

Confessions around Sexuality as a form of Practice in the Artwork of Tracey Emin

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Abstract

In this research I examine the idea of confession and confessional art as a form of practice in selected examples of artworks by British contemporary artist Tracey Emin. Emin's work is paradigmatic of this kind of impulse in contemporary art and is clearly linked to an exploration of autobiography in art. Confession, stemming from religious and psychoanalytic practices, and more recently in the form of television chat shows, always involves an audience, i.e. the people who the confessor confesses to. Emin's work can be shown to openly present the private to the public, thus framing such perceptions of confession even though her work does not necessarily share the same moral framework as is traditionally the case with practices of religious confession. Her work epitomizes the practice of confession in art in the extreme and I particularly focus on her explicit references to sexuality. I also evaluate my own creative work in the light of the above as there is not much of this kind of framework in the context of South African art.

Declaration

I declare that this is my own unaided work. It is submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Masters of Arts in Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Antoinette Murdoch-Trapani

_____ day of _____ 2010

To my beautiful daughters Zoey and Mia,
thank you for loving me,
I trust that you will grow up to make sense
of life, love and sex.

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Introduction

An article by Lina Goldberg titled *Artist as Victim, Artist as Celebrity: Interrogating the Work of Tracey Emin and Sue Williams* (1999) sparked my interest in confessional art.¹

The article outlines the fact that in the early 1990s some artists were criticized for too narrowly focusing on themselves as subject matter. Goldberg refers to the work of Tracey Emin and Sue Williams in order to elaborate on the extreme responses to this kind of art that focused on the sexual and the domestic. Sue Williams first brought attention to herself as victim by exhibiting images of rape and abuse at the 303 Gallery in New York in the early nineties (Goldberg 1999: 1). According to Goldberg, Williams openly spoke about her personal abuse and in this regard can be compared to Tracey Emin whose work similarly addresses very personal and intimate experiences. This paper will specifically interrogate confession around sexuality as a form of practice in the autobiographic artwork of Tracey Emin.

¹ As Fanthome puts it: “Confessional modes of expression permeate contemporary media and have become an integral part of celebrity self-representation. For Tracey Emin, confession is particularly significant as it is both a crucial ingredient of her creative inspiration and also responsible for her status as one of Britain’s best known artists” (2008: 223). Joel Swanson defines religious confession as follows: “Confession in a religious context, although generally and conceptually instituted within the New Testament, was formally codified into Catholic practice as integral to the Sacrament of Penance through a series of institutional interpretations and reifications. Most of these engagements surrounded the practice of “Private Confession”. As a sacrament, private confession was instituted by Tertullian in the 3rd century at the Council of Trent. The contemporary image of private confession remains, due to its various representations within popular culture such as film, as the solitary confessor divulging transgressive behaviors to the priest through the screen of the tenebristically lit confessional booth. The priest then prescribes penance, which upon its completion will render the confessor absolved from sins committed (absolution leads to the final state of the sacrament which is satisfaction). Along with the codification of confession, penitential discipline also introduced the concept of tariff penance, which is the assignment of particular penance by the priest to the specific sins confessed. These changes affected the increased focus on confession enacted through the categorizing, cataloguing, and measuring of sins” (2005: 2).

Goldberg points out that Emin makes use of “her two abortions, childhood sexual abuse, her rape at age thirteen and subsequent sexual promiscuity, the fact that she has herpes, her alcohol abuse, her suicide attempts, her menstrual blood and her boyfriend's penis size” as subject matter and considers nothing too sacred or too private to share (1999: 3). This process of personal disclosure is further examined by Christine Fanthome in her article *Articulating authenticity through artifice: the contemporary relevance of Tracey Emin's confessional art* (2008) as she highlights possible reasons why Emin shares her private life with her audience. Possible explanations offered include the fact that autobiography could be considered crucial to a sense of self-identity, as well as the therapeutic nature of the process of disclosure. Both of these ideas will be further examined in this paper.

While Tracey Emin has often been criticized for being guilty of narcissistic self-indulgence, Fanthome points out that spectators of her confessions could make use of these sexual articulations as a channel through which to process their own social meaning and that Emin's artworks thus “provoke questions about the relationship between artist and observer that extend beyond the artwork itself” (2006:31). The private is made universal and this could explain the iconic status of Emin amongst her fans (2008:226). I will consider this aspect of her work a bit more in closely examining selected examples of her work as well as some of the audience responses to these works.

Emin was born in London in 1963 and spent her childhood in Margate, a coastal town in England that also often features centrally in her artworks. After graduating she worked

with fellow artist Sarah Lucas² and together they opened a store selling so-called homemade pop culture and “low art” products (Goldberg 1999:2)³. This collaboration only lasted for six months, after which the shop closed and the content was set alight. While Emin continues to run her own online shop she is now considered to be one of the leading controversial Young British Artists (YBA)⁴ group.

Emin has become notorious for works such as *My Bed* (1998), which was her entry for the Turner Prize in 1999. In addition to this unmade bed surrounded with used tampons, condoms, empty bottles of vodka and other objects, Emin has also attracted attention with works like *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995), an appliquéd tent which is a revealing investigation of her exploration of memory and truth. She is further known for drunken public appearances and handmade quilted blankets displaying confrontational statements as well as neon signs and erotic, scratchily drawn monoprints, all of which have contributed to her public profile. Lina Goldberg comments that Tracey Emin has in fact become a “demi-celebrity” with all her appearances outside of the so-called art world (<http://knol.google.com/k/artist-as-victim-artist-as-celebrity->

² “Sarah Lucas is a British artist. She is part of the generation of Young British Artists who emerged during the 1990s. Her works frequently employ visual puns and bawdy humour, and include photography, collage and found objects.” (<http://www.artandculture.com/users/3398-sarah-lucas>)

³ A 2009 article in *Times online* tells of the handmade T-shirts, baby vests, badges and key rings that could be purchased at the shop (<http://www.shutitdown.net/text/victim.html>).

⁴ “In the late 1980s British art entered what was quickly recognized as a new and excitingly distinctive phase, the era of what became known as the YBAs – the Young British Artists. Young British Art can be seen to have a convenient starting point in the exhibition *Freeze* organized, while he was still a student at Goldsmiths College in London in 1988, by Damien Hirst, who became the most celebrated, or notorious of the YBAs. Goldsmiths, which was attended by many of the YBAs, and numbered Michael Craig Martin among its most influential teachers, had been for some years fostering new forms of creativity through its courses that, for example, abolished the traditional separation of the media of art. The label YBA turned out to be a powerful brand and marketing tool, but of course it concealed huge diversity. Nevertheless certain broad trends both formal and thematic can be discerned. Formally, the era is marked by a complete openness towards the materials and processes with which art can be made and the form that it can take. Leading artists have preserved dead animals (Damien Hirst), crushed found objects with a steamroller (Cornelia Parker), appropriated objects from medical history (Christine Borland), presented her own bed as art (Tracey Emin) made sculpture from fresh food, cigarettes, of women’s tights (Sarah Lucas), made extensive use of film, video and photography, used drawing and printmaking in every conceivable way, increasingly developed the concept of the installation (a multi-part work occupying a single space), and not least refreshed and revitalized the art of painting.” (<http://artwelve.com/explore/Emerging-Markets/Young-British-Artists>)

interrogating-the-work-of-tracey-emin-and#). Amongst other things she has recorded a song with 80's pop singer Boy George and modeled for fashion designer Vivienne Westwood. She is either loved or hated by critics and members of the public and often features in British gossip columns. The boundaries between her life and her work become completely blurred and her sexuality seems to be her central theme in exposing her life to the public. Tracey Emin publicly admits that her work is about herself and that she feels completely part of it (Fanthome 2008: 233). As Adrian Gargett puts it:

Taking "confessional" art to new heights of disclosure her work relates everything we could ever want to know about her life. Her sadness, happiness, weirdness are her art. An insistent narrative of bad luck, bad men, bad sex, bad betrayals and survival. Emin is dramatically honest in her work. An unusually frank artist telling us frankly about her unusual personal development. Boozy, direct, uninhibited, inspired by films, pop music, tough on men; she is the voice of the single urban female, telling it like it is. Emin possesses an unerring ability to "package" her personal anguish in a direct and lucrative manner. She has become a heroine for the disaffected generation (2001: 2).

Emin employs a wide range of media and this multiple-media approach reflects her piecing together of aspects of her life and leaving the viewer to also try to piece together various fragments as "she moves abruptly between large-scale sculpture and video to the patiently handcrafted media of appliqué and drawing" (ibid: 5).

Chris Townsend and Mandy Merck make further attempts to locate Emin culturally in their book *The Art of Tracey Emin* (2002). They compare her "self-promotion" with artists such as Gilbert and George, Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali, but argue that while these artists lived very public lives, they did not offer any of the emotional darkness brought to the fore by Emin. It is made very clear that her seriousness and urgency of production sets her apart from these artists and the rest of the YBA (ibid: 10).

Emin actively exhibits and, according to her most recent press release for her fourth New York exhibition entitled *Only God Knows I'm Good* (2009), her recurring themes are still “love, sex and lust” (http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/#!/exhibitions/2009-11-05_tracey-emin/). In her continued use of a variety of processes including monotypes, embroidery and film, she claims to be in continuous search for clarity. The title for this exhibition was appropriated from David Bowie’s lyrics and in keeping with her pop status, the publications on her work and her life seem to be never ending and she continues to be a favoured choice for Art Fairs and Biennales over the world. Tracey Emin lives and works in London. The Tate Britain recently opened a room devoted to her work and she represented Britain at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. The Hayward Gallery in London will host the first retrospective of her work in England in 2010.

Even in the 21st century Emin still faces censorship and criticism for publicly advocating promiscuity. Her 2004 movie *Top Spot* was given an 18 age restriction by the British Board of Film Classification for a suicide scene, while generally she is criticized for contributing to moral decay (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2004/oct/22/bbc-broadcasting>). I will examine her work and her intent with confession around sexuality to consider how her work perhaps meets a need to confess within a prevailing climate of censorship and prohibition. Her work is clearly provocative and confrontational.

Michel Foucault, in his *Repressive Hypothesis* (Rabinow 1984: 301), outlines how censorship appears to have its roots in the seventeenth century and how we still seem to

suffer the consequences of imposed silence (ibid: 302). It is argued that while there was an expurgation and the establishment of very specific moral codes, there was also (from the seventeenth hundreds onwards), a discursive explosion with regards to sex (ibid: 318). In the *History of Sexuality* (1990) Foucault goes on to emphasize the centrality of confession in Western society to the production of truth. As Fanthome notes:

He argues that the ritual of confession is not a new occurrence but was established in the Middle Ages, since which time it has achieved a pivotal role in society by becoming central to civil, religious and social procedures (*here Fantome directly quotes Foucault*):

We have since become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. (Foucault 1990:59)

Foucault further acknowledges the

centrality of the theme of sex to the process of confession, observing changes pre and post Freud. He notes that before Freud sex was shrouded in mystery, as it was not talked about openly, whereas after Freud there was a movement towards greater openness and frankness. This change in perspective influenced other cultural forms such as letters and autobiographical texts, and eventually affected society's response to sexual disclosure in a fundamental way by promoting the expectation that feelings surrounding the sex act, and not just the act itself, needed to be exposed, explored and explained (*here Fantome directly quotes Foucault*):

It is no longer a question of simply saying what was done – the sexual act – and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it (Foucault 1990, 63) (2008: 225-226).

As Fanthome says, “this goes a long way in accounting for the appeal of Emin's confessional art, and her installations in particular, which enable the spectator to seek and

interpret clues about the artist's history and context should they wish to do so" (ibid: 226).

Some consideration will have to be given to the above in my examination of the manifestation of sexuality in Emin's work and also in the broader context of contemporary visual art. Lina Goldberg explains that confessional art "found its place in the social landscape" in the 1990's, first through music but also in other social activity (1999: 3). She identifies individuals such as Sylvia Plath as forerunners of this genre and acknowledges the late 1980's and early 90's in America as the time when this art form became prominent. Goldberg refers to musicians such as Tori Amos who sang about her personal rape experience and Kurt Cobain who confessed to hating his father as popularising confession in music. She points out that the visibility and vocalization of issues such as sexual abuse was crucial at the time. The silence was broken through the explosion of talk shows and it was the beginning of reality TV. As Joel Swanson puts it: "In the 1990's, American talk shows and call in radio shows take on a curiously confessional tone (with Jerry Springer as a Jewish Priest?). MTV's the Real World, started using a separate confessional room which subsided of a single camera in front of which a character could confess his or her secrets to the viewing public. The influx of digital technologies has provided even newer confessional forms: blogs, social software, chat rooms, text and instant messaging. Even cell phones can function similarly to confessional structures in that they use the screen to provide an ambiguous anonymity from which an interpersonal discourse is enacted" (2005: 4-5).

Fanthome mentions Jon Dovey who notes that there has been an increase in “confessional modes of expression” in recent years. Fanthome goes on to say: “The television schedules in particular are now interspersed by first-person narratives: chat shows, reality TV, documentaries, features, competitions, lifestyle programs, and light entertainment. Moreover, the subjects of these programs are frequently ordinary people, who then become “celebrities” as a result of their involvement. Similarly, celebrities take on the role of “ordinary people” in top-rated programs such as *Celebrity Big Brother* and *I’m a celebrity: get me out of here*. the BBC’s *Video Nation* project, which was launched in 1993, has ensured that fifty “ordinary” people have been given access to the airwaves each year to document their own perspective on their everyday life. *Video Nation Shorts* has enabled literally hundreds of contributors to broadcast a one or two minute glimpse of their own lives, in what has become an absorbing and iconic appointment-to-view. These developments have prompted a wave of academic enquiry and writing focusing on, for example, genre mutation (Corner), the mediated representation of everyday life, and the contemporary depiction of celebrity (Van Zoonen). Dovey notes that a great deal of factual TV ‘Is now based upon an incessant performance of identity structured through first-person media speaking about feelings, sentiment and, most powerfully, intimate relationships’” (2006: 39).

