

One t(w)o One: Confessional Constructions

In August 2000, I was invited to participate in the International Women's University, an extraordinary event that took place in several German cities over the summer months. I was located for a week in the town of Kassel, giving lectures and seminars on work I had published on the topic of gender, space and architecture. I talked about the relationship between feminist theory and architectural space, in particular about the ways in which we write, and the complex interaction between theory and practice, in what I call feminist spatial practices.

During the one hour lecture sessions, held in raked traditional auditoriums with the lights down, it was not clear to me how well I was engaging with the audience. The diversity of the women who attended was incredible, both in terms of geography, where they came from, but also in terms of discipline and practice, what they did. There were women working for NGO's in India, architects from Brazil, sociologists from Nigeria. . . I was an English trained architect and academic. Despite my history, because of my father's involvement in domestic irrigation, I was born in the United Arab Emirates, and as a child had lived in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Sudan, and the fact that I had travelled widely, I felt uncomfortable. Who was I to speak to them? What could these intelligent women learn from me? How was I to make a connection. To turn things around.

My way of teaching involves risk taking, it involves admitting 'not-knowing' and refusing to provide answers if I don't have them. My students love and hate me for it. They want answers and I won't give them. I don't have them to give. I love the questions. My love of teaching is I think generated through my desire to connect, to encounter other people and get to know what makes them tick. In order to do this I often tell stories about myself. I do so in order to shift the power dynamic between us, to allow a space to be made where students trust me enough to tell me their difficulties and confusions, so that I have a better idea how to guide them. By telling stories I show empathy, 'I've been there too', but I also reveal weaknesses, aspects of myself that disempower me. To travel the distance to reach the other, I put myself at risk. I sometimes think that my students encounter me in a vulnerable state.

With this in mind, I decided to carry out an experiment for my last lecture session. During coffee breaks and lunches during my week in Kassel I had got to know several of the women there, fairly well, well enough to feel some sense of trust. So I took the paper I had been about to deliver and cut it up into pieces. The lecture had been entitled 'Undoing Architecture' and was a piece of work composed in sets of threes: the voice of French feminist critical theory, the voice of the serious and conventional architectural practitioner, and the voice of the story teller – me – describing an aspect of my private life, the taking apart, through unconventional DIY, of a house I had once lived in. I handed out bits of the text to all the

women in the audience and then asked them to take up any position in the raked auditorium they wished, and when they felt ready to read aloud the piece of writing they had been given, but in their own mother tongue.

What did I expect - a delirious cacophony, a rich celebration of cultural diversity, an overturning of the lecturer and lectured-at relationship? How wrong I was. I hadn't anticipated how fearful the students would be. Slowly people did start to read, but in English, in quiet and reverend tones, struggling to pronounce the words just right. While it was beautiful to listen to so many female voices, of different tones and intonations, filling the lecture space rather than my own, the words were still mine, I could only hear my own writing in my ears. I had failed to turn things around, to set western academia on its head, but rather, in some strange way, inadvertently reinforced my own position of authority. How could these women speak, when I was silencing them with my own words?

What had been created in that room, that afternoon, was what I have come to call 'a confessional construction'. My sorry attempt to create a piece of participatory art at least made me aware that stories of the self, confessionals, are not revelations but constructions. The confessional is a form of phisic architecture. In the piece of writing that follows, I explore this concept, conceived of in Kassel, in more detail. In my own creative and critical writing, through a close engagement with the recent work of artist Tracey Emin, I examine the tensions and ambiguities that exist between the personal and the public, the autobiographical and the theoretical in feminist spatial practice.

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Tracey Emin, 'You forgot to kiss my soul', White Cube, London, 2001.

