept the role of 'spectator' and enter into a relation with the art object, an object that as 'art' is already ascribed certain credentials accrued within the value system of the artworld; a system of exhibition, curation, critique and review and collection. Embarrassment as a conservative mechanism will reinforce exactly those values, persuading the spectator to take on those values as her values, so that she can be

as Berlant says, in proximity to 'okayness'. She will play by the rules of the gallery, she will gaze in the prescribed manner, and aspire to show if not knowledge, then at least taste. She might aim to *appreciate* art.

Within the context of art spectatorship, to alternatively accept the possibilities of embarrassment as radical and individuating might be to stand apart from the normative values of the art world, to stand 'without' the system that ascribes them: not to contradict or oppose, but to be apart from the system rather than a part of the system. Barthes writes of the pleasure of the text being a matter of 'individuality' rather than 'subjectivity'; an embodied sensation quite unlike, that is to say, quite separate from other individual bodies. And embarrassment, as a good feeling, or at least as a not entirely un-pleasurable feeling, makes us acutely aware of that separation and the cultural specificity of our individuality. Embarrassed, we feel our singularity. By exposing ourselves to art, we may find ourselves seeing (and seeing ourselves seeing) from a viewpoint that is critical, self-centric, trivial, but also true. Not perhaps well-informed, or clever, or even legitimate; but true.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.
- Bacon, Alex. "Punks, Skinheads and Dandies: Matrices of Desire in Gilbert & George." In *The Art of Queering in Art*, edited by Henry Rogers. Birmingham: Article Press, 2007.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sade Fourier Loyola*. Translated by Richard Miller. London: Jonathan Cape, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Roland Barthes*. Translated by Richard Howard. USA: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard. Berkeley LA: University of California Press, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. London: Vintage, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Translated by Richard Howard. London: Vintage, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*. Translated by Linda Coverdale. Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009.
- Baume, Nicholas. *Getting Emotional*. Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2005.
- Berardi, Franco 'Bifo'. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Translated by Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washinton City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Intimacy*. Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

- Bersani, Leo. *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Culture of Redemption*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" In *Reclaiming Sodom*, edited by Jonathan Goldberg. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Bersani, Leo, and Adam Phillips. *Intimacies*. London: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso, 2012.
- Blackman, Lisa, and John Cromby, eds. *Affect and Feeling*. Vol. 21, Critical Psychology: The International Journal of Critical Psychology. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2007.
- Bochner, Arthur P., and Carolyn Ellis, eds. *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*. Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press, 2002.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. New York: Routledge & Kegan and Paul Ltd, 2007.
- Bourner, Louise. "Mark Lawson Talks to Gilbert and George." BBC, 2011.
- Bourriaud, Nicholas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods Collection Documents Sur L'art. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002.
- Bracewell, Michael, and Lisa G Corrin. *Gilbert & George: Dirty Words Pictures*. London: Serpentine Gallery, 2002.
- Burn, Gordon. *Sex & Violence, Death & Silence*. London: Faber and Faber, 2009.
- Burrows, David, and John Slyce. *Jemima Stehli*. Birmingham: ARTicle Press, 2002.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2006.
- Butt, Gavin. "How I Died for Kiki and Herb." In *The Art of Queering in Art*, edited by Henry Rogers. Birmingham: Article Press.
- Cairns, Jon. "Ambivalent Intimacies: Performance and Domestic Photography in the Work of Adrian Howells." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22:3 (2012): 355-371.

- Cashell, Kieran. *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art*. London: I B Tauris, 2009.
- Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Translated by Paul A Kottman. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.
- Cleland, John. *Fanny Hill or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. London: Penguin Books, 1985 (first published 1748).
- Cobb, Michael. "Lonley." In *After Sex?: On Writing since Queer Theory*, edited by Janet Halley and Andrew Parker. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Collings, Mathew. *Sarah Lucas Modern Artists*. London: Tate Publishing, 2002.
- Connor, Steven. "The Shame of Being a Man." (2000). [accessed 11.12.2011].
- Corradi Fiumara, Gemma. *The Mind's Affective Life: A Psychoanalytic and Philosophical Inquiry*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2001.
- Crews, Frederick C., ed. *Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend*. New York: Viking, 1998.
- Davis, Vaginal. "Papi/Diaspora: The Beauty of Franko B." In *Franko B: Blinded by Love*, edited by Dominic Johnson. Bologna: Damiani, 2006.
- De Salvo, Donna, ed. *Open Systems: Rethinking Art C.1970*. London: Tate publishing, 2005.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." In *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, edited by John Caughie and Annette Kuhn. London: Routledge, 1992 (first published in *Screen* 1982).
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge, 2006 (first published 1966).
- Doyle, Jennifer. "Critical Tears: Franko B's 'I Miss You'." In *Franko B: Blinded by Love* edited by Dominic Johnson. Bologna: Damiani, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Dufresne, Todd. *Killing Freud: Twentieth Century Culture and the Death of Psychoanalysis*. London: Continuum, 2003.
- Duncan, Carol. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007.
- Edelman, Lee. *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