With work by women being given a new prominence within the artistic community during the late 80s and early 90s, confessional art came into prominence as a significant genre of that decade and notably associated primarily with women artists. As Goldberg notes:

Women artists especially were criticized for bringing matters of sexual and domestic abuse – subjects often regarded as “women’s issues” – to the forefront in their art. Supporters proclaimed that these artists were reversing the tradition of regarding woman as the muse or object of artistic representation, and were, instead, becoming agents of their own creativity. By frankly addressing the dark side of female sexuality, they were creating art that was both inspired and empowering. But other viewers said that these artists could not be taken seriously because their self-proclaimed status as “victim” had the effect of placing their art “beyond the reach of criticism.” And, later, as the novelty of the female-confessional genre wore off, it became all too easy for critics to accuse artists such as Tracey Emin of producing little more than “unadulterated, self-indulgent crap” (1999: 1).

In discussing my own body of creative work which also deals with confession around sexuality, but more specifically with regard to upbringing in a prescriptive religious environment and censorship toward sexual content in a South African Afrikaner cultural context, I will also examine connections to the religious practice of confession as may be evident in Emin’s work, specifically in light of her Catholic background. As Sally Munt puts it: “Her work contains themes of spiritual anguish, debasement, and revelation, appropriating many religious traditions of art and representation that imitates the soul-searching quality of its purpose” (2007: 212). When confronted about her religious views, Emin volunteers the following: “At the moment, if you go to Liverpool Anglican Cathedral you’ll see a giant neon piece of mine. It says, ‘I felt you and I knew you loved me.’ If you deal with those kinds of ideas, you believe in an after-life, your ideas run parallel to religion. I am respectful toward it, though I certainly wouldn’t say I was a Christian” (<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601088&sid=a12pquKpooZ0&referhome>).

Emin's desire to confess is more of a cultural rather than religious phenomenon as she acknowledges that her confessions "produce[s] healing rather than achieving[es] forgiveness", her spectators are actually her counsellors and she feels that it is a form of therapy to be interviewed about her work (Fanthome 2008: 233). Her confessional style lends itself to popular media and as Swanson puts it:

The public eye, as enabled by technologies, has arguably taken the place of the priesthood. The priest has evolved into a polymorphous entity, the countless millions who are always and never watching: the generalized other. And this generalized other is the new locus of power. Confession still functions in the contemporary psyche, it has just channeled itself into new architectures and modalities (2005: 4).

In order to situate Emin's practice historically, I will need to provide some background to sexuality in contemporary Western art and particularly how women artists have contributed to this phenomenon since the 1960s. In my first chapter I address this by providing a brief overview of important influences and events that have had a major impact on the way in which artists have explored sexuality in contemporary art practice. Surrealism, psychoanalysis, feminism and the rise of women artists, the 'counter-culture' of the 1960s and the widening of the range of means of expression in art are amongst the points briefly touched on before also mentioning a few examples of artworks to demonstrate how women artists have approached themes around sexuality in their work, also with regard to the confessional genre. I then also briefly discuss sexuality in contemporary South African art where conservative attitudes still prevail in the post-apartheid years.

In Chapter Two I examine selected examples of Tracey Emin's artworks in discussing her concern with confession around sexuality as a form of practice. I discuss works such as *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With From 1963 – 1995* (1995) and *My Bed* (1998) by firstly describing them in detail and then bringing in critical responses to the works. Emin's choice of medium is always an important factor in how her work is read and while some critics have criticized her for being narcissistic and exhibitionist, others have pointed out how undeniably mediated and constructed her work really is. I try to elaborate on this and also foreground the fragmentary and multi-vocal style of her artworks. While Emin is not a religious person and her work does not necessarily share the moral framework as found in religious practices of confessing, there is an affirmative spiritual and religious sentiment in her work. I also touch on abjection and how it foregrounds a tension behind erotic art and consider some critical audience responses to her work. Nudity and explicit sexual imagery, censorship and so-called 'victim art' are briefly discussed.

In Chapter Three I introduce my own creative work submitted for this degree in an exhibition titled *Karaoke Confessions* (2007). My personal concerns with confessional art as a form of practice are discussed in view of observations made on Tracey Emin's artworks in previous chapters, positioning my work and specifically this exhibition within confessional art practice. In a brief conclusion I draw together the main ideas and findings of my research.

Chapter 1

Sexuality in Contemporary Art – A Brief Overview:

Sex is about much more than sex. Arguably, it is the single most important key to unlocking the secrets of human motivation. That is certainly the view of psychoanalysis; and there is a strong case for saying that the principle value of psychoanalysis and those schools of thought which derive from it lies less in the sphere of therapy than in what they have to offer intellectually to a much wider understanding not just of the actions of individuals but of collective human action as well. History, politics, sociology and all the human sciences have already learned much but have much more yet to learn from focusing on the seemingly irrational patterns of belief and behavior that can be brought about by the workings of unconscious desire. Art, while lacking the kinds of analytical tools that theoretical disciplines possess, has a correspondingly greater freedom to explore in intuitive and imaginative ways, with the potential to lead to still newer and more unexpected insights. It follows that art about sex has, in principle at least, the potential to lead to radically new insights of particularly crucial human importance (Watson 2008: 127).

The 1960s saw a massive acceleration in the extent to which sex was discussed and sexual images were being produced and also used as subject matter in art of the West. Also, after a long-standing history of the neglected social status of women in society, we see major improvements in this regard in the sixties and seventies with feminism being one of the prominent forms of subject matter in art (ibid: 1). The rise in the number of women artists since then is probably one of the biggest historical changes affecting art. One of the key intellectual reference points for recent art dealing with issues around sex and sexuality has been the discipline of psychoanalysis, and as Watson points out:

Even if some artists working in this area have been hostile or indifferent towards psychoanalysis, there can be no denying that the writings of Freud and his followers, naturally including the more rebellious ones, have both been a source of inspiration and because of the central position accorded to sex in the psychoanalytic picture of the world, provided a highly suitable framework by means of which art about sex can be discussed (ibid: 2).

Before looking more closely at Tracey Emin's artworks in the context of confessional art practice around sexuality, informed as it is by her autobiography, it is important to look briefly at art in this context from the 1960's onwards so as to sketch a contextual background to her confessional practice as a contemporary art phenomenon.

Surrealism (especially the more extreme and darker wing represented by figures such as Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille and Hans Bellmer) was of course the first movement to be seriously influenced by Freud's theories around psychoanalysis and it also became the most important precedent for recent art dealing with sex. "Narrowly speaking, psychoanalysis is a method of analysing psychic (psychological) phenomena and treating emotional disorders: broadly speaking it is a philosophy of human consciousness, both individual and social. Its modern founder is Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939), an Austrian doctor who developed a therapeutic method for analysis the unconscious through the interpretations of dreams, verbal slips, jokes, etc. and through the use of free association. Freud himself, and many after him, applied the theory and practise of analysis to works of art and literature and to society at large" (D'Alleva 2005: 88,89). "Freud stressed the importance of infantile sexuality in later development, evolving the concept of the Oedipus complex. His works include the *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923) (Collins English Dictionary 2008: 656). Many of the concerns of

the Surrealists, especially the quest for total liberation, were carried over by the youthful 'counter-culture' of the 1960s and creativity became more openly linked with sex, most obviously in the area of rock music. During the 1960s, the idea of 'high art' was also being challenged with increasing recognition of the importance of popular culture. Also, movements such as Conceptual and Performance Art widened the definition of what constituted art (ibid: 3). Imagery dealing with sex within the ambit of popular culture started to filter through in the explorations of Pop Art of the 1950s and 1960s in Britain and the USA.

The body is central to Foucault's writings. He is concerned "not only with how bodies have been perceived, given meaning and value, but with 'the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested' [...] In the modern period, Foucault argues, sex has become a focal point of the exercise of power through the discursive constitution of the body. Yet sex does not exist outside of its realization in discourses of sexuality. Like the signifier in language, it is always historically and socially specific and its meaning is a site of constant struggle. Sex has no essential nature or meaning" (Weedon 1987: 119).

The idea of viewing sexuality as a social construct (rather than innate or natural) and the "centrality of sexuality as a locus of power in the modern age" (ibid) as expressed by Foucault has opened up opportunities for ideological and political expression around the body as the site of sexual experience and also in addressing a wide range of psychosexual issues (Watson 2008: 7,8). During the 1960's many artists in the West started making

use of their own bodies in performative work. The use of the body “could also to some extent be seen as a reaction against the prevalent post-structuralist focus on ‘the-text’, or at least as a means of reintroducing sensuous reality into theoretical discourse” (ibid: 7). The erotic potential of the body is explored to the full in so-called Body Art⁵ and Performance Art⁶ and live performance was to be the medium, which proved to be the most significant in terms of dealing with sex (ibid: 4). Watson credits Harold Rosenberg’s characterization of Abstract Expressionist as ‘action painting’⁷ as well as the delayed influence of Marcel Duchamp for this development (ibid: 9).

The experience of sex is inevitably very different for men and women and the issue of the gendered body has been a vital point of debate in recent art discourse. As Watson puts it: “Whereas in the past, exploration of sex in art was almost exclusively the preserve of men, in recent years this has shifted radically, to the extent that now it is women to a much greater extent than men who are pushing the boundaries and charting hitherto uncharted territory” (ibid: 16). While both Surrealism and Pop Art was mainly expression of male sexuality, “art historians have begun to qualify this picture with the benefit of a hindsight informed by feminism” (ibid: 18). Subsequently, attention has been given to recuperate the careers of female Surrealists such as Claude Cahun, Leonora Carrington, Meret Oppenheim, Dorothea Tanning and the better-known Louise Bourgeois, although she should perhaps not be classified as a Surrealist. Her work provides a link between

⁵ “The 1970s saw the heyday of “Body Art” (an offshoot of Performance Art), which began in the 1960s. In Body Art, the artist’s own flesh (or the flesh of others) is the canvas” (<http://arthistory.about.com/cs/arthistory10one/a/performance.htm>).

⁶ “Performance Art’ meant that it was live, and it was art, not theater. Performance Art also meant that it was art that could not be bought, sold or traded as a commodity. Performance artists saw (and see) the movement as a means of taking their art directly to a public forum, thus completely eliminating the need for galleries, agents, brokers, tax accountants and any other aspect of capitalism. It’s a sort of social commentary on the purity of art” (<http://arthistory.about.com/cs/arthistory10one/a/performance.htm>).

⁷ “The term characterizes artists who first and foremost see the canvas as a space for action. Jackson Pollock is the artist who best illustrates the techniques of action painting” (<http://www.jackson-pollock.com/action-painting.html>).

the Surrealist milieu of the 1930s and 1940s as she continues to reinvent her work throughout the twentieth century. Will Gompertz points to the sexual and autobiographical nature of her work, which can be compared to that of Frida Kahlo and Tracey Emin (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/oct/07/louise.bourgeois>). He further points out in this article that the autobiographical content of most women's work sums up the struggle of women who are expected to live with the responsibilities and constrictions of attempting to maintain the balance of wife, mother and domestic while trying to retain a semblance of individuality and personal sexuality (ibid).

Another factor that comes to play when it comes to female artists expressing their sexual identities from the 1960s onward is the widening of the range of means of expression. Performance, installation and experimental film provide a suitable platform for these artists. Previously, media such as painting and sculpture were dominated by men, but “with these new media, artists were free to make up the rules to suit their own needs as they went along [...] One performance piece that could be seen to comment directly on this situation was Shigeko Kybota's *Vagina Painting* (1965), “in which she squirted paint from her vagina, ridiculing the notion that language, art and other symbolic systems of communication need be the privileged preserve of men” (Watson 2008: 19).

Working in the 1960s, Carolee Schneemann, a key pioneering feminist, used her work to express her active sexual desire, for example in her film *Fuses* (1964-74) where she records herself and her then lover, James Tenney, in the act of making love. Her most iconic performance, however, was *Interior Scroll* (1975) in which she stood naked on a

table, reading a scroll that she pulled slowly from her vagina “Schneemann’s message conveyed the importance of a specifically female consciousness and sexual experience, not only to women but to society as a whole” (ibid: 19).

Another artist who should be noted in this context of work dealing with female sexuality is the French artist Orlan. She is perhaps best known for a series of plastic surgeries, witnessed by the audience in video documentation, to transform her own body. She thereby deliberately exposes a parallel between religious martyrdom and the lengths to which some contemporary women go to live up to canons of female beauty. In earlier work, such as *Le Baiser de l’artiste* (1977), she also dealt directly with sexuality, albeit humorously and in a teasing way. In this artwork, a prosthetic naked torso was attached to the front of her body and she invited visitors to insert five-franc coins into a slot at the top of the prosthesis. The coins then rolled down a vertical conduit, landing in a triangular container between her legs. While this is a playful take on commercial sex, other women artists, notably Annie Sprinkle and Cosey Fanni Tutti, have made art about their autobiographical experiences with the sex trade. Several years later, Tracey Emin, confesses to being paid for sex in *Strangeland*. Watson notes:

Historically, in art as in all parts of society, female sexuality has been an unknown quantity, conceived around an enigma, the hidden, the unknown and the unconscious, offering not a finite destination but a realm in which to search. The necessity for female artist to express their own sexuality and authentic desires has been counterbalanced by an impulse to deconstruct the limitations of a male vocabulary: representations of female sexuality appear alongside examinations of the means of representation itself, creating new ways of affecting as well as reflecting female sexual experience. Certainly female sexuality is still something to be created collectively, an open-ended quest, in which artists can play a leading part. It need hardly be said that this gives an enormous sense of opportunity (ibid. 27).