Helter Fucking Skelter – it doesn't matter how good things are – How Good Life is – it only takes one little knock, to start the never ending downward spiral, for me. Every moment of reality is a balance – This show will be a assortment of works – Bordering from the Formal to the insane. I've made what I felt like making. – The biggest compliment I could be made – are the words – unresolved – A far as I'm concerned – The day has just begun.¹

What does it mean to write about the work of one's contemporaries, and what is the best way to do it? Why do it? [...] I will, however, mention three interrelated ideas that, for me, are closely linked to writing about contemporaries and also function as compelling reasons for doing so: self recognition, historical awareness, and collective action.²

I've always admired Tracey Emin's art, not only the art but the artist, and with Emin they are one and the same. I was particularly impressed by her appearance on the judging panel at the RIBA Building Awards 2000. She shouted abuse at Norman's Foster's Canary Wharf Station, one of the contenders for the prize, for being a piece of 'patriarchal bollocks'. That the sleek concrete structure was designed by a woman is beside the point. Deeper into the evening, as the judging panel settled down to their final decision making, Emin got drunk. Not loudly like she did at the Turner Prize, but quietly. Emin's judgement was razor-sharp, that sharpness you get at the heights, just before the drink that rolls you over the top and into free-fall. Emin railed against the arrogance of the architectural profession, the elitism, the lack of passion and the lack of commitment to people. The RIBA didn't like it, this crowd-puller, this mouthy woman artist, wasn't behaving as predicted, she was saying things that mattered.

¹ Tracey Emin, 2001.

² Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking who one is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 3.

i confessional constructions

Mark Gisbourne: Are the confessional aspects of your art a means of telling a story, or are they a catharsis, a means of getting rid of the past.

Tracey Emin: *I wish I didn't have to 'get rid of it' in the first place. I start off with what I know, and if what I happen to know about is a totally fucked up love affair than that is what I will work on.*³

I define a mode of reading I call 'strong autobiographical' which consists of reading another's story' as if it were one's own'. [...] Perhaps most precious of all, autobiographical reading can lead to more writing – your own. What I call 'strong autobiographical reading' leads, in the best cases, to autobiographical writing. That kind of writing is not the same as autobiographical criticism, or some have called personal criticism – or what I am calling mediated autobiography.⁴

I've always considered 'telling' a process of revelation, that confessions uncover the truth beneath. But confessing is just like all the other stories we tell about ourselves. It is not a revealing, but a constructing of yet another version of ourselves. Telling about yourself is a making of the self. It is a form of physic architecture. How does material architecture aid that process? I wonder whether Emin's pieces of architecture are analogous to certain psychological moments in her history?

As I enter 'You forgot to kiss my soul', I look around, the show is a mixture of words: great big mis-spelt words in light, in thread, in pencil and in fabric; sketches of birds, flowers and of her – Emin – lying on her back; and bits of furniture – that might be stage set and might be the stuff you find discarded lying around the house or half finished DIY in the back garden. . . It feels familiar, reminds me of a house I used to once live in. A strange kind of place, ugly and pretty at the same time. Being here is a bit grim, a bit rough round the edges, but I like it, I trust it, things are what they appear to be (for once, for a change).

On my left is a badly made model of an aeroplane – layers of newspaper and glue. It's about as skilful as the kind of model I used to make at architecture school. Though mine would

³ Interview with Tracey Emin by Mark Gisbourne, 'Life into Art', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, issue 20, pp. 28-34, p. 30.

⁴ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking who one is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 8.

normally have an additional blood streak from using a scalpel that was blunt and card that was too thick.

In the distance is her neon writing. . .

'life without you (never).'

'you forgot to kiss my soul.'

ii writing

MG: Does each material have a particular relevance for you?

TE: *Yes. I have this thing called high-altar: high-altar memorabilia, high-altar images; high-altar drawings, high-altar this and that. Certain sentences deserve to be made in neon, and then there are certain sentences which strike a stream of consciousness which can then warrant being on a blanket. A blanket takes six months to make. It has to be a strong idea otherwise I would get bored with it.*⁵

I will say: today, writing is woman's. That is not a provocation, it means that woman admits there is another. . . Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me - the other that I am and am not, that I don't know to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live - that tears me apart- disturbs me, changes me, who?⁶.

