

Key words: Femininity, Postmodernism and Representation

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## Proposal for Dissertation

Within this proposal I aim to explore the three key words that reflect my passions and pursuits as a female creative and as a young woman in general. I will research *femininity*, *postmodernism* and *representation* of women through art and cultural context and how this representation shape's modern female identity. I will look at how gender stereotypes have been reformed through art and cultural movements, and how gender as a construct is evolving to be something that empowers rather than confines. As well as this I will examine how western culture depicts women through gender ideologies and the way that these ideologies and feminist theories expressed in art have shaped societal change as well as public opinion.

### Femininity

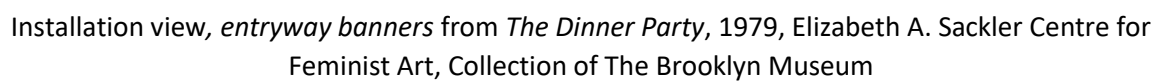
By dictionary definition femininity is "the fact or quality of having characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for a woman:" (Cambridge Dictionary, 1995), However, femininity is very much subjective to personal point of view and is not conducive of only the female gender.

Quintessentially femininity, in its dictionary form, is an outdated, romantic notion that has burdened women and men for a millennium and, until recently, enacted limitations to women. "Femininity is something that women had more of in the past, not only the historic past of prior generations, but in each woman's personal past as well-in the virginal innocence that is that is replaced by knowledge." (Brownmiller, 2013) meaning that the outdated ideology of femininity is enrooted in women from birth, with fairy-tale stories claiming that for a woman to be happy and successful she must find a husband and women's magazines boasting ways to attract men and 'keep your man happy.' Though, with age comes knowledge as women outgrow and overcome these debilitating notions that a woman cannot thrive or be happy alone.

From a cultural perspective there are still many harmful notions about femininity that are used in everyday life and thought to be small and insignificant. For example, when the phrase "that isn't very lady like" is used to comment on a woman's behaviour, this fundamentally suggests that this woman appears not to care about men or their perception of her, therefore making her unattractive to them. The problem is that these terms of femininity have been defined by men and do not reflect the reality of being a female. "As a woman in this world, it can often feel like we have two choices: we can either be desired or respected. Seen or heard. We rarely get to experience both at the same time." (Given, 2020) Again this notion has been constructed by men to enlist control over the female, but this is now being challenged politically and as a social construct.

Many feminist artists and creatives have now enabled an empowering take on femininity that is not only more accurate to general female perspective but also not defined by the

One artist whose work is synonymous with feminist art is Judy Chicago. Arguably Chicago's most celebrated work '*The Dinner Party*' has highlighted the need for women's history education and shone a light on the sexism within the art industry and the wider world.



Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974-1979, mixed media, 48ft x 48ft, Elizabeth A. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art, Collection of The Brooklyn Museum.

This art installation inspired a generation of feminist thinkers and was one of the first feminist artworks to receive such global attention and media coverage. It continues to be a source of motivation and muse for many present-day feminists. "With origins in the West Coast feminist art movement of the early 1970s, The Dinner Party embodied a kind of art that few Americans outside of activist or bohemian circles had seen before." (Gehard, 1970-2007)

This artwork resonates with women as it puts forward the idea of shared female form, mutual experiences of oppression and communal strength. Moreover, the struggles experienced by Chicago while creating the artwork are the same struggles faced by numerous female artists, creatives and females in general then and today.

"The circulation of The Dinner Party became its own parable about the feminist artist" (Gehard, 1970-2007) making Chicago the "avenging David going toe- to-toe with the Goliath of a male- dominated art establishment." (Gehard, 1970-2007) Many museums declined to show the installation, provoking parties of women in five different cities to create exhibition spaces in local churches and community centres in an attempt to show feminist art and spread a message to their community.

The feminist point of view demonstrated through this art installation challenges traditional perspectives of femininity meaning politeness, gentleness and delicacy, and showcases the strength that can be found in feminine and female characteristics.

### Postmodernism

Postmodernism is difficult to define as it is subject to opinion and theory, however for the purpose of this proposal, I am choosing to define it as an art movement beginning in the 1960's.

Postmodernism is a rebellion against the ideas and values demonstrated in the modernist period, therefore is a juxtaposition to the idea of utopian life and the belief in progress. It is a satire and sceptical take on art and objects and "inspires us to ask questions about its context rather than its content: 'What is the point of this?', or 'Why is this displayed in a museum?'" (Butler, 2002)

Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" is a postmodern feminist reaction to gender inequality and female oppression as Chicago ridicules the notion of femininity meaning 'soft and fragile' and presents a counter argument that is undeniable and provokes us to rethink our views on femininity. Therefore, it could be argued that postmodernism and feminism are natural collaborators.