From the various examples mentioned above it is evident that the traditional viewing of images of women through male eyes has changed significantly. Women artists are clearly expressing, exploring and celebrating their own experience of female sexuality as well as female authorship and spectatorship. Closely related to concerns around sexuality is the notion of autobiography and it too takes on a variety of forms and involves a range of practices in contemporary artworks made by women. As Gibbons points out:

The revealing of personal histories has become a popularized practice through mass media such as tabloid newspapers or television – the chat show serving as an obvious example. Equally, autobiographical information has become a key part of the everyday administration of institutionalization of our lives – in the filling out of insurance forms, applications for finance or social benefit, the recording of medical histories and so on. Operating on so many levels and in so many forms, autobiography plays a key role in Western culture and has come to represent a key issue of our time: the relationship of the private to the public [...] The current openness of expression in contemporary art has allowed for the terms in which autobiography is figured to be stretched and tested in new and significant ways (2007: 9).

In the South African contemporary art context, sexual subject matter and autobiography is also being explored by a young generation of artists, but as Stacey Hardy puts it quite frankly: “Apartheid repression clamped down mercilessly on cocks and cunts. Then there was the Struggle. In those days there was no time for dicking around. Arousal was drowned out by shouts of ‘Amandla!’” (2006: 42). Sue Williamson expands:

In the apartheid years culture was widely held to be a weapon in the arsenal of the movement against racism that South Africans called ‘the struggle’. Culture was a powerful agent in preconditioning audiences to change, an expectation that relaxed only after 1994 when artists felt freed morally to create work unshackled to a political imperative. A diverse range of personal explorations around identity and heritage has understandably dominated post-apartheid artistic production. (2009: 124)

But despite this moral freeing up for artists to explore more personal material, a conservative attitude towards sexual subject matter in art still persists in the post-apartheid years as the following quote sketches:

Laws criminalizing miscegenation, commercial sex work, homosexuality, abortion and almost all explicit and even suggestive representations of sex inscribed the Apartheid system into the most intimate bodily practices and consciousness of all South Africans. Policies advancing rights and freedoms for all South African citizens have now replaced those enforcing racial discrimination. However, these new rights and freedoms are profoundly abridged by entrenched racial and income inequalities, deeply rooted and widespread conservative moral attitudes, and some of the highest reported rates of sexual violence and HIV-infection in the world (<http://www.artthrob.co.za/08mar/news/maart.html>).

As Hardy puts it: “[...] occupying the vacuum caused by the demise of apartheid censorship is an insidious wave of moral conservatism. Who can forget the 1995 banning of Bitterkomix? Or the furore Kaolin Thompson’s 1996 vagina-shaped ceramic ashtray caused in Parliament? Or the hysterical response by Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, Lindiwe Sisulu to Mark Hipper’s 1998 Grahamstown Festival exhibition of child nudes? It doesn’t end there. Remember the fuss around Peet Pienaar’s foreskin performance from 2000”. As Hardy’s article continues to outline, such sexual suppression and rallying for censorship reveals “the dangers of a sentimental, prescribed rainbow reality”⁸

While some South African artists certainly do address issues around gender, same-sex love and AIDS and through their work attempt to “inform their audiences of the damaging effects of intolerance, calling for a generosity and a humanity that, sadly, too often can be lacking” (Williamson 2009: 123), there is not much evidence of work that

⁸ The term ‘rainbow nation’ was first applied by Bishop Desmond Tutu to denote the miraculous homogeneity “around which post-apartheid South Africa was being reinvented as a multicultural, multiracial society”. (Williamson 2009: 16,17)

could be identified as being specifically confessional around sexuality. The notion of confession has certainly featured strongly in the political sphere in the post-apartheid years with the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1995. It was instituted to investigate human rights violations since 1960 and “was authorized to grant amnesty to those perpetrators who made a full disclosure. The commission also had to foster reconciliation and unity among South Africans.” (Giliomee and Mbenga 2007: 413)⁹.

A young South African artist whose work perhaps comes closest to a form of confession in the context of consumerism (e.g. obsessions around having and not having/eating and not eating) is Frances Goodman. In her work she frequently makes use of sound recordings, often inspired by pop songs and characters in books by Charles Dickens, Emily Brontë and Virginia Woolf. Taken out of their original contexts, they sound very much like real-life (i.e. non-fictional) confessions to the viewer/listener. An example is *Table for Three* (my heart will go on) (2004/5) installed in the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg. The work consisted of tables set as in a restaurant and viewers were invited to sit down and put on headphones that relayed such recordings.

In other works, “the obsessiveness of the feminine domestic arts is also apparent in a series of dazzling beaded pincushions that stab home the painful hypocrisies of social intercourse. A work of black sequins and red beads spell out the words “exquisite pain”. The seductive disco shimmer of other works in this series read: “oozing sex”,

⁹ The commission received some 21 300 victim statements that recorded some 38 000 gross violations of human rights. More than 1000 perpetrators received amnesty after full disclosure.

“paralyzing fear”, “gushing sympathy” and “consuming jealousy”. Aptly, the surface almost obscures the content”. In *You and You II* (2003) portraits of a man and a woman are framed in large, dark, circular frames and accompanied by audio monologues. The recording contains “a poetic string of naked confessions: ‘you make me believe I am almost lost without you. You make me greedy for your attention. You make me want to consume your identity....’ ” (<http://www.artsouthafrica.com/?article=442>). There are interesting connections between Goodman’s and my own works which similarly deal with confessions around sexiness, romance and personal relationships. I discuss my own creative work in more details in chapter three.

In the following chapter I focus on selected works by Tracey Emin in examining the idea of confession and confessional art as a form of practice.

Chapter 2

The Practice of Confession around Sexuality in the Work of Tracey Emin

Tracey Emin elaborates on her lonely childhood in her autobiographical collection of memoirs titled *Strangeland* (2005). Divided into three sections: “Motherland”, “Fatherland” and “Traceyland”, she recollects poignantly, for example, on how she once got dressed up and went to a party at age seven only to be told by the birthday girl’s father that she did not “have an invitation”. That night she cried herself to sleep and in the morning she asked her mother what an invitation was (Emin 2005: 25). Her autobiography relates many similar stories and several artworks deal directly with such painful disappointments, embarrassments and rejections throughout her life.

In “Motherland” she looks at her early childhood and teens, focusing specifically on the relationship with her twin brother, and it offers a vivid depiction of life as a child and then a teenager growing up in Margate¹⁰ She writes about “rape, sexual abuse, poverty and degradation as well as family intimacy and love” (Fanthome 2008: 232).

“Fatherland” focuses mainly on her Cypriot heritage and her relationship with her father.

“Traceyland” presents several experiences together with poetry that advises mainly on sexual matters and describes personal crises and crossroads such as her abortions.

¹⁰ “Already in Georgian and Victorian Times, Margate was a popular seaside resort offering Londoners escape from the omnivorous city. Those able to afford the fare took a ferry down the Thames and disembarked directly on Margate piers. ‘Today’s Margate is less glamorously associated with Chaz and Dave’s infamous *Down a Margate* song portraying the area as a bargain basement British resort that the whole family can afford’. In summer the town is a destination of those who cannot afford to go abroad. Londoners arrive at the weekend for cheap nights out in the pubs and discos. Those forced to live there would prefer to move” (Goetz, I and Urbaschek, S 2006: 470).

O’Keefe comments that Emin “is at a strategic disadvantage when it comes to writing her autobiography – we know most of the juicy bits already” (cited in Fanthome 2008: 232), but her writing also adds intimate details to what is already known from interviews and publicity around her and what she presents in her drawings and installations. Text is clearly very central to her project of placing her own autobiography at the centre of her work. But word and image also become inextricably linked in her work, as can be seen in her embroideries, appliquéd blankets, neon tube works and the following work to be discussed.

The way in which moments from Emin’s autobiography are linked with collective experience and recollection becomes very clear in her work *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With From 1963-1995* (1995) (also known as *The Tent*)¹¹ In this iconic example of confessional art Emin makes her private sexual behavior very public¹². This work consists of a small shop-bought, igloo tent which Emin appliquéd on the inside with 102 names of people in variously coloured, cut-out letters. The letters spell out the names of all those who shared a bed with her during that time and along the edge on the outside of the tent it reads: 1963-1995. These include early boyfriends and girlfriends, family members, her twin brother, and of course subsequent lovers. Amongst the names on the inside of the tent are also the words “Foetus I” and “Foetus II, referring to her two abortions. While the inner walls are covered in text, the floor of the tent also displays some lettering reading: *With myself always myself never forgetting*, thus also including herself as named in this work.

¹¹ This provocatively titled artwork was included in the well-publicised *Sensation* exhibition held at the Royal Academy in 1997 that brought the Young British Artists firmly into the Establishment.

¹² This artwork was destroyed in a fire at a Momart art storage warehouse in 2004.

Rosemary Betterton argues that the exhibit can only be fully appreciated by crawling into the tent, which “suggests that the audience is being offered an experience of revelation which may be intimate or voyeuristic, depending on one’s viewpoint” (2008: 228).

Crawling inside the tent and lying down “on the lettering representing Emin herself, thus forg[es] a link, albeit transitory, between artist and spectator” (Merck 2002, 130 cited in Fanthome 2008: 228)¹³. The viewer is left to work out that the names in the tent are not only the names of lovers, but also include “family, her friends, comatose drinking partners, her aborted fetuses” (Brown 2006: 83). Emin herself says: “The thing about the tent that really annoys me, when it’s in the media, is people just write it’s the names of my lovers. But it’s not [...] It’s about conception, sleeping in the womb with my twin brother, up to my last friend or lover that I slept with in 1994. That’s what the tent’s about. It’s about sleep, intimacy, and moments” (Gargett 2001: 1).

Thus being about ‘sleeping’ in a broader sense than just the sexual, Neal Brown suggests that this work implies that Emin’s presence is defined by other people, but that she “remained isolated and alone, somewhere between solitude and loneliness” (2006: 83).

Gibbons notes: “The listed names are reminders of the many intimacies that her bed has been host to but does not attempt to differentiate between them nor to disclose the relationships involved, so that if we want to know more about who is named we have to go to whatever is available in other sources” (2007: 20). Merck comments that the underlying tone of the work suggests that “sharing is inevitably short-lived, but the self

¹³ As Merck notes, the encounter of the spectator crawling inside the womb-like structure and lying down on the message inscribed on the blanket covering the floor is “a critical celebration of this brief encounter with an artist who sleeps with herself [...] it affirms another self, that of the spectator, whose own sense of personal continuity is sustained in an experience of intimacy and separation she compares to ‘sex with a stranger’” (2000: 259).

survives” (2000: 259). Gibbons observes that “details of the memories represented are not up for sharing in the viewing of this piece and nothing is actually confessed.

Alongside the naming of her dormitory companions, it is the idea of the intimacies and associations of the bed that Emin opens up for scrutiny” (2007: 20)¹⁴. It stands out as one of Emin’s most intimate works and corresponds closely to several crudely appliquéd blanket artworks in which she similarly sews big letters to form words interspersed by small pieces of fabric containing hand written diary entries.

The appliqué technique used for creating the blankets is traditionally assigned to women’s work made from scrap fabric and thus, in contrast to institutional and commercial design, places it “within the unsophisticated and less supervised sphere of the domestic and amateurish” (Morley 2003: 188). These patchwork bed coverings recall ideas of the bed as focus of “matrimonial female domesticity” (Brown 2006: 37). While ideas of matrilineal heritage, marriage and birth are evoked through these blankets, the text is often in stark contrast with such potentially docile concepts. In addition, such processes have been recently disparaged for their association with feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s. But Emin seems to ignore these histories and embraces the associations with memory as she selects pieces of fabric filled with nostalgic experiences¹⁵.

¹⁴ Renée Vara has suggested that the tent adds substantially to the meaning of the work, “its iconography (for Emin in particular) going back to the Tibetan tent as a site of that which is ritualistic and contemplative” (Gibbons 2007: 20).

¹⁵ “...her use of fabric associated with important individuals is reminiscent of the way in which children adopt and cling to soft blankets for reassurance. Psychologists call such fabric pieces ‘transitional comfort objects’ – more commonly known as security blankets – from which children are inseparable, at least until their next developmental step” (Brown 2006:37).

Blankets can be both associated with warmth as body covers as well as with cold, impoverishment, pain and loss and are often seen in the media as covering disaster survivors and refugee victims (ibid). Blankets are

Historically used in ceremonial remembrance of the dead; for example, in America babies were sometimes buried in tiny coffins lined with quilts made from fragments of their clothes. Protesting hunger strikers have been known to strip themselves of their prison garb, retaining only a blanket to cover themselves, and Britain's mentally ill and homeless beg by cashpoint dispensers wrapped in them. Although they can be plain, dirty, raw and itchy, a blanket is one of the most fundamentally important possessions of those leading an impoverished existence (ibid 37,40).

In addition to all of these associations, Emin's blankets function as unstretched painting canvases, reminiscent of heraldic banners and flags. There is also the reminder of religious banners used in processions and protests. Her statements on these blankets are usually exclamatory: "Like pop-song lyrics, they are catchy, and like an endearment to a lover – or an insult to an enemy – they stimulate a strong reaction" (ibid 48). In *Psycho Slut* (1999) letters were cut out to form the following phrases: "Pysco Slut, And I don't have to tell you its all to beautiful, Every time I see my shit, yea I know nothing stays in my body, I didn't know I had to ask to share your life, You see I'm one of the best, You know how much I love you, Oh Trace shit, It's you again". These fractures of thoughts are displayed against a backdrop of brightly coloured patchwork, a pair of dancing cowboy boots and some swimming semen.