Collections of scratchy sketches on paper with torn edges are stuck up with cellotape on the white gallery walls. Mainly they show Tracey. Her legs long and sexy, her shoes high and tottering. She has a cigarette in one hand and a wine-glass in the other. Her face is rarely to be seen, all screwed up and covered with hair. Her sketches of herself are accompanied by a hand-written scrawl - the writing looks drunk to me - but with Tracey it is hard to tell. She's always writing, in neon, in fabric, in letters, in phrases and it's always fast and furious, stream of consciousness stuff. Very angry and right on the edge.

'It's just an idea of space.'

'No clear thoughts.'

⁵ Interview with Tracey Emin by Mark Gisbourne, 'Life into Art', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, issue 20, pp. 28-34, p. 31.

⁶ Hélène Cixous, 'The Newly Born Woman', Susan Sellers (ed.), *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 42

'Conversation with a friend.'

'Don't dare lie to me.'

And a second grouping:

'Self portrait reclining drunk.'

'Well - this is it- I'm too pissed to even stand.'

'Mind fuck.'

TE: *I recently had a show in Paris where I showed seventy or eighty drawings. And some of my more crazy ones were made when I was really drunk. I've made a whole series of drawings called 'sofa' drawings. I sit on the sofa and fall asleep, then I wake up about four in the morning. It's too early to get up and it's too late to go to bed. And it's at those moments that I sometimes have the strangest thoughts.*⁷

iii little birds

On the radio this morning there was a surreal news story about seagulls in Canada who lure other birds to their death, break their necks on the sides of buildings and then eat them. Tracey had seagulls hung in the air in her South London show. She needed them because they were like God, apparently, in another art film, she describes the boys in Margate, and the scene cuts to gulls pecking on the ground. You hardly notice it the first time round, because you are listening to the story. In her family when someone dies, the ashes are thrown off a cliff when a flock of gulls flies over. There's some words embossed on the wings of her gulls, but you can't see them. They say 'I could have really loved you'.⁸

A flock of plaster seagulls flew across her exhibition in the South London Gallery. In various cultures, birds are seen as the symbols of the poetic imagination, of freedom and the soul escaping the body. Yet this aggressive bird that bickers over scraps of food left by holidays, is an unlikely symbol of transcendence.⁹

⁷ Interview with Tracey Emin by Mark Gisbourne, 'Life into Art', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, issue 20, pp. 28-34, p. 33.

⁸ Matthew Collings, 'Just how big are they?' (edited by Carl Freedman), Tracey Emin, *I need Art like I need God*, London: Jay Joplin, 2001, pp. 58-9, p. 58.

⁹ Sarah Kent, 'Tracey Emin: Flying High?', (edited by Carl Freedman), Tracey Emin, *I need Art like I need God*, London: Jay Joplin, 2001, pp. 31-7, p. 37

Birds, Women and Writing: I am interested in a chain of associations and signifiers composed of birds, women, and writing. [...] Each one of us – the whole of mankind, irrespective of sexual difference – must deal with the feeling of things being taken away from us. What is interesting is that birds, writing and many women are considered abominable, threatening, and are rejected, because others, the rejectors, feel that something is taken away from them. But let me leave women aside for today, since this is a controversial issue, and keep only birds and writing. Neither birds nor writing take anything away, yet people do feel that some forms of writing do take something from us.¹⁰

'Shall we go to bed?'

'You said what.'

'You told me not to.'

'Never ever bite the hand.'

'If I wanted I could have been the most beautiful bird in the world.'

'I've done that better than I thought I would.'

'Nothings that cute.'

Mocking, accusatory, nagging, but at the same time frank, endearing, vulnerable. These cross birds with their ruffled feathers and their squawking beaks hit the target: mother and child. These horrible birds who would happily peck my eyes out, bring out all the mothering instincts I thought I knew I never had. I want to take them home, wrap them in a blanket, and say, 'there, there, it'll all be all right'.

But I am not sure about their feathers. In a plump pillow feathers can be soft and silky. As feathers drift on the air, as they fall from sky to earth, they are dreamy and downy. But feathers also speak of uncertain horrors and sordid attractions – the sexual fetish of kitten mules with feathered tops and the anthropological fetish of primitive magic and exotic ritual.