- Edelman, Robert J. *The Psychology of Embarrassment*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons 1987.
- Elkins, James. *Pictures & Tears*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Farson, Daniel. *Gilbert & George: A Portrait*. London: Harper Collins, 1999.
- Fortnum, Rebecca. *Contemporary British Women Artists: In Their Own Words*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007.
- Foster, Hal, ed. *Vision and Visuality*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality 1*. London: Penguin Books, 1976.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by A. A. Brill. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1997 (first published 1932).
- Gallop, Jane. *Thinking through the Body*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Anecdotal Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Envy*. Edited by Cindy Katz and Nancy K. Miller. Vol. 34, Women's Studies Quarterly. New York: The Feminist Press, 2006.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Gardner, Lyn. "How Intimate Theatre Won Our Hearts." *The Guardian* 2010.
- Gilbert&George. *The Words of Gilbert & George*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1997.
- Goffman, Erving. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books, 1990 (first published 1959).
- Goldberg, Jonathan, ed. *Reclaiming Sodom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Guattari, Felix, and Suely Rolnik. *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*. Translated by Karel Clapshow and Brian Holmes. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008.
- Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Hardt, Michael, and Anronio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Harrison, Charles, and Paul Wood, eds. *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

- Hawks, Howard. "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." Twentieth Century Fox, 1953.
- Heathfield, Adrian, ed. *Live: Art and Performance* London: Tate Publishing, 2004.
- Hjort, Mette , and Sue Laver eds. *Emotion and the Arts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hughes, Athol, ed. *The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers 1920-1958*. London: Karnac Books, 1991.
- James, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*. London: Wordsworth Editions, 1999 (first published 1880).
- Jarman, Derek. *Smiling in Slow Motion*. London: Vintage, 2001.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkley CA: University of California Press, 1994.
- Jonquet, Francois. *Gilbert & George: Intimate Conversations with Francois Jonquet*. London: Phaidon, 2004.
- Kipnis, Laura. *Against Love: A Polemic*. New York: Vintage, 2004.
- Klossowski, Pierre. "The Philosopher Villain." In *Reclaiming Sodom*, edited by Jonathan Goldberg. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Levin, Amy K., ed. *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Lewis, Michael. "Embarrassment: The Emotion of Self-Exposure and Evaluation." In *Self Conscious Emotions: The Psychology of Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment, and Pride*, edited by June Price Tangney and Kurt W. Fischer. New York: The Guildford Press, 1995.
- Malik, Amna. *Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel*. London: Afterall Books, 2009.
- Marks, Laura U. "Straight Women, Gay Porn, and the Scene of Erotic Looking." *Jump Cut* 40 (1996): 127-135.
- Mavor, Carol. *Reading Boyishly*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Miglietti, Francesca Alfano, ed. *Franko B: I Still Love*. Milan: 24 Ore Cultura, 2010.
- Miglietti, Francesca Alfano *Extreme Bodies: The Uses and Abuses of the Body in Art*. Milan: Skira Editore, 2003.
- Miller, Nancy K. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Miller, Rowland S. *Embarrassment: Poise and Peril in Everyday Life*. New York: The Guildford Press, 1996.
- Millet-Gallant, Ann. *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

- Munoz, Jose Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Murdoch, Iris. *The Nice and the Good*. London: Penguin, 1978.
- Nelson, Robert S., and Richard Shiff, eds. *Critical Terms for Art History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge Ma: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Obrist, Hans Ulrich. *Gilbert & George The Conversation Series*. Koln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter Konig, 2007.
- Perry, Gill, ed. *Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's Practice*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Petry, Michael. *Hidden Histories: 20th Century Male Same Sex Lovers in the Visual Arts*. London: Artmedia Press, 2004.
- Phillips, Adam. *On Flirtation: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Uncommitted Life*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Monogamy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *On Balance*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012.
- Pollock, Griselda ed. *Psychoanalysis and the Image*. Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006.
- Prinz, Jesse J. *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Pritchett, V S. "A Family Man." In *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories*, edited by Malcom Bradbury. New York, 1988.
- Probyn, Elspeth. *Blush: Faces of Shame*. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Putnam, James, "The Freud Museum: Sarah Lucas in Conversation with Curator James Putnam" (accessed 29.08.11).
- Ranciere, Jaques. *The Emancipated Spector*. London: Verso, 2009.
- Ricks, Christopher. *Keats and Embarrassment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Ridout, Nicholas. *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Riley, Denise. *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

- Robecchi, Michele. *Sarah Lucas Supercontemporary*, Edited by Francesco Bonami. Milan: Electa, 2007.
- Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Sartre, Jean Paul. *The Age of Reason*. Translated by Eric Sutton. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979 (first published 1945).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nausea*. Translated by Robert Baldick. London: Penguin, 2000 (1938).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Reprieve*. Translated by Gerard Hopkins. London: Penguin Books, 2001 (first published 1949).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008 (first published 1943).
- Searle, Adrian. "Why Do I Feel Naked?" *The Guardian*, 15.07.00 2000.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. London: Penguin Books, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works (the Alexander Text)*. London: Collins, 1978.
- Snediker, Michael D. *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Stallabrass, Julian. *High Art Lite*. London: Verso, 1999.
- Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Sylvester, David. *About Modern Art: Critical Essays 1948 - 2000*. London: Pimlico, 2002.
- Thomas, Calvin, ed. *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*. Urbana IL: university of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Tomkins, Silvan S. *Exploring Affect*, Edited by E. Virginia Demos. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Tompkins, Jane P., ed. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Baltimore John Hopkins University Press, 1980.
- Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1972.

Wagner, Anne Middleton. *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'keeffe*. Berkley CA: University of California Press, 1998.

Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge Ma: Harvard University Press, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*. London: Vintage, 1996.

Young-Bruehl, Elizabeth. *Anna Freud: A Biography*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Zizek, Slavoj. *Enjoy Your Symptom!* New York: Routledge, 2008.