In response to works such as these and in keeping with the observations made by the various critics mentioned above, critic Natasha Walter comments on the deeply emotional nature of Tracey Emin's work, which she feels is partially the reason why Emin gets so

¹⁶ "Psycho" is wrongly spelt in this artwork and reads "PYSCO". Emin's bad spelling has become one of her trademarks.

much public and critical attention, but she also questions the validity of this “emotionalism/turns exhibitionism” which she associates with the fact that Emin is a woman (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_19991025/ai_n14268422). She also hints at the fact that as for so many women artists before Emin, unhappiness and woe is often what feeds the artist to be creative. Walter points out the danger of the fact that the public’s attention feeds the artist to create more work of sorrow and that making this work does not contribute to a therapeutic healing process, referring to the eventual suicide of writers such as Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf. The Title of her article: *It’s time for Emin to make her bed and to move on* (1999) implies that she feels that Tracey Emin has lost her ability to differentiate between herself and her art. She is concerned about the fact that in a male-dominated society, women choose to express themselves emotionally and that this reiterates stereotypical perceptions about women and makes it hard for them to gain respect. It seems that Walter feels that emotionally charged women’s work might for the time being serve as a strategy for women to gain access into a closed male world, but that it would be much more affective in the long run to employ other plots.

In addition, Julian Stallabrass, along with other critics, offer their concerns about the emotional content of Emin’s work now that she is not experiencing hardship any longer. Emin’s integrity seems to be in question since she is no longer outwardly suffering.

Stallabrass quotes Emin denying these accusations:

People think that because my life has become more comfortable, my work will get insipid. On the outside it might look like my life is very comfortable, but inside my heart is still in turmoil over things. I still go to bed crying, I still pray to God for a better life, I still curl up in a small foetal shape and cower

from the world and those feelings never change (Emin quoted in Stallabrass 2006: 43).

However, Stallabrass feels that Emin makes new commodities in order to keep up with the demand for her work and that what she produced for her 2002 show at Modern Art in Oxford supported her brand rather than investigate new themes (ibid).

From a more (delete: supportive) positive angle, Fanthome notes that “it is perhaps unsurprising that turning to one’s own personal autobiographical experience, or to that of others, can locate meaning and provide explanation and validation”. She goes on to quote Giddens:

Autobiography – particularly in the broad sense of an interpretative self-history produced by the individual concerned, whether written down or not – is actually at the core of self-identity in modern social life. Like any other formalised narrative, it is something that has to be worked at, and calls for creative input as a matter of course” (2006: 40)

Emin’s art is undeniably mediated and constructed, as will be shown in my discussion of further examples of her work. It is in her selecting, editing and organizing of her own experiences that she makes the resulting creation of her artworks meaningful to the viewer.

Rosemary Betterton also seems to underscore this aspect in her essay *Undutiful daughters – avant-gardism and gendered consumption in recent British art* (2000) where she explores the confessional mode of Emin’s art. She sees the autobiographical elements “less as direct outpourings and more as highly mediated and artful self-reconstructions. Drawing on the work of Joan Smith, she proposes

that the tactics of self-revelation by women artists are not so much exhibitionism, the implications of the allegations made in the *Guardian* that Emin is a ‘dedicated media tart and headline junkie’, but rather that they comprise a counter-aesthetic to reclaim feminine subjectivity”. She carries on by saying that this kind of self-representation is “part of contemporary consumer culture. She likens Emin’s art to the feminized genre of day-time television shows where audiences in the studio and at home consume not so much commodities as experiences as they watch subjects confess the private in the public, not just blurring the boundaries between two domains but wholly confounding them. Yet, as she suggests, such strategies are not without risk, all too easily confirming women artists as hysterical and deviant” (Cherry 2002: 5). Betterton’s concern about voyeurism and sexual fantasies potentially triggered by Emin’s performances seems to be shared by many critics.

Arguably the most notorious of Emin’s confessional works is *My Bed* (1998). This installation work is of the artist’s own double bed, dirty, rumpled sheets and detritus including bloodied underwear, empty liquor bottles, discarded tissues, cigarette ends, condoms, used tampons, dessicated apple cores, contraceptives, a child’s toy and other leftovers from sexual encounters. The title of the work exclaims that this particular bed in fact belongs to the artist and it puts the artist at the ‘scene of the crime’ so to speak. As Goldberg says it is “ostensibly Emin’s actual bed in which she had lain for four days while contemplating suicide” (1999: 3). The bed has no frame and consists of a mattress on top of a box made of wood. Emin says the following about the moment of realization that led her to display her own bed as an artwork:

[I] was surprised to wake up from it. I'd been drinking, I hadn't been eating for days; felt like a twig when I got out and crawled to the bathroom to get some water. Then I looked back and saw the bed and I thought that's it: I've got to do something with this. It was like a screen had come down between me and it and I knew it was art. It was a vision. (Gargett 2001: 3)

Different versions of *My Bed* have been exhibited in various locations. The first display formed part of a group show called *Minky Manky* at the South Gallery in 1995 and then it was shown at the Tate's Turner Prize exhibition in 1999 while yet another exhibition took place at Lehmann Maupin in New York in 1999. Showings of *My Bed* also took place in Tokyo and New York. As Fanthome points out, the fact that *My Bed* is not simply a reflection of Emin's life but is carefully constructed and mediated is evident in the fact that key differences occur in the arrangement of the installation from venue to venue. Most particularly, a rope noose was hung above the bed in London (2008: 229), "a final touch [...] as a silent testament to Emin's pain and narcissistic exhibitionism", according to Goldberg (1999: 3).

The original display at the Tate Modern was positioned centrally in a room with polished lightwood floors. Similar lightwood also formed the base of the bed supporting the mattress. The urine stained white linen appeared very untidy and interspersed with tan coloured, worn pantyhose and white towels as well as pillows randomly strewn around. To the right-hand side of the bed were two suitcases wrapped with what seemed to be elastic cord and chains and on the other side of the bed was a dark blue rug with a round side table, an empty Vodka bottle, photographs, a soft toy and shoes. In a separate room,

a number of video pieces including *Tracey Emin's CV. Cunt Vernacular* (1999)¹⁷ were also on display. These other works “amplified details of the artist’s personal profile not otherwise deducible from the installation presented to the public” (Mahon 2005: 270).

From details about the bed and the video works on show the audience was thus allowed to ‘investigate’ the work and what it was about. Gargett points out that ultimately *My Bed* raises questions about Emin herself and he points to a religious dimension:

It’s a piece of iconography, the inability to control one’s bladder a correlative for the inability to control one’s life. There’s something essentially Dickensian about this need to wade through excrement; the belief that “good” can only be found by touching bottom, redemption only in darkness. In addition there is a singularly Christian dimension, an idea that fascinated Emin. “For years, I made religious art”, she says, “then I destroyed it, I did, like, a thousand drawings of Jesus being crucified; I was very interested in Mary Magdalene, I did drawings of her at His feet; I did the Wedding Feast at Cana, and John the Baptist’s hand – just his hand. And I did lots of Depositions” (2001: 3)

Such preoccupation with Judaeo-Christian iconography informs much contemporary art making in the West and religion often “suffers rejective insult” in the process, as Brown puts it (2006: 111). He points specifically to artists such as Francis Bacon and Andres Serrano (*Piss Christ* (1987))¹⁸ Tracey Emin’s works differ somewhat in that her images are interpreted as positive in their affirmation of spiritual and religious sentiments. Hers is also a more varied religious reference than the Judeo-Christian, as the following quote reinforces:

¹⁷ Emin’s video CV is an accompaniment to her work on paper, *Tracey Emin CV* (1995), which is “a potted history of the artist’s professional and emotional life from conception until 1995. This CV, read aloud by Emin, constitutes the sound-track to the video and provides contrasting background to the visual information on display [...] The video was originally titled Tracey Emin Curriculum Vitae, but the artist later replaced the words ‘curriculum vitae’ with ‘cunt vernacular’ as a pun referring to the sexual history recounted in the narrative (the original written cv).” (Elizabeth Manchester 2002 <http://213.121.208.204/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=27324&sea...>)

¹⁸ “The infamous large scale photograph *Piss Christ* (1987) has widely been criticized as ‘blasphemous since the pretty red glow, and the work’s title, emanate from a plastic crucifix suspended in urine’” (The Prestel Dictionary of Art and Artists in the 20th Century 2000: 296).

The use of the word 'God' in her work, as signifying extraordinary and ultimate value, has always seemed adequately purposeful, without any need to qualify how much her use of the term is specific to (or an approval of) any particular religion, or to none at all. It might be the best to simply describe Emin's spiritual outlook as having qualities of religious pluralism within which is manifested a personal relationship with devotional spirituality. (Brown 2006: 111)

Fanthome notes that the key changes in detail in *My Bed* from one exhibition venue to the next are further evidence

that Emin's mediated confessions should be interpreted as a starting point for spectatorship rather than a simplistic solution to decoding her art. The degree to which it is purely autobiographical should not be of primary importance, although Emin's willingness to draw on aspects of her personality and behaviour that present her in an arguably humiliating and demeaning light enable her to prove what Gray term's "her 'genuine' emotional and cultural authority" (Gray 2002: 132). Emin's candour, specifically about traditional "taboo" subjects such as rape, sexual abuse, promiscuity and bodily functions, is fundamental to the public response she generates, which spans the spectrum from shock and abhorrence to intimacy, resonance and intense shared meaning. As Gray notes: "Tracey Emin has made the inversion of every protocol of feminine decorum so dear to middle England central to her creatively performative processes (Gray 2002: 132)" (2008: 229)

This unflinchingly genuine and direct form of expression in examining events and emotions that usually remain very personal is what so clearly characterizes Emin's work. As Gargett puts it, she "wants to "crack open secrets," smash apart their power by communicating them to us, and admit to things you'd die to conceal rather than confess. The work is affecting, affectionate, nostalgic, neatly grouped; often based around a phrase, such as 'I need art like I need God' (1994) (Written on Cliftonville sea wall), or integrated into a story or film project" (2001: 2).

Critics have compared Emin's bed to other artists who have used the bed as subject matter in their work, the best-known example perhaps being Robert Rauschenberg's famous combine painting *Bed* (1955).¹⁹ In this sense Emin's work continues a subversive use of bedding and soiled matter in modern art.²⁰ For his combine painting Rauschenberg used an actual sheet, pillow and quilt to stretch an upright 'canvas' in the form of a bed and smeared and splattered thick paint marks onto it. Mandy Merck compares the "skidmarks" (2002: 125) on Emin's linen to the graphite marks and thick paint on Rauschenberg's combine painting. Merck further elaborates that these markings "can be taken as attempts to connect the artist's body with the artwork, a connection that Rauschenberg also rendered indexical in various works by applying paint to canvas directly with hands or by handpressing his collaged images into their glue" (ibid:125). This comparative display of bodily traces is reiterated by Emin leaving behind used condoms and cigarette ends while these also tell of a preceding narrative. *My Bed* (1998) is the romance of what had happened the night before.

Mahon points out that *My Bed* suggests "not just the private made public, nor the need to confront the still taboo subject of woman's body; it also seems to stage a scene of sexual violence, or of suicide perhaps (in Tokyo and New York, the installation included a rope noose suspended from the ceiling). In the artist's own words, *My Bed* "looks like the scene of a crime as if someone has just died or been fucked to death," and as Merck

¹⁹ "Combine Painting is a term coined by Robert Rauschenberg to denote a type of work in which a two-dimensional picture surface is combined with objects or photographic images. Combine paintings are related to Dada, collage, and montage, but differ in that they incorporate large objects, as in Rauschenberg's *Black Market* (1961), a rope-tied combination of collage and a wooden case. Combine painting is also related to environmental, in which everyday objects are also sometimes used" (Prestel Dictionary of Art and Artists in the 20th Century 2000: 84).

²⁰ Other artworks that have made use of the bed include Judy Chicago's *Menstrual Bathroom* installation at Womanhouse (1972) and more recently, Gillian Wearing's *Take Off Your Top* (1993) in which Wearing took photos of herself in bed with men undergoing sex-changes, neither wearing anything on top).

notes, “sex is not so much coupled with violence as equated with it” (2000: 255).

Emin’s installation in fact provokes members of the public to reveal their own unconscious fears about woman, sexuality, and death – the desire to mock this art work or to laugh at it is best understood as nervousness in the face of the abject” (2005: 272).

The abject from the Latin for ‘to cast away from’ (*ab-jacere*) is the space of the outcast. The French theoretician Julia Kristeva describes it as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Mahon 2005:272). This theory of abjection draws from two key elements: “a blurring of boundaries between self and other, which relates to psychoanalytic ideas of the ‘visceral unconscious’ and the ‘bodily ego’; and the notion of ‘base materialism,’ introduced by the dissident Surrealist writer George Bataille, which challenges dominant concepts of mind/body dualism and our established categories of social taboos through an investigation of degraded elements” (Houser, Jones and Taylor 1993: 7). While often dealing with the marginal and the impure, the abject is also about intimacy, “it is where intimate suffering and loss can also join intimate sexual desire and excess as the body and mind, physical and psychic, come together”. As in Emin’s *My Bed*, abject art is a mixture of disgust and intimacy where the residue of bodily effluents such as blood, urine, cum, excrement, skin and hair become a medium and theme in itself. As Hal Foster puts it, such images “evoke the body turned inside out, the subject literally abjected” (Merck 2000: 255)²¹. Abjection also foregrounds a tension behind

²¹ Hal Foster considers the 1990s aesthetic of trauma, which he sees as a “rebuke to the poststructuralist celebration of desire and subjective mobility in fantasy. Such art is read to register the despair generated by systemic poverty, disease, death and an abandoned social contract. But Foster is skeptical of the ascription of truth to abjection, noting that it relies on two incompatible presumptions: the psychoanalytic account of trauma as that which shatters subjectivity, and more popular views that grant the sufferer the authority

erotic art, namely that between “the sacred and profane body, pure and impure desires, and the tension between Eros and Thanatos” (Mahon 2005:272). Bodily waste points to the fear and reality of death. For this reason many contemporary artists, including Emin, make use of religious symbolism together with the abject to articulate ideas around religion as purifying the abject.