Swedenborg said that the thoughts of angels were perceived in the world of spirits in material forms as birds.¹¹

¹⁰ Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder to Writing*, (1990), (trans. Sarah Conell and Sarah Sellers), New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 111 and p. 115.

¹¹ AS Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, London: Chatto and Windus, 2000, p. 107.

iv 'Helter Fucking Skelter'

MG: Where do you see your art in ten years time?

TE: *Sewing school labels on scarfs... ha! It is going to go monumental, probably. A lot of my ideas are for big sculptures. I am going to be stepping into the male world in terms of my making.*¹²

We set off. We are already there: advancing. At the junction of the paths and the languages which branch. For never has the composition of a book of essays- chosen (logos) flowers (anthos) placed side by side, differing, dialoguing, dissembling – done less violence to the whole, better signaled the movement of the work towards which it carries. Towards which it fashions so elegantly a stepping-stone. In fact, this dance around the emptiness which the preceding anthology of the texts organizes, gives, feature by feature, the portrait of Hélène Cixous' writing: multiplicity, differentiality, happenstance. By which the work is: straightaway. Awandering. Always already on the way:¹³

The most striking object in the gallery is a ramshackle helter skelter that just about reaches the ceiling. The construction is crude, knocked up out of a mixture of different kinds of wood, ply and mdf. A bit unsteady on its feet, it reminds me of Tracey in her high heels.

I find it hard not to draw comparisons between Louise Bourgeois and Tracey Emin, both are needle-women, both are drawn to the more brutal side to human emotions. In this show, 'Poor Love' bears more than a passing resemblance to Bourgeois's sculptures made out of empty clothes. Emin's various smaller scale constructions correspond to Bourgeois' references to lairs and her 'Femme Maison' from 1947. And now we have this new possibility of huge Emin sculptures, which I can't imagine would be anything but spidery. I have an interest in sewing, weaving and spinning, and structures like webs, cones and spirals that might be described as embodying a feminine spatiality. For me, the out of place feeling you get after spinning around on the spot best describes, as a bodily gesture in space, a feminine topography.¹⁴

¹² Interview with Tracey Emin by Mark Gisbourne, 'Life into Art', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, issue 20, pp. 28-34, p. 33.

¹³ Mireille Calle-Gruber, 'Afterword', in Susan Sellers (ed.), *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 207-22, p. 207.

¹⁴ The spiral and the spinning figure in Bourgeois' work have been linked to Irigaray's essay 'Gesture in Psychoanalysis'. See Hilary Robinson, 'Louise Bourgeois's cells: gesturing towards the mother', Ian Cole (ed.), *Museum of Modern Art Papers*, vol. 1, Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1996, pp. 21-30.

'Helter Fucking Skelter' makes me feel a bit sick, just like I used to feel when I'd been spinning, round and around out in the garden on a hot summer's day. Behind it, I glimpse Tracey, she's out of it too, lying in the garden on her back. A rough but fluid line drawn on white paper. All around her are flowers, gaudy and ghastly, hacked out of magazines with a blunt scissors.

'Dying for it – in my dreams on back – legs open'.

v 'Poor Love'

MG: Your grandparents, parents, and twin brother seem like the ghosts in the machine of everything you do. Is this true?

TE: *This goes back to the power of blood and remembering where I came from. I came from Margate and not many people brag about that.*¹⁵

What is Reading? It's Eating on the Sly? It's also a clandestine, furtive act. We don't acknowledge it. It confuses. Reading is not as insignificant as we claim. First we must steal the key to the library. Reading is a provocation, a rebellion: we open the book's door, pretending it is a simple paperback cover, and in broad daylight escape! We are no longer there: that is what real reading is. If we haven't left the room, if we haven't gone over the wall, we're not reading.¹⁶

'Poor Love' makes me so sad, a drab blue dress on a wire hanger, dangling from a make-shift version of one of those trolleys designed to help you move around after an operation in hospital. There's even a half- empty evian bottle acting as a drip. It makes me think of my mum and her ill-health. All the years she's spent loving me. There's something about the empty dress that speaks of mothers, as spent as husks, as skins that have been shed. It reminds me of one of Kim Chernin's insightful comments on eating disorders: that mothers and daughters, as lovers and rivals, are locked into one another. The daughter cannot bear to

¹⁵ Interview with Tracey Emin by Mark Gisbourne, 'Life into Art', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, issue 20, pp. 28-34. p. 31

¹⁶ Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder to Writing*, (1990), (trans. Sarah Conell and Sarah Sellers), New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 21.

do better than her mother, yet she cannot bear to be her mother.¹⁷ And what does the mother want? How would I know, I am only a daughter.