Partly because of this tapping into a tradition of an aesthetics of dirt which adds to the transgressive nature of the work, *My Bed* elicited strong responses from the public and from critics:

Critics were quick to denounce Emin and to view the work as lacking in any significant meaning. One newspaper, *The Independent on Sunday*, ran a debate asking readers ‘would you show your bed to the public?’ (24 October 1999). *The News of the World*, a paper whose news is dominated by sex scandals and celebrity gossip, claimed a furious housewife had to be stopped from cleaning it all up (31 October 1999). A critic in the *Sunday Times* claimed it only appealed to ‘naughty schoolgirls’. Most art critics saw it as adolescent, as naughty. (Mahon 2005: 271).

During the display of *My Bed* (1998) at the Saatchi Gallery in London, two half-naked men jumped onto the artwork and staged a pillow-fight. Performance artists Xi Jianjun and Cai Yuan later explained that they were reacting to the self-promotion implicit in the work. (Merck in Merck and Townsend eds. 2002: 127). Criticism of this kind sees Emin’s work as “an expressive conduit for her emotions or as artful stage-management” (Cherry 2002: 7). As Cherry goes on to say, the tousled state of the bed “suggests occupation by figures who have departed or disappeared, its objects the possessions of the artist or left with her by another missing person, perhaps the man who wore the

of ‘witness, testifier, survivor’. ‘In trauma discourse’, he concludes, ‘the subject is evacuated and elevated at once.’” Merck notes that Tracey Emin’s artistic career “might have been invented to illustrate this paradox” (2000: 255).

underpants” and she points out that this metaphysics of presence and absence was called into question by the action of the two artists who jumped onto the bed. “In a western metaphysics of presence and absence the signature and title suggest the once present but now absent artist”. Working in the traditions of artistic, political and social activism, the two artists claimed to “act as artistic space invaders, using London as their exhibition space’ (Cai and Xi, 2000)” (ibid)²².

Merck also makes reference to the fact that the bed can be a signifier of human solitude as well as a signifier for sex, as it is often shared (2002: 128). The fact that the bed is unmade could imply a “night of passion”. But while Emin puts her sexuality on display, Merck also observes how her candour about sexual encounters simultaneously speaks of turmoil:

But as Emin’s installation, and much of her other work, insists, sex is not an antidote to singularity. Hers may be a double bed, the bed for the couple and coupling, but that only makes it a more potent figure of longing and abandonment. Moreover, its stained linen can be read to represent the dangers sex still represents for women – virginity undone, reputation lost, desire supplanted by disgust. At the very least, Emin’s bloodied bed suggests a battlefield, the *amor militis* celebrated in the Renaissance (2002:128).

For the work titled *Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made* (1996) Emin put herself on display for three weeks in a studio-living space at the Galleri Andreas Brandstrom in Stockholm. She appeared naked during this entire performance and was available for public scrutiny during gallery hours. Spectators viewed and were able to photograph her painting, eating, sleeping and telephoning friends in the nude (Merck 2000: 256). The

²² Cherry notes: “According to Eduardo Walsh (2000), this ironic and playful self-publicity was undertaken in order to call attention to the presence of Chinese artists in the UK and to refute the desires for authenticity, as well as to expose the sensationalism of contemporary British art and its press. “We are not trying to shock, we just want to show how spontaneous art is superior to the institutionalized art which dominates the Turner Prize (quoted in Kennedy 1999: 1)”.

video documentation of the work is called *The Life Model Goes Mad* (1996). In this work Emin literally exposes herself and the crude totality of her life and her nudity inevitably raises questions around her sexual display, the tradition of women in art and the objectification of women, i.e. the discourse around the “male gaze” and gendered looking. The fact that Tracey Emin has appeared nude or is depicted as nude in some of her public performances, drawings, paintings and photographs, often with her genitals exposed, seems to reinforce her own objectification.

A number of feminist writers have investigated the fact that the subject is not natural or whole but is produced through discourse, always gendered and shaped by power relations in society. Parallel to this investigation of the subject is the “interrogation of the female body as the object for the male gaze and as a vehicle for expressing and reinforcing patriarchal values, such as the association of women with nature rather than the “higher” sphere of culture” (D’Alleva 2005: 65). Following Lacan, psychoanalytic theorists use “Gaze” to refer to the process of looking, “which constitutes a network of relationships, and ‘gaze’ (with a lower-case “g”) to refer to a specific instance of looking. According to Lacan, we try to give structure and stability to our illusions, our fantasies of self and other via the Gaze [...] A lot of contemporary theorizing about the Gaze emerged in film theory, which emphasized the psychic process and experience of viewing. In her groundbreaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), English filmmaker and feminist theorist Laura Mulvey challenged patriarchal models of viewing in her critique of classic Hollywood cinema. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey argued that viewers derive pleasure from films in two ways: through scopophilia (or

voyeurism), the pleasure in looking, and through identification with the ideal ego, represented by the on-screen hero. Hollywood cinema reflects and reinforces the way that, in patriarchal society, “Pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female”. In the film, the hero is male and active and possesses the gaze; he makes the story move forward. In contrast, the film treats women as objects of desire, not heroes: they are passive, and, rather than possessing the gaze, they are the object of it. In fact, Mulvey argues, the woman’s appearance on screen often interrupts the flow of the narrative – she is pure spectacle [...] There have been a number of responses to and elaborations of Mulvey’s provocative thesis. Many critics have argued that, whatever Hollywood may intend, viewers may actually occupy multiple viewing positions, not just the binary either/or male/female. There are various ways for both men and women to possess the gaze or to be excluded from it due to such factors as sexual orientation, class, or race. Similarly, a woman viewer may indeed identify with a male protagonist, even if the Hollywood machine doesn’t intend her to; and a lesbian woman may fully experience the scopophilia, the erotic viewing pleasure, to be had from the spectacle of a woman on screen, while a gay man may not. The boundaries between active/passive and male/female aren’t always so clear-cut, either: the male body can also be fetishized and displayed as spectacle. In her essay “The Oppositional Gaze”, Bell Hooks argues for a gaze that challenges and critiques what’s going on in the film, rather than passively complying with it.” (ibid: 107,108).

The barrier between female sexuality and the public realm has long been a central issue for feminism, but as a recent article on this topic by Elizabeth Farrelly notes, “the debate now is, if anything, murkier, more veiled, than ever” (2008: 2). The title of an essay by Germaine Greer (2008) asks the question very directly: “Why do so many female artists put themselves in their work – often with no clothes on?” There is, of course, a long tradition of the female nude, but feminist painters and theorists have largely repudiated it and reviled the “male gaze”. The question therefore remains: “Why, then, do women artists so readily volunteer for this same gaze? Why, where men’s art typically says “look at this”, does women’s art now typically say “look at me?” (Farrelly 2002: 2). Farrelly goes on by saying:

[...] the question is not just why such female artists repeatedly choose their own bodies as subjects when, as Greer says, any of their ‘art school chums’ would have done as well. It’s not even the unaskable question, which draws Greer to the work of the US academic Linda Nochlin, of ‘why most women’s art is no good’, though both issues are related. It’s whether such repetitive, narcissistic, self-glamorising is substantially different from the three-year-old blonde in pearls and stilettos kissing her own mirror-image? Or for that matter, from your common or garden stripper? [...] Feminism has often wanted it both ways. Wanted to keep woman’s sexuality veiled, out of the question, leaving women unburdened by the gaze. And wanted to celebrate that sexuality, as evidence of difference, especially when this celebration was a female choice. (Feminism has often tacitly implied that women should be denied nothing). In other words: for women to paint female nudes, especially self-nudes, is entirely different from men painting female nudes. So much for the death of the author (2008: 3).

The monoprints which Emin produced during the time of this performance throw some light on her preoccupation with confession in such instances where she depicts nudity and uses overtly sexual imagery. A good number of these mono-prints depict Emin’s explicitly naked body in distorted positions, often with open crutch gesturing to sexual

poses and scenes of female masturbation. These images are mostly accompanied with statements in Emin's own handwriting on the prints themselves. The images are expressionistic in their gestural and urgently executed manner. The very process employed in order to create a mono-print requires a relatively quick hand as the ink should not be allowed to dry on the plate before it is transferred onto the paper. This very basic technique of printmaking is a once-off method of production, i.e. only one unique copy of each print exists, unlike printmaking techniques involving editions. The image is made by coating a smooth surface such as perspex with a layer of ink, placing a sheet of paper on top of it and then making use of a blunt tool to draw into the ink. This is then transferred to the paper and the image is thus revealed (in reverse) when the paper is peeled back. Often ink residue is left on the paper in places where the artist did not specifically apply pressure. These random marks form part of the final image and add a tentative texture to the artwork.

The mono-print *Thinking about you all the time* (1996) (58 x 81cm) appears to depict two individuals engaged in oral sex, a female figure lying down while the head of another person is strategically placed between her legs. The scratch marks to the side of this image imply that Emin either wanted to cover up an accidental mark or intentionally added these lines in order to add a kind of shadow. Either way, these scratch marks seemed to have been made out of frustration. The manner in which her drawing tool is not lifted from the paper but lines rather continue one into the next, suggests a sense of irritation reminiscent of a writer scratching out thoughts in an attempt to replace them with better ones. It is also evident that these marks are more strongly rendered than the

more sensitive lines with which the bodies have been drawn. Such marks carry the same kind of emphasis as a raised voice does in conversation, or even when screaming. Such evidence of irritation may possibly indicate sexual frustration as in this case it is coupled with highly charged sexual subject matter. Here too Emin becomes the central character/performer in her own narratives (Merck & Townsend eds. 2002: 84) while exposing a very private relationship and, according to the title, confessing to thinking about somebody all the time.

In the first chapter of *Strangeland*, Emin professes to the fact that her mother considered aborting her and her brother. She felt that she was dead at birth and that she was a “mistake” (2005: 4). She elaborates on how she tried to kill herself as a baby by pressing her mouth against the side of the carrycot and attributes the fact that she is still alive to her baby brother’s crying which would alert somebody to the fact. She recalls being called: “the deaf and dumb” as she did not speak until age three. Her chilling recollections of her parents screaming at one another and her severe loneliness do not paint a picture of a happy childhood. Further on she talks candidly and frequently about being sexually abused. She blames herself for a loveless relationship that she was in for three years where she was subjected to regular anal sex. Emin follows this tirade with a “size does matter” (ibid) comment while she elaborates on the tightening of the female “hole” just before menopause.

As already pointed out, the fragmentary style of Emin’s work and its multi-vocality (including her writing) leaves the viewer to try to piece together bits and pieces. Gargett

notes that Emin “avoids the danger of simply indulging in a private therapy by examining her own mementoes to construct “a fiction” (which says a lot about her as well as distinguishing her). The audience is then left to value their own mementoes, showing they are just as significant as something that is widely considered as important. What elevates Emin is the way she has shaken off the conventional role of an artist and yet still exists as one; you do not necessarily have to be confined by studio practice” (2001: 3).

This constructing of “a fiction” that Gargett points out strikes me as an important observation. One problem with the confessional nature of Emin’s artwork is that it is often wrongly assumed to be an unmediated reflection of her experiences. As Fanthome points out, “this may explain in part why the focus of critical and public attention often falls on the artist herself rather than the work in question” (2006: 33). Commenting on Emin’s own understanding of the process of constructing art from experience, Rosemary Betterton notes that “Emin poses questions about the relationship between representation, lived experience and the construction of self in art” (ibid). Deborah Cherry puts it as follows in writing about one of Emin’s blanket pieces and *My Bed*:

Garden of Horror (1998) weaves this mesmerizing spell, its broken grammar and lack of punctuation giving rise to multiple ambiguities of pleasure and pain: ‘You don’t fuck /me/over you gently lift me out of bed/lay me on the floor/and make love to me’, ‘Whats your ideal of betrayal’, ‘Welcome to my garden of horror/and you know I love you’. Using the language of the 1990s, Emin addresses her audience directly through the voice, not necessarily or exclusively her own. To interpret her art as the artist speaking about herself is to reduce or even to refuse its impact, to narrow it down to the expression/confession of one woman’s problems, a self-confessed slut at that. It is perhaps inevitable that Emin’s engagement with sexual politics is voiced through an individualized rhetoric. If this can be dismissed by linking it to the ethos of the ‘me’ generation, it is not dissimilar to the earlier address to sexual politics in the art of Barbara Kruger. Installed in New York and the Tate, *My Bed* became a powerful feminist statement. (2002: 8)

As Cherry goes on to comment, Emin's rhetoric and self-presentation are risky strategies, but "they may be among the only ways of speaking the sexual politics of feminism in a muted situation without a public movement" (ibid).

A chapter in Tracey Emin's autobiography *Strangeland* is entitled "Masculinity". In this chapter Emin rants and possibly even boasts about how she has more testosterone in her right foot than most men have in their entire bodies (2005). Boasting about sex is often associated with teenage boys as it seems to make them feel more masculine and grown-up and affords some distorted sense of status. For teenage girls, on the other hand, boasting about sex is more likely to get them the "slut" label. (Williams 2002:

http://books.google.co.za/books?id=wUFKvs1xxj4C&dq=Boasting+about+sex&source=gbs_summary_s&cad=0). Is Emin trying to affirm some sense of masculine power by boasting about her sexual experiences? Is she attempting to set straight this age old double standard in terms of acceptable sexual behaviour for men and women?

Foucault's *Repressive Hypothesis* (1984) gives insight into sexual behaviour over the last few centuries. As noted in the introduction, he outlines how censorship appears to have its roots in the seventeenth century and we still seem to suffer the consequences of the imposed silence (Rabinow 1984). According to Foucault we now read the history of sexuality according to what he calls the "repressive hypothesis" (ibid: 301). This means that we generally confine sex within marriage and regard everything outside this structure to be prohibited. He brings to the fore the fact that even up to the twentieth century, the

realm for discussing the sexual seems to be restricted to the academic and the confessional. He argues that beyond these explorations we remain so aware of our repression that we have created the need to speak about it openly (ibid: 315,6) and yet, due to this self-created repression we see the effects of censorship on visual art over a period of 600 years.

Emin's artworks seem to break open all forms of repressive restriction and censorship, but her stories carry an extraordinary level of humiliating content, drawing overt attention to the psychology of victimhood. She seems to be 'justifying' herself by drawing attention to incidents where she was wronged during her childhood years. From a position of victimhood, the victim is not responsible for what happened, the victim is always morally right, the victim is not accountable, the victim is forever entitled to sympathy and the victim is justified in feeling moral righteous anger for being wronged (<http://www.zurinstitute.com/victimhood.html>). It is perhaps the last two points that Emin embraces most fervently. She might feel that because of these incidents of wrongdoing against her she is entitled to sympathy and she is justified in feeling indignation for being wronged. This may be a very simplistic way of looking at this specific psychology, but as already pointed out, it is her candour in the light of her position of victimhood that is fundamental to the public response she generates.

Goldberg notes that the critic Arlene Croce, who popularized the term 'victim art', complained that

[...] things had reached the point where 'victimhood in and of itself is sufficient to the creation of an art spectacle'. She suggested that confessional

art defies criticism by engaging in a sort of emotional blackmail with critics and the public. She asked, 'Where will it go from here? If an artist paints a picture in his own blood, what does it matter if I think it's not a very good picture?' Croce also suggests that confessional art may be appealing to a different audience, one that may have previously found art 'too fine, too high, too educational, too complicated'. The implication is that an audience raised on a steady diet of talk shows and celebrity worship may only be able to respond to art in the same manner that they are accustomed to responding to most public spectacles: with a mixture of horror, titillation and Schadenfreude" (1999: 3,4).

The apparent 'self-absorption' of Emin's work is so clearly a means by which she copes post-traumatically with the humiliating experiences of her past and as has been demonstrated, her mediated construction of 'a fiction' so evidently underlines her artworks that it seems too simplistic to view her art as merely a display of victimhood. In terms of its therapeutic value, Emin's form of confessional art is not too dissimilar to artists like Frida Kahlo and Louise Bourgeois who similarly stage personal history, although in somewhat more suggestive ways. Kahlo (1907-1954) conflates autobiographical symbolism with cultural symbolism in her paintings and the "interweaving of personal memory with religion and myth not only allows for hindsight but also generates insight into the interweaving of personal memory within larger cultural schemes" (ibid: 14,15). Bourgeois (born 1911) also builds on personal experience in finding "a physical expression not only for that which has occurred but also for the complex of emotions that accompanied the experience" (ibid: 17, 18). As Gibbons points out, what distinguishes Emin's work from these artists' work is its directness. "The forms that she employs are seemingly more explicit and [...] the references to life events are more blatantly put" (ibid: 19). What I hope to have shown in this chapter is that her working through and coming to terms with personal trauma is never just

indulgent. Also, in opening her wounding to public probing she always also affirms the spectator.

As Cherry argues at the close of her essay:

It is all too easy to see Emin's art as the outpourings of a tortured soul and much harder to take it as serious, troubling work about migration, identity and sexual difference. 'Tracey', the institutions which produce her, and the YBA phenomenon just get in the way. Yet she is uneasily placed in the discourses of the YBAs which, for Kobena Mercer (1999: 53-55), constitute 'defensive and, above all, regressive responses to the bewildering effects of 'globalisation', trading in stereotypes of Britishness in a period of 'multicultural normalisation' and the cultural management of diversity. At the same time Emin has not been accommodated in discussions about diasporic art and internationalism. To continue to view her art in general and *My Bed* in particular through the frames of the dysfunctional female artist, 'bad girl', and young British artist is to miss the point and the charge of an extraordinary and awkward work (Cherry 2002: 11).

Chapter 3

Karaoke Confessions: A Solo Exhibition by Antoinette Murdoch:

Art has always been, a lot of the time, a mysterious coded language. And I'm just not a coded person; I wear my heart on my sleeve, if you like. What you see is what I am. I want society to hear what I'm saying. I'm not only talking to galleries, museums and collectors. For me, being an artist isn't just about making nice things or people patting you on the back; it's some kind of communication, a message (Emin cited in Brown 2006: 50).

Tracey Emin's emphasis on art being a form of communication or message deriving from a personal (autobiographic) impulse and addressing society at large relates closely to my own concerns in my creative work. Just as she uses the visual and the verbal (image and text) in her artworks to convey her message very directly, I have also used a combination of image and text in my work. Emin seems almost obsessed with the use of words and letters. Journalist Melani McGarth tells about a studio visit to Emin and how she was gathering some left over letters that she had cut from fabric for various art pieces. As they had never been used, she was sewing them onto a blanket arranged in alphabetical order and as McGarth notes: "Words, letters, writing are Tracey Emin's order"

(<http://www.tate.org.uk/magazine/issue1/something.htm>).

My own exploration of text in my artworks involves my personal handwriting as a form of doodling, much like Emin uses her scribbles and scratchily written marks when creating her mono-prints. But my writing is more consistently 'ornamental' in look, not unlike a child's slow form of writing when learning to write words. When compared to

Emin's works, even in her appliquéd blankets where she uses cut-out capital letters, my scripted works appear far less abrasive and rudimentary. It underlines my concern with how I have been brought up to conform to certain moral codes of conduct and Christian values, not least by way of practices such as learning to develop neat handwriting (known as "Skoonskrif" in Afrikaans, translated as "clean writing").²³ In contrast to Emin's very graphic and explicit images and performances, my own brightly coloured artworks appear comparatively inoffensive and even lighthearted in tone. It was my intension from the start to use bright colours in the words and phrases that I fabricate as a means of underlining a seemingly frivolous or 'sugar-coated' take on what is otherwise a deep-seated conflict around sexuality and desire. This will become clearer as I discuss the individual works on my exhibition.

My own body of creative work submitted for the masters degree was presented in 2007 at the Premises Gallery, Johannesburg, under the title *Karaoke Confessions*. Karaoke is defined by the Collins English Dictionary as "an entertainment of Japanese origin in which people take it in turns to sing well-known songs over a prerecorded backing tape (etymology: from Japanese, from *kara* empty + *ōkesutora* orchestra)" (2009: 896). As a popular pastime originating from Japan but widely practiced all over the world, Karaoke involves an act of singing along to a music video from which the original vocals have been electronically eliminated. The performer sings live in front of an audience and follows the words of the song on a video screen. Practiced in party situations, the participants would commonly be somewhat inebriated and in festive spirit, voluntarily

²³ I recall from my schooldays having embellished letters and words as a form of doodling in class and by applying this practice to my artworks I am referencing the transgressive act of not paying attention in class, i.e. a form of disobedience. This links to similar features of refusal to conform in my work which are spelt out further on).

blurting out the lyrics of popular love songs in an uninhibited manner. My own work makes use of text as image. I present relief panels in which word and image coexist in a “mixed-media relationship” where, as Morley points out, “word and image have less intrinsic coherence and are only minimally separated from one another, having been enfolded, decanted or scrambled into each other’s customary domain” (2003: 12).

The panels are displayed on the wall as a means of a direct form of confessional communication. The confessional statements are my own but also allude to titles of popular songs or common phrases and sometimes draw in the audience in some participatory way. The title of my exhibition *Karaoke Confessions* thus brings together aspects from a popular form of entertainment, i.e. a secular practice, with the notion of confession which derives more commonly from Christian religious practice. It is this connecting of two seemingly incongruous things that underlies my preoccupation with confession around sexuality as it addresses a sense of tension and ambivalence around my upbringing in an Afrikaner environment and the moral values that it prescribes. But while Emin’s confessions come across as deeply sincere and blatantly direct, my own use of text reveals an almost opposite impulse in its association with popular song titles and sentimental phrases. The phrases that I use in this exhibition come from utterances made by lovers such as “I am crazy about you” which could easily also be the title of a popular song. The generic nature of these phrases as common expressions thus relate to the notion of karaoke singing where participants ‘appropriate’ the lyrics from songs to express emotions in a form of cathartic outlet. It is this somewhat bland and ‘second-hand’ remove that carries the content of this exhibition in an ironic, mediated form of

confession and reflection around sexuality that addresses personal experiences of disappointment and frustration from dating experiences²⁴.

Karaoke Confessions consisted of three components of work: relief objects made in felt that were hung on the walls in groups, an interactive computer work (laptop on sculpture base) and a performative event in the form of a live karaoke party which was combined with a symbolic cake-cutting ritual. The felt objects on the wall were brightly coloured, text-based works which were made by way of wrapping successive layers of felt ribbon to echo the shapes of words in a kind of doodle-embellishing of the text. I would start by cutting (2cm) strips of thin felt (approximately 2 to 3mm thick), which I then folded to achieve a more rigid and pliable ribbon. The folded felt edge was also more in keeping with the overall organic shape of the final object, i.e. I avoided sharp edges. The next step would be to shape the folded ribbon into words written in my personal signature. A glue gun was used to stick the first ribbon onto a base (cardboard or paper) after which the successive layers of variously coloured felt ribbon were added until the phrase achieved the desired organic shape. These would sometimes resemble speech bubbles²⁵.

Once the shape was completed, the base would be cut away and mounted on super wood cut according to the final outline. The combined depth of the base and the felt was approximately 3cm. The form of these relief panels was thus directed by the process of layering and the rhythmic repetition of layering the felt ribbon carried the same kind of

²⁴ In its disguised or 'veiled' form of address it speaks about a certain glossing over or 'hiding' of what is really going on inside and a 'double standard' is implied, i.e. on the surface it appears sentimental and lighthearted, whereas further down it speaks of emotional turmoil and disappointment. It also speaks of ambivalence in that it involves a kind of 'singing along whilst feeling guilty', i.e. putting up an appearance of things being fine.

²⁵ Certain bodily references, specifically the vagina and other bodily orifices can be read into the works in that they have been formed around a central core. The choice of predominantly reds, shades of pink and pastel colours also reinforces this.

repetitive engagement as the singing of the lyrics of popular karaoke songs does. The wrapping is also similar to calligraphy or doodling in that the ‘writing’ becomes a form of embellishing which accentuates language as *visual*, i.e. “it is something that appeals to the eye as well as to the mind” (ibid: 12). Made in felt, the final reliefs have a strong visual but also tactile dimension, accentuating the bodily and therefore also the sexual connection to the content of some of the phrases used in these works²⁶.

The scale of the individual pieces ranged from 60 x 40cm to 200 x 120cm. Most works were arranged in groups of separate phrases but the work *I no longer see it as my duty to please everyone* was presented as a group of words forming a sentence along a straight line arranged at average eye level on the gallery wall. While some of these phrases were easy to read, others were more camouflaged and obscured as a result of the close colour ranges used. The process of layering thus complicated the reading of some of these works and their indecipherable nature was often intentional as a form of self-censorship. Some swearwords, for instance, were made less decipherable and therefore speak of my unwillingness to utter them, for example, in the presence of my parents. Again, this speaks of my deep-seated ambivalence towards moral codes of behaviour that have been drummed into me as a young person and a grappling with these as an adult.

The visual appearance of these works was loosely derived from neon signage as also used by Tracey Emin and other contemporary artists.²⁷ As Morley puts it: “Neon signage has

²⁶ My original exploration in this material was influenced by my lecturer, Marc Edwards, whose early sculptural pieces included material like the grey blankets associated with the homeless. The very first artwork using the process of wrapping was made by combining felt and such blanket material.

²⁷ Gibbons points out that for Emin, neon brings associations of her home town “and is a familiar part of most urban landscapes in the west” (2007: 21).

its roots in the public, instrumental world, and so its artistic use also pulls works [...] into the orbit of popular culture [...] Neon makes a direct appeal to the senses as well as communicating information” (2003: 156). Putting a statement in neon tubing has similar popular culture associations to karaoke. Felt was chosen as medium for its properties of softness and warmth which relate to flesh and the body²⁸ and it also provided the saturated colour that I wanted from my material. The density of the compressed fibre in the felt adds to the richness of the colour. This luminous and saturated quality together with the successive layering of coloured bands of felt is comparable to the glow created by neon light tubing. There is also a strong resemblance to colourful sweets, particularly the retro candy stick variety originating from the 1950’s in America. The association with sweetness is intentional; candy is a highly desirable material infused with erotic qualities. The wrapping of layers around words may also recall the psychedelic script from record album covers and posters dating from the 1960s, i.e. the decade that is associated with an ethos of “flower power and faith in love” (Watson 2008: 21) and a rebellion against authority. The record covers of the Beatles’ Yellow Submarine album and the poster for the musical “Tommy” come to mind.

My exploration with felt also derived from early Sunday School experiences in which felt boards were commonly employed as instructional tools, where cut-out figures of biblical characters were used to tell Bible stories. This instructional approach allowed for interactive participation between learner and teacher. The didactic religious connotations

²⁸ Joseph Beuys, one of the most influential artists working in the 20th century, regularly made use of felt in his work. Amongst other pieces, Beuys is well known for his *Felt Suit* (1970), which is said to evoke images of “protection, insulation, and spiritual warmth” (<http://www.walkerart.org/archive/C/9C43F9ACA34F1B386167.htm>). In the late 1960’s Robert Morris also produced works in which he frequently used strips of thick felt attached to a wall so that they would limply cascade onto the gallery floor. These are extremely tactile and emphasize process and the natural and unpredictable behaviour of the material. In 1968 Morris published “Anti-Form”, his “influential essay that defined the radical practice of process-oriented art in opposition to the idealizing notions of art based on form, or art for art’s sake” (Houser, Jones and Taylor eds. 1993:42).

are important to the content of my work and this is specifically demonstrated in *She said he said* where some interactive participation was required from the audience²⁹.