Food and clothing are popular subjects with many women artists. Hermione Allsopp's 'Death by Chocolate: Eat this in Remembrance of me' (1998), for 'Chocolate' at Collin's Gallery, forms an interesting comment on the parallels between emotional and oral satiation. A body of chocolate lies still as a corpse, full and solid, with a greasy sickly surface. A number of textile artists have made empty dresses. Caroline Broadhead's show 'Bodyscape' (1999) at the Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham consisted of transparent dresses. 'Steppenwolf' (1997) and 'Shadow Dress' (1998), hung away from the wall, cast animate shadows more solid than the fine material they were constructed from. The fragile shadows of the seams are the substance, while the body has mysteriously disappeared. What about Jane Baker's beautiful brittle 'Glass Dress' (2000) that would tear your flesh if you slipped inside or Marina Abramovic's stone shoes whose cool and silky interiors tempt your toes inside, only to realise that if you lifted your foot these shoes would break your ankle.

For 'Art Textiles 2', a site specific show at the Bury St. Edmund's Art Gallery, (2000), Shelley Goldsmith also exhibited empty dresses. She imprinted tiny toddler's dresses reclaimed from the children's home of Cincinatti with images of floods. The interest in fluids and femininity is not new for Goldsmith, having worked with themes concerning menstruation before, but here water is not a life affirming element but a life threatening one. In 'Fluids' (1999) an installation in the Salara, Bologna, Italy, performance artist Wendy Ryan also explored water, childhood and danger. The work was created in the salt cellar and the women's spaces of a derelict workhouse, and dealt with associations made with salt - alchemical, religious and domestic. Ryan's performances comprise ritualised actions, sound pieces, and light projections onto found clothing,

I've been interested in textile art for quite some time now. I like it's naughty nature, not quite fitting into any set category, not craft, nor design, not even art. I've made my errors in mistaken identity: a group of students looked at me in horror as I once described myself as an architectural designer. 'What's wrong with that?' I said. 'Architects are ok', they said. Architects were ok because they were into space, sort of clever and a bit mysterious, but designers were not ok, they colluded with the market place. On another occasion when I congratulated a textile artist on the meticulous craft of her work. I committed an even bigger gaff. Craft meant making and this implied not thinking, that the work was not conceptual - an important aim for younger generation artists working in textiles.

¹⁷ See Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity*, New York: Harper and Row, 1985, p. xiii, p. 130, p. 201.

A colleague once defined it for me: textile art can either involve a textile-based process such as weaving, and any material, or it must involve a textile but not necessarily a textile-based process. 'Could a house with a carpet count?', I asked, 'or a brick wall inlaid with one fine golden thread?' What about Melanie Counsell's work, her over-long calico curtains soaking up water at Tooting Bec Psychiatric Hospital (1989), her installation combining a soaking wet rolled up carpet and floral curtains twisted round a washing line at Matt's Gallery (1989) or even her use of a tent at TSWA Four Cites Project, BSR Factory, Derry (1990). There is Tracey's famous tent, 'Everyone I have ever slept with 1963-95', (1995) and Sarah Lucas', 'Au Naturel', (1994) comprising a bucket, two melons, two oranges, a cucumber and a mattress. I think of Sally Morfill's 'Travelogue' (1997), a piece of lurex thread wound round and around a plywood plinth, forming a painstakingly precise shiny band. It is Ariadne-like, my favourite figure in Greek mythology, whose cleverness with thread took Theseus to the centre of the labyrinth to slay the Minotaur. And back out again, whereupon he abandoned her, and she found solace in the drunken orgies of Naxos, but that's another story.

vi table and chairs

MG: Do you feel you had a childhood?