My work addresses the disjuncture or lack of communication on matters of a sexual nature in the Afrikaner culture that I grew up in which is informed by strictly Calvinist moral codes. In addition, felt craft, much like Emin's embroidered quilts, is often associated with womens' handcrafts. Watson points out that the act of sewing "may partly operate as a metaphor for displaced female sexual desire, a result perhaps of the rhythmic back and forth action of sewing" (Watson 2008: 25). The process of layering and wrapping in my own work as a kind of cocooning of phrases and words could perhaps be read in similar terms. The felt thus carries various associations for me that derive from practices of instruction, conformity and suppression and in this particular work I use it in a somewhat subverted, accusatory way.

She Said, He Said (2006-7) consists of seven individual felt ribbon phrases arranged unevenly in a line at average eye level and is accompanied by a pin-up felt board to form a wall installation work with a participatory element. The phrases used are: "...most beautiful woman I've ever seen...", "I need you", "I'm crazy about you", "I'll take you to the dark side", "You haunt me", "I want you" and "You are mine" (Fig. 2-10). Again, these are all very personal snippets of conversations with various lovers or soft whispers spoken during love-making but can equally be read as pop song titles. The colours chosen for individual phrases relate closely to their content, for example, dark shades of colour are used for "I'll take you to the dark side". While most of these phrases are

²⁹ It is also perhaps worth mentioning here that similar instructional devices may also be used for teaching young children the facts of life and there is thus a straddling of the idea of instruction around sexuality and religion.

generic in nature, i.e. commonly used at random by people all over the world and are not necessarily profound or poetic, I noted them from specific personal encounters over the period of roughly five years. It is the context of these statements which makes them intimate to me, however, the audience can also relate to these phrases in their more universal usage. The felt pin-up board carried vinyl stickers of the names of a selection of my lovers over that period, including my ex-husband. The instruction next to the pin-up felt board read as follows:

Do you recognize any of the displayed statements as being something you said to the artist at some point? If you would like to claim ownership of any of them please find your name on the list of stickers and transfer it to the appropriate demarcated area next to the corresponding artwork. (Fig. 9)

While the general public could and also did participate in this interactive work, the intention of this invitation for participation was directed more specifically at the listed individuals who may or may not have attended the exhibition. I wanted to ascertain whether these individuals would in fact confess to having made these statements by adding their name to the allocated dotted lines below the works. On the opening night various members of the audience positioned several stickers, but interestingly enough none of them were correctly identified and marked according to my recollection.

The somewhat accusatory tone of this work can be compared to Tracey Emin's *Everyone I have ever slept with 1963-1995* (1995) where she similarly documents personal relationships of which some were sexual. A similar method of memory and recall is thus employed in both works through naming individuals and this device is thus used "to celebrate intimacy, to declare love and affection [...] and to shame those who have

wronged [her/me] in the past” (Fanthome 2008: 228). I was very aware of censoring myself in the sense that certain names were omitted from *He Said, She Said* (2006-7). Some omissions were simply due to their irrelevance, i.e. not being noteworthy encounters or not having recalled specific utterances from such encounters, and other names were strategically left out for reasons of confidentiality and obligation towards friends and colleagues.

In retrospect I realize that fear, guilt and a false sense of loyalty may have been the predominant reasons for my censoring the list of names. This piece could perhaps have been more confrontational and impactful had I presented the full list of names. While I did not feel that I got the reaction from the people that the work specifically addressed, it certainly raises the issue of obligation to a wider audience. Artists have often assumed the position of the narcissist and Melani McGarth directly accuses Emin of this by saying: “Tracey Emin is narcissistic” (<http://www.tate.org.uk/magazine/issue1/something.htm>) and she goes on to describe her work as lonely, furious and demanding of attention. She explains that this has to do with her being very much a part of her work. Julian Stallabrass states on more than one occasion that Emin’s work is unmediated and therefore questionable as art. However, she seems to be able to transcend the mundane and mesmerise the public who seem to be hungry to see what she is going to reveal next (1999: 43). McGarth disagrees as she feels that Emin is “herself the mediator between her experience and its expression” (<http://www.tate.org.uk/magazine/issue1/something.htm>). Does this making of work about oneself and around autobiographical documentation pose a problem for the audience? Both Emin’s and my

work is often concerned with mundane details of our own lives which are enormously important to us personally, but as I found out, not necessarily all that important to our audiences.

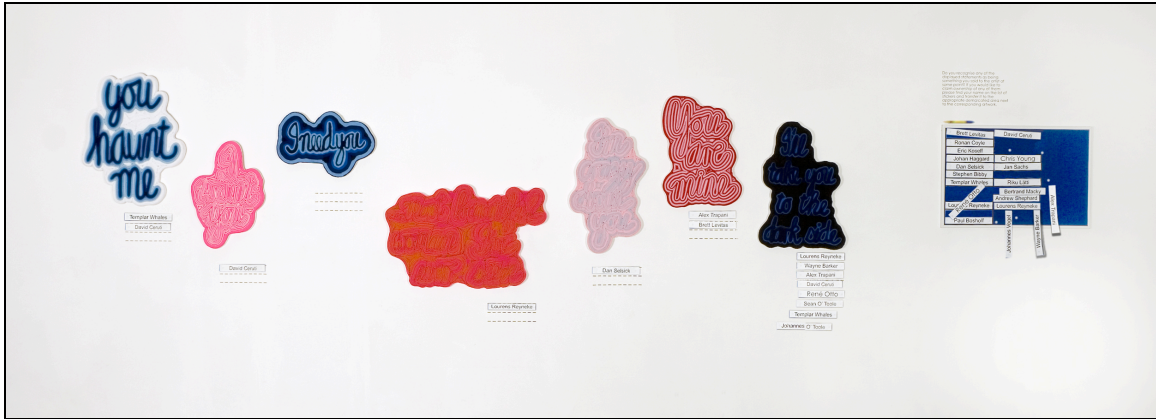


Fig.1 *She said, He said*
Felt on Board
4m variable
2006/7



Fig.2 Most beautiful woman I have ever seen (Detail: *She said, He said*)



Fig.3 I need you (Detail: *She said, He said*)



Fig.4 I'll take you to the dark side
(Detail: *She said, He said*)



Fig.5 You haunt me (Detail: *She said, He said*)



Fig.6 I want you (Detail: *She said, He said*)



Fig.7 You are mine (Detail: *She said, He said*)



Fig.8 I'm crazy about you (Detail: *She said, He said*)

Do you recognise any of the displayed statements as being something you said to the artist at some point? If you would like to claim ownership of any of them please find your name on the list of stickers and transfer it to the appropriate demarcated area next to the corresponding artwork.

Brett Levitas	David Ceruti
Ronan Coyle	Lourens Reyneke
Eric Koseri	Sean O' Toole
Johan Haggard	Chris Young
Dan Selsick	Jan Sachs
Stephen Bibby	Alex Trapani
Templar Whales	Riku Lähti
Johannes Vogel	Bertrand Macky
René Otto	Andrew Shephard
Lourens Reyneke	
Wayne Barker	
Paul Boshoff	

Fig. 9 Felt pin-up board
(Detail: *She said, He said*)

The series entitled: *I Love You* (Fig. 13) is a wall installation consisting of nine felt ribbon phrases arranged in a straight line on the wall at average eye-level height and read as follows: *I Love Life, I Love Sex, I Love Food, I Love Money, I Love Shoes, I Love Art, I Love Robbie, I Love Sushi* and *I Love You*. They are thus expressions of love and affection, but primarily also expressions of desire, again highlighting an ambivalent tension between moral values and selfish need. Choice of colour corresponded to particular connotations towards commodities (including a pop icon), for example, “I love Sushi” was made up of white felt resembling rice together with a salmon pink and dark green border, i.e. much like a cross-section through a roll of sushi.

The word ‘love’ in some pieces is replaced by the symbol of a heart as commonly found on sentimental, romantic paraphernalia such as Valentine’s cards and soft toys, but also in a religious context such as the bleeding heart of Catholic tradition. These hearts were upholstered in felt to project in relief. “I love you” was intentionally placed at the end in order to highlight the ‘weight’ that this phrase carries in comparison to the previous phrases which address desire of commodities. This phrase is also the title of the work. In terms of confession, this work thus lists a number of social taboos, specifically relating to my own background as Afrikaner, my adulthood and being a so-called ‘big girl’ (i.e. in terms of body size/weight).

Having been raised in a conservative Afrikaner home, suppression of sexual discourse was enforced by a strict religious moral code and therefore forbade admitting to loving sex. This would have been considered sinful and disrespectful. As an adult, society

expects a certain level of maturity and decorum and professing my love for Robbie Williams therefore reflects an expression of adolescent infatuation. Lastly, expressing my love for food transgresses a social expectation for women to conform to a culture of diet, and self control.



Fig. 10 *I love you*
Felt on Board
3m variable
2006/7

The third wall installation is similarly grouped together in a set of eight pieces collectively entitled: *You don't have to like me*. Again making use of specifically selected colours in the range of reds and pinks to accentuate and/or censor readings, this work consists of very personal confessions arranged irregularly on the wall. "I am bipolar", "I weigh 80 kilos", "I eat peanut butter from the jar", "I fucking hate you"(directed at an ex lover), "I'm in love with you"(directed at an ex lover), and "I do believe in fairies" all form part of this installation. As a result of the random, cloud-like shapes of these confessions, they may remind one of thought bubbles which appear in

comic strips above characters' heads to suggest that they are contemplating something. In other words, they suggest an internal reflection and are thus somewhat more secretive in character. This may also be reinforced by the difficulty in deciphering some of the texts. They are admissions of failure to conform or transgressions (weaknesses) and also childish naivety.

At the time of making this artwork, personal circumstances and relationships made me want to produce a confrontational work which would also be cathartic in its frankness of stating who I am. The title *You don't have to like me* is directed at the audience as an expression of defiance. "I am bipolar" acknowledges an often misunderstood medical condition that bears a lot of social judgment and is commonly misread as misbehaviour. In admitting this, I challenge the audience to accept me as I am. In the context of confession which is traditionally understood in the Christian religious sphere to encourage repentance and subsequent forgiveness, this work, in contrast, stubbornly refuses to conform to this practice. In offering no apology and asking no forgiveness, this work does not resolve the turmoil that it expresses (and confesses to).

From the various phrases the audience can get a glimpse of unresolved issues and personal crises. As in Emin's work, there is thus a clearly autobiographical thread in my own work which raises questions about the role of the addressee and how "the relationship between artist and spectator may change and develop over time. Do viewers seek to identify with the artist and empathize with the situation, distance themselves from her, or simply try to analyze her? Are they merely voyeurs whose gratifications are

wholly selfish or do they provide some therapeutic function for the artist by dialogic engagement?" (Fanthome 2006: 32)



Fig. 11 *You don't have to like me*
Felt on Board
6m variable
2006/7

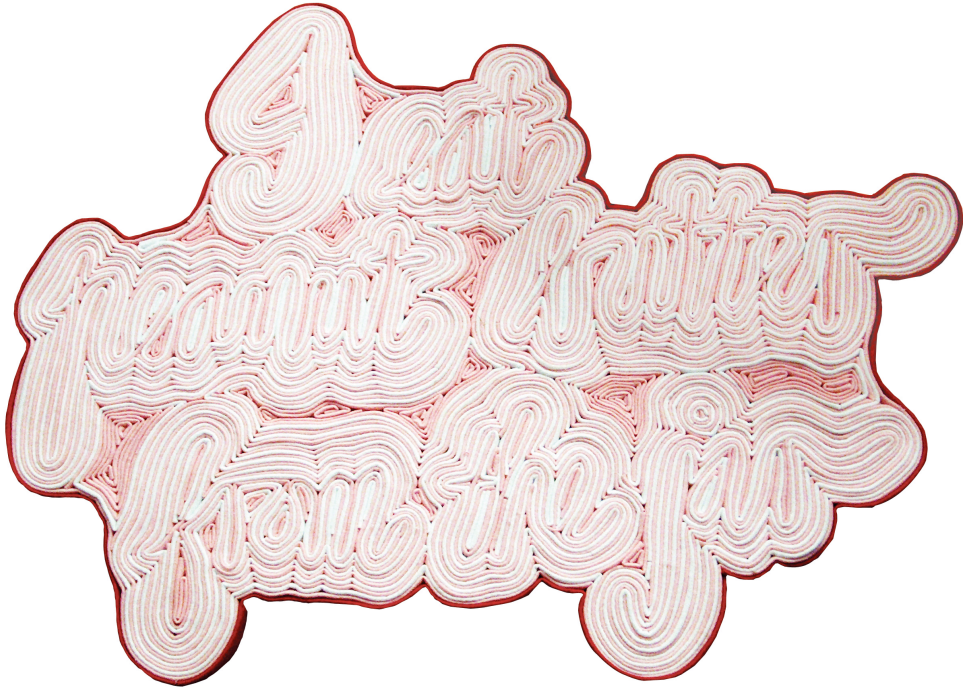


Fig. 12 I eat peanut butter from the jar (Detail: *You don't have to like me*)



Fig. 13 I weigh 80 kilos (Detail: *You don't have to like me*)

As my birthday coincided with the opening of *Karaoke Confessions*, my mother participated by baking and decorating a birthday cake with the lettering *Sex Bomb* written in bright pink icing to correspond to the predominantly red and pink felt ribbon works on display. My mother has traditionally baked me a birthday cake every year and this has also previously been referenced in artworks in the form of performative events³⁰. Similar to the ritual of cutting a wedding cake, the act of cutting and distributing the birthday cake signifies a rite of passage of sorts and therefore a significant personal event in ‘growing up’. As a child, my birthday cakes had been decorated with Barbie dolls and Disney themes and now, in contrast, the “Sex Bomb” cake denotes a departure from innocence. Having my mother partake in this must have been awkward for her but also reinforced my refusal to conform.