TE: Although I have a really brilliant memory – my work is about memory – in my childhood I have massive blanks. I do remember waking up in the night crocheting. I remember banging my head against a brick wall. I remember putting bamboo stick through my leg. I remember all these weird events. But I wasn't very happy as a child. I am not very happy as an adult, now I come to think about it.¹⁸

Tracey's mum: 'I want you to be free. . . once you have a child. . . your mind becomes a different thing.'

As if to demonstrate this very thing, Kristeva intersperses her analytical, discursive text with lyrical, discontinuous fragments of an 'other' text- this 'other' text being the inner discourse of a mother, Kristeva herself/ since the lyrical fragments are surrounded, enveloped by the discursive text, it is tempting to see the two as 'mother' and 'child'.¹⁹

¹⁸ Interview with Tracey Emin by Mark Gisbourne, 'Life into Art', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, issue 20, pp. 28-34. p. 31.

¹⁹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking who one is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 29.

Every time I walk into the gallery there are two women sitting on the two small children's chairs, headphones on, totally engrossed in the video they are watching. Here Tracey and her mum are sitting at a table chatting over a cup of tea. Except that the conversation they are having, although it appears to be full of laughs, is deadly serious. They are discussing Tracey's past, her teenage youth and her present, her career as a famous fine artist. Tracey keeps asking her mum why she doesn't want her to have a baby. And her mum is insistent, having a baby changes you, she says over and over again in many different ways: you can't be a mother and an artist. The mother and daughter watching are gripped, laughing, they can't tear themselves away. But then they are suddenly silent, tears fill their eyes.

Sitting around a table is a very female thing to do. I remember a conversation with my best friend Nikki. We used to sit around our table first thing in the morning, last thing at night, drunk, sober, debating art and politics, gossiping about food and sex. Who, we wondered, was going to be the first to have a table of her own? Having a table of your own was a sign of having come home, to a home of your own. The table is such a significant place for gathering, for friendship, for sharing food and conversation. From Judy Chicago's seminal 'Dinner Party' (1974-9) to Suzanne Lacy's, 'The Crystal Quilt', (1987), a project involving hundreds of women in their sixties and older, sharing stories at tables; feminist artists have a history of working with tables. But a newer generation of artists are investigating the more ambiguous nature of domestic furniture, the sense of comfort that obscures and constrains. Think of Jane Simpson's 'Sacred' (1993), a curvaceous white chest of drawers, emanating milky breath as it freezes and melts, but marked with rose-red pin-pricks like bruises visible just beneath the surface. The domestic space of the kitchen table isn't always the easiest place to be.

vii house

MG: You create rooms or studios for the gallery space, as in the South London Show and in Ca-Ca-Poo-Poo in the Cologne Kunstverein. What is this need to be in the middle of the work?

TE: *Personally I would like to live and work in the same place. Sometimes people walk past [the Tracey Emin Museum, London], they look in and say 'there she is'. It is like they have seen my art by seeing me. Sometimes it really irritates me that for a lot of*

*shows I have to be there. People get bitterly disappointed if they know I am not going, whereas a lot of other artists don't have to go.*²⁰

Writing is not making love but making room, 'making room for the other part of myself who is the other, who can only exist, of course, if I am there to receive' (p. 112). So I have to be there and not be there, the homemaker's predicament.²¹

This is how I figure it: the ladder is neither immobile or empty. It is animated. It incorporates the movement it arouses and inscribes. My ladder is frequented. I say my because of my love for it; it's climbed by those authors I feel a mysterious affinity for; affinities, choices, are always secret.²²

Next to the conversation piece, the table and two chairs, there is another domestic setting. This one is outdoors, a collection of outdoor plants in big pots, red geraniums mostly, which over the course of the show loose husky petals to the floor. The smell dry, the sound is hot, of buzzing insects, of holidays in the Mediterranean or a baking July day in London. A small wooden ramshackle hut is perched on legs, a ladder leads up to it and from the top rung you can see into a tiny peep hole. I climb up the ladder, as I bend forward to peer, I am conscious that I am positioned somewhat provocatively in the gallery, just above eye height. I imagine myself viewed from behind, juxtaposed against the image in the background, the big one of Tracey with some angry scrawls:

*'Don't look for revenge it
Just happens
if you don't like it
then go and fuck
yourself don't take it
out on me'.*

From the 'Flower Show', (1999-2000) at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, to 'Sub Rosa' a touring show of 30 Nordic women artists working with the flower as a motif, there is a current interest in flora. Anya Gallaccio has been exploring the delicacy of flowers as part of her more

²⁰ Interview with Tracey Emin by Mark Gisbourne, 'Life into Art', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, issue 20, pp. 28-34. p. 30.

²¹ Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 250.

²² Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder to Writing*, (1990), (trans. Sarah Conell and Sarah Sellers), New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 5.

general concern with changing nature of materials in transition. For example, we have the fragile chains of gerbera suspended in space in 'Head over Heals' (1995), or caught, as their prettiness starts to decay, between sheets of glass in 'Preserve 'Beauty' (1991). Tina McCallan's 'Attic Installation' (1998) at 'Clerk's House' created an atmosphere of saturated blue and heady aroma, with her video of a greenhouse dense with carnations, their petals swishing against bare skin. Coloured shells were laid out on the white painted wood floor. Delicate and brittle, yet brimming with scented promise. Emin's use of flowers is more earthy, the only similarity is the sound of midsummer. I peek through the hole, a middle-aged man, tanned, overweight and sweating, in a white sun hat and tight blue trunks, comes towards me through the lush undergrowth. It's Tracey's Dad and he's holding out a pink carnation for me to smell. I lean forward to inhale, and then he moves back, smiling, turns around and disappears off the way he has come, lurching through the vegetation. Fathers and daughters. Mothers and daughters. Fort and da. Here and there. What does a father's absence mean to his daughter?

I stumble backwards down the ladder.

There's Tracey again. I'm a bit sick of her to be honest. She's lying on her back, what's new, her hand is between her legs, what's new. Bits of her have been cut out and glued back on carelessly. 'A Working Landscape (in my dreams)'. But the 'L' could be an 'h'. . .

Next to her, her image asks:

'Give it to me like a man I'll take it like a man.'

viii tableaux

Partly what moved me in the 1960's was the way it made me think about the vocabulary of a whole text as a field, a coherent field in which certain words worked and others didn't. But partly it was the excitement and freedom of the self-reflexive narrative transgression.²³

Of course we all have our stories. Except that actually we don't. For example, a lot of art now is about stories but they tend to be the possible stories of someone else, not the story of an artist. A lot of art has street wisdom-ish titles and slogans attached.

²³ AS Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, London: Chatto and Windus, 2000, p. 98.

But they are not really wise. The art usually doesn't even mean those things, it could mean something else and still work OK as art. Whereas Tracey Emin's art couldn't mean anything other than it does.²⁴

MG: Your use of sewing and stitching seems to suggest the home environment – somewhere to be decorated and to perform.

TE: *That's a bit of a posh way to put it. I sew simply because I sew and I am actually quite good at it. It's not like I am trying to come up with some kind of grand female statement. I like the humbleness of sewing. [...] So you might think it is domestic but I actually think it is something that you get in mental institutions. Who knows, you may see me there in forty years time, sewing the same bit of cloth again and again.*²⁵

There are some embroideries, or are they samplers? Whatever they are technically, the words are made with a needle and thread and the pictures of birds on branches are sewn in pastel pinks and blues. Sewing by numbers, these are raw, but tender pieces, of needlework. Childlike in their execution, in their subject matter, and in the messages they convey:

'It could have been something very ugly but I thought about you.'

Her prayer blankets come from someone a bit older, not yet a woman, this is the stropky self-obsessed teenage Emin. In pastel pink ribbons and bloody red velvet, they tell stories of love and abortion, of silly childhood games, of bitter resentment and violent passion.

'Something really terrible.'

'No-one would believe her.'

'Come unto me.'

'It's a spiral witch goes down.'

'Helter fucking skelter.'

'I find your attitude a little bit negative.'