Fig. 14 Sex Bomb
Cake with icing sugar
65 X 35cm
2007



Fig. 15 Cutting of the Sex Bomb cake
(Performative event)

³⁰ Another cake-cutting performance took place at the opening of *Pure Pop* (2003) where various Barbie-shaped cakes were cut and shared.

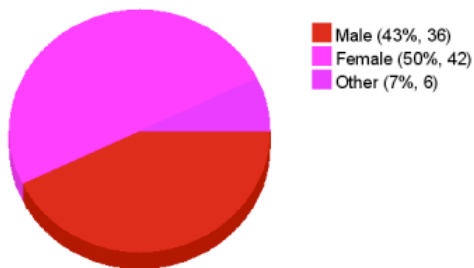
As Emin's place of birth and background influence her every decision in making her artworks, so does mine. The small conservative town of Margate with its Dreamland amusement park attractions and sexual enticements can by no means be compared to the protective level of Afrikaner conservatism that I grew up with in South Africa during the 1970's. I can clearly recall, at the approximate age of 11, reading the words "Slegs Blankes" (whites only) on a public toilet door and questioning my mother about this sign. She could not provide me with a satisfactory explanation. To this day my parents claim not to be racist; they confess as Christians to loving all people equally, however, they were also members of the Dutch Reformed Church from before I was born and they repeatedly voted for the National Party, (or so I can assume), until its final disbandment in 2004. We were raised to love our president P.W. Botha at the time, and sang songs of national pride at assembly in our whites-only suburban schools. Like so many other white South African children, my understanding of culture was white and exclusive. While it included the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniging (Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations)*, it excluded visits to art galleries and the theatre as these were not sanctioned by the conservative culture in which I grew up.

From my point of view Emin's upbringing seems far more liberated and tumultuous than mine and she refers to her childhood town of Margate as the "place that screwed her up" (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2001/jul/30/news2>). Her parents were never married and she portrays her upbringing as having been very unstable. In her book *Strangeland* she tells of sometimes being very rich, living in hotels and other times experiencing extreme poverty. I have lived in the same family home environment since age four and I believe

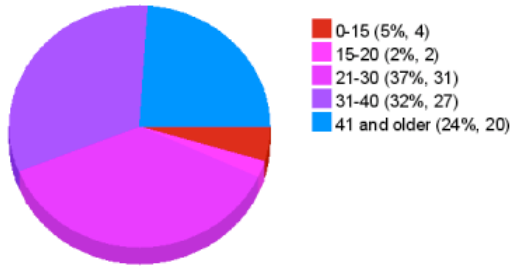
that although I was constantly reminded of financial strain, I was extremely privileged. I was completely ignorant of what went on in Soweto, a few kilometers to the south-west of Roodepoort and my sex education was limited to a hamster cage and the accompanying book: *Soesie se babas* (Suzy's babies), a story about a hamster and her babies.

Another component of *Karaoke Confessions* was an electronic survey which was completed by visitors to the exhibition. This survey could by no means be a controlled scientific exercise because of the anonymity of participants, but the designed software did ensure an accurate calculation of the input. In my compiling of the survey I left it open to the participants to be either truthful or not in their response. The questions were narcissistic in nature and I set out to determine certain perceptions by other people about myself. The following instructions and questions were directed at the viewer:

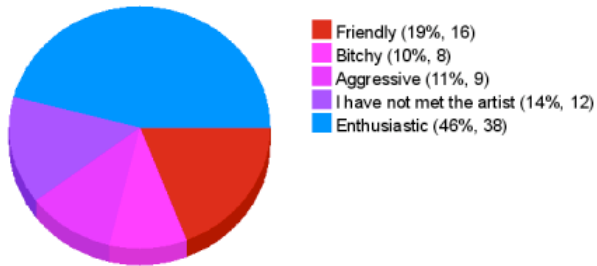
Select your gender



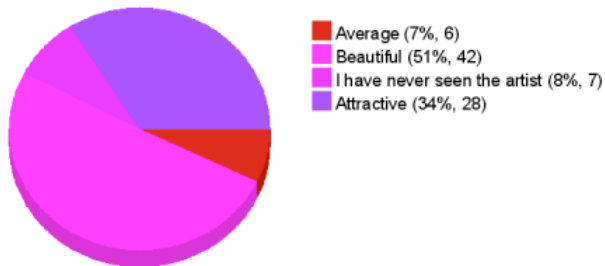
Select your age category



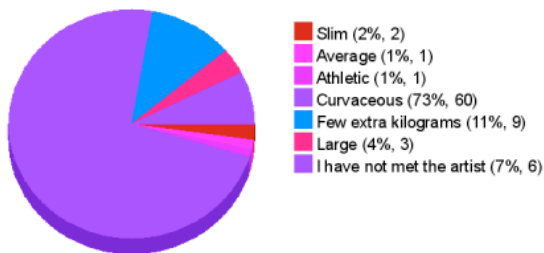
What term do you think best describes Antoinette's character?



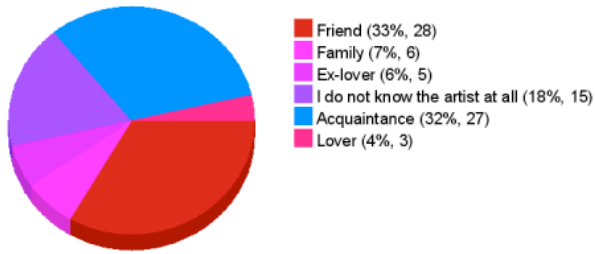
How would you describe Antoinette's face?



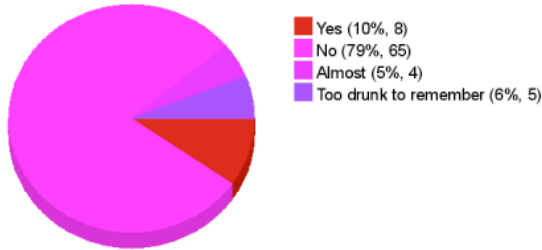
How would you describe Antoinette's body?



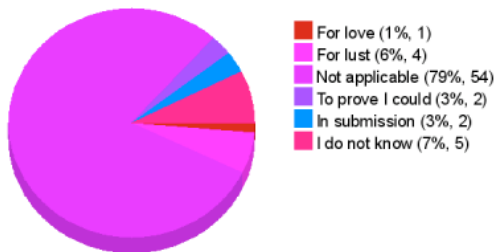
Which of the following words best describe your relationship with Antoinette?



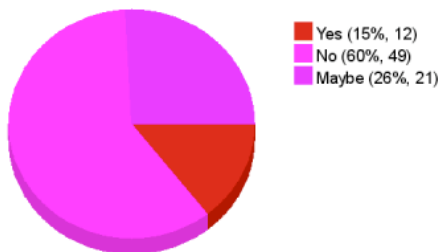
Have you ever had sex with Antoinette?



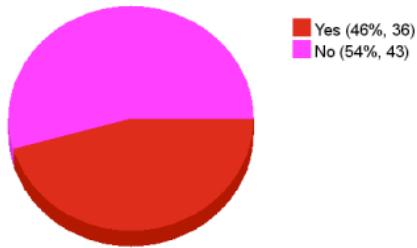
If you answered yes to the previous question, why did you have sex with Antoinette?



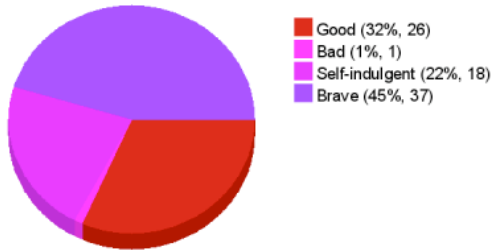
Would you like to have sex with Antoinette again or for the first time?



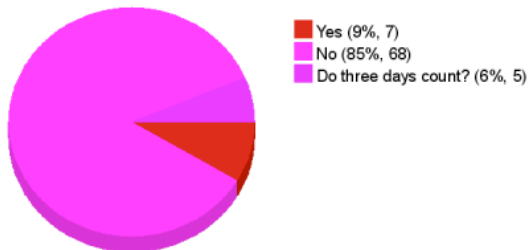
Do you love Antoinette?



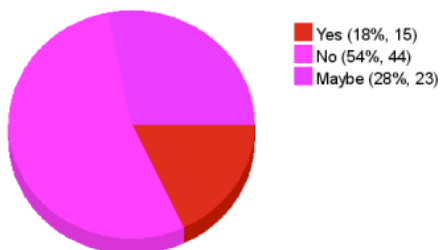
What do you think of the exhibition?



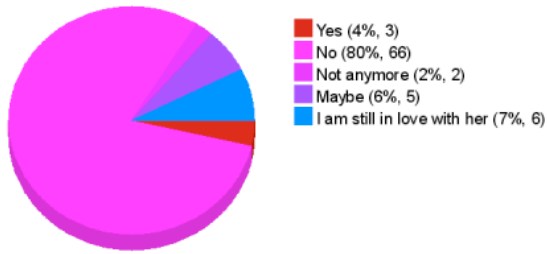
Have you ever lived with Antoinette before?



Would you want to live with Antoinette?



Have you ever been in love with Antoinette?



Has Antoinette ever been in love with you?

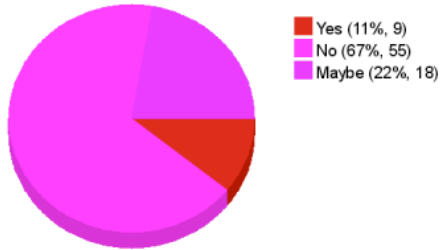


Fig. 16 Survey results

82 people completed this survey. Amongst these were family, friends, my children, my ex-husband and members of the audience. The survey results were both predictably painful and funny. Of course, such a survey would inevitably be taken up in a less than serious way by the audience, especially seeing that it was presented in the context of karaoke and a generally lighthearted context. 15 respondents acknowledged that they had been in love with me, while 3 felt that I had been in love with them. The outcome of this work may be seen as reflecting a therapeutic intent. Surveys are generally conducted in order to establish facts and in this case it left me with responses to how people perceive me.



Fig. 17 *I no longer see it as my duty to please everybody*
Felt on Board
6m variable
2006/7

I would like to conclude this chapter with what I consider to be the key work of my exhibition in that it fundamentally expresses a point of realization and affirmation in not having to answer to conformity: *I no longer see it as my duty to please everybody* (2007) (Fig. 18). For me this statement affirms life changing decisions which I had to make since 2002. Made up of independent words in bright red felt adding up to a continuous sentence, it stretches to a length of approximately 6 metres and is thus the longest work on the exhibition. The words are somewhat difficult to read because of the close wrapping in tonally similar colours of felt throughout and the reading is therefore slowed down in deciphering the work. This accentuates the statement as a kind of phrase of avowal and affirmation. My name appearing below the work in printed form also further underlined the assertion.

Conclusion

In her article: *Artist as Victim, Artist as Celebrity: Interrogating the Work of Tracey Emin and Sue Williams* (1999), Lina Goldberg notes how during the 1990's minority groups became recognized and while many of these previously disenfranchised groups were praised for making their private worlds public, there were always some critics who felt that it was all just too personal. Women in particular were accused of self-indulgence. Emin, specifically, was criticized for highlighting sexual and domestic abuse, but her supporters were confident that she was reversing women's role as "object of artistic representation" to "becoming agents of their own creativity" (Goldberg 1999: 1). Artists such as Emin were also accused of placing their art outside of "the reach of criticism" as they assumed victim status (ibid).

In this paper I have attempted to examine the idea of confession and confessional art as a form of practice in selected examples of artworks by Tracey Emin and in my own creative work submitted for this degree. In examining Emin's work closely I have also considered various critical responses to it in order to gain a better understanding of the framework of confessional art in which she operates. I have tried to foreground how her work becomes a means of coping post-traumatically with the abuses she has suffered but that this happens through a process of mediation and construction.

In Chapter One I sketched a brief overview of sexuality in contemporary art in the West so as to situate Emin's practice within the wider scope of exploration around sexuality

and confession since the 1960s. The range of expression in various media in the work of women artists is foregrounded before examining Emin's work more closely.

In Chapter Two I focused on selected examples of Emin's artworks by describing them closely and bringing in observations and concerns expressed by critics and spectators. While her highly personal and emotively charged work is considered narcissistic and exhibitionist by some, other critics see her work as using autobiographic elements in order to link it to collective experience and make it meaningful to the viewer through 'investigative' and participatory means. The confessional nature of her work is thus seen to be affirmative of the viewer.

In Chapter Three I have outlined my own creative work submitted for this degree within the framework of confessional art as explored in Emin's work. My own experience of making such confessional artworks as well as exploring concerns around sexuality has been liberating and therapeutic in examining my conservatively repressive upbringing and subsequent emancipation.

Finally, I would like to end off with a quotation from the American writer and journalist known for her work in the confessional memoir genre, Elizabeth Wurtzel, who writes in her book *Bitch*:

I intend to scream, shout, race the engine, throw tantrums in Bloomingdales if I feel like it, and confess intimate details about my life to complete strangers, I intend to do what I want to do and be who I want to be and answer only to myself, that is, quite simply the bitch philosophy, and it seems particularly

refreshing in the face of all the contortions women are taught to put themselves through (1998: 30).

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