'Always alert, always active

Volcano closed, both eyes open.'

²⁴ Matthew Collings, 'Just how big are they?' (edited by Carl Freedman), Tracey Emin, *I need Art like I need God*, London: Jay Joplin, 2001, pp. 58-9, p. 59.

²⁵ Interview with Tracey Emin by Mark Gisbourne, 'Life into Art', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, issue 20, pp. 28-34, p. 30.

ix door

MG: To what extent do you rely on the complicit voyeurism of the world?

TE: *I was thinking more about the narcissism behind what I do – the self, self, self – and how difficult it is for me to really share things, even though I think I am sharing all the time. In my personal life it causes a hell of a lot of problems. At one point I would have sacrificed everything to be what I consider normal. Like the other day I hated my art so much I wanted to smash it up, like you abuse a faithful lover. I was so angry with it because I thought this is all I fucking have.*²⁶

'I really matter', is the message of her art. She had a dark childhood, and teenage promiscuity was a bid for freedom and self expression. But there was the feeling after a while death lay in that direction. Even so, there was the idea in that dressing up and disco dancing and having-sex time, that ultimate freedom of thought was some kind of early aim for her. Avoiding death, she thought art might be the route. I think that's it.²⁷

Emin's subject matter is herself; her life story is the source of her pain and her pride. She mines this resource ruthlessly – pinpointing the pettiness, hypocrisy and abuses of trust and probing the disappointments, loneliness, fear that one experiences so keenly in childhood as well as celebrating the happiness and the euphoria.²⁸

The final piece is a video work, to hear it, you have to step into a cubicle the size of one of those at the swimming pool. The cubicle made of wood, with an ill-fitting open door, I can't work out if it's a room or a door or both. The video image shows another door, Tracey's front door, and Tracey is there, twice, on the inside and on the outside. The Tracey indoors is nice, a bit timid and frightened in her dressing gown, holding tight a bread knife for protection. Outside in the stairwell, is a nasty Tracey, tough, mean and smoking, in black leather and jeans, battering at the door.

Nasty Tracey (kicking the door): *Open the door. I can hear you.*

²⁶ Interview with Tracey Emin by Mark Gisbourne, 'Life into Art', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, issue 20, pp. 28-34, p. 30.

²⁷ Matthew Collings, 'Just how big are they?' (edited by Carl Freedman), Tracey Emin, *I need Art like I need God*, London: Jay Joplin, 2001, pp. 58-9, p. 58.

²⁸ Sarah Kent, 'Tracey Kent: Flying High?', (edited by Carl Freedman), Tracey Emin, *I need Art like I need God*, London: Jay Joplin, 2001, pp. 31-7, p. 37

Nice Tracey: (cowering and whining): *Who is it? What do you want?*

Nasty Tracey (shouting and sneering): *I don't want your weakness, that's what I don't want.*

This work is hard core, Tracey is facing up to those demons within, those conflicting aspects of the self - one too complying, really pathetic, the other an aggressive, domineering super-ego. Where am I? Who am I? How many of me are there? This is the stuff of psychoanalysis, that only years in therapy can start to unravel; that, or a few drinks. These are the kind of themes that artists such as Gillian Wearing has dealt with, or that Sharon Kivland and Victor Burgin explore, though in a more theoretical ways.²⁹ It is also the territory of Sophie Calle, particularly in work such as 'The Birthday Ceremony' (1998), where she tells us who she really is. Teasingly, of course. Well, show me someone who really knows.

Similarly, the self is not a fixed entity but an evolving process, not something discovered (or passively 'remembered') but something made; which does not mean that it does not exist, but that its existence is always subject to revision (re-vision).³⁰

The subject at risk is the unparalleled subject of writing, in the double sense of the genitive, passive-active: writing matter, producer of the text.³¹

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²⁹ See Sharon Kivland, *The Case of Hysteria*, Bookworks, 1999 and Victor Burgin, *Shadowed*, London: AA Publications, 2000.

³⁰ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking who one is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 3.

³¹ Mireille Calle-Gruber, 'Afterword', Susan Sellers (ed.), *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 207-20, p. 216.