Privacy and civility have always been a necessity for women when expressing themselves artistically or emotionally, but feminists transformed that expectation into a tool to use against their oppressors." Postmodern art uses the public to make a statement and it is a

very effective tactic. Making things public that should be private is one of the biggest reasons postmodernism was successful.” (Parrish, n.d.). Consequently, postmodern feminist art has always been and will be a great catalyst for change and promoter for equality between gender, race and sexuality.

Female postmodernist artists have always struggled in a male dominated setting with the walls of art galleries and museums often being a place that was reluctant to accept the validity of female creatives and therefore hesitant to display their art. This is still the case today, however, “It could be argued that this uprising of women opened doors for many postmodern and contemporary female artists to be able to work more independently.” (Shields, 2017)

When researching postmodern feminist art, instantly you are met with the work of Tracey Emin, in particular her 1998 work ‘My Bed.’ “Much of Tracey Emin’s work has dealt with themes surrounding sexual abuse, and she has openly talked about being raped at the age of 13” (Shields, 2017) This is why the autobiographical nature of this piece speaks to so many women and men who have experienced similar trauma. The ugly reality of this piece of artwork is that the volume of people who have experienced similar abuse is astronomically high with “20% of women and 4% of men have experienced some type of sexual assault since the age of 16, equivalent to 3.4 million female and 631,000 male victims” (Rape Crisis, 2017)



Tracey Emin 'My Bed', 1998

Emin's raw and unfiltered account of a depressive episode where she was unable to get out of bed shows all aspects of femaleness that are considered 'taboo' and to be hidden from men to avoid them viewing us in an 'unflattering' way. For example, empty vodka bottles, cigarette butts and stained underwear litter the space, conjuring notions of classic characteristics and behavioural patterns associated with the negative side of the male sex.

Subsequently and unashamedly, this draws awareness to the significance of the bed to the woman. The bed has strong and symbolic links to many of life's most poignant moments, particularly for women as notions of sex, birth, sleep, dreams and death are conjured.

This piece of art is a classic and powerful example of postmodern feminist art as it invites you not only to look at the piece but also to question its significance to the artist and the viewer as well as to ponder on the victims and a solution to the wider social issues of gender inequality that are pointed out in the work.

### Representation

When discussing representation of women in western culture and art, it is important to look back on a modernist interpretation of what women were seen to be. Representation, along with education, economy and history have long been dictated by men, for the benefit of men and therefore women's representation was an ideology forced upon them by men. Due to the violent masculine imagery that has long been indoctrinated into society by men women remained mostly complacent in their oppression, for example, the multitude of harmful narratives created during the nineteenth century of nude women being 'saved' by victorious men is a vulgar depiction of the 'male gaze' and invites the male viewer to see these women as sexual objects. An instance of this is Paul-joseph Jamin's '*le Brenin et la sa part butin (Brenn and his share of the plunder)*', 1893, where "The captured women are deliberately shown naked and/ or tied up, with the bodies shown from different angles, thus encouraging (possibly violent) male sexual fantasies." (Perry et al, 1999)



Paul-Joseph Jamin, *le Brenin et sa part de butin* (*Brenn and his share of the plunder*), 1893.

In postmodern art we often see a representation of women that is entirely different to the male perception in the image above. This could be due to the female experience being accurately depicted in an uncensored manner by female artists. In a sense, through art women have reclaimed their own bodies, "This notion of returning women's bodies, is indicative of the somewhat group mentality of First wave feminist art: to discard the self, in order to create a kind of 'Sisterhood', based on a shared female experience." (shields 2017)

An example of a powerful, postmodern feminist artwork that depicts the nude female body in a way that is non-relatable to the 'male gaze' is the 1975 piece '*interior scroll*' by American performance artist Carolee Schneemann.



Carolee Schneemann, *'Interior Scroll'*, 1975.

This is an honest and unfiltered view of the female form, imperfect from a male standpoint, smudged and powerful. This performance piece was exhibited in front of an audience of primarily female artist and consisted of Schneeman approaching a table while fully clothed, then undressing and wrapping herself in a sheet before reading from her book *'Cezanne, She Was A Great Painter'* (published 1976). She goes on to paint swathes of dark paint on her body and face and draws a scroll from her vagina, reading from it aloud. The scroll "recounts a conversation with 'a structuralist film-maker' in which the artist sets intuition and bodily processes, traditionally associated with 'woman', against traditionally 'male' notions of order and rationality." (Tate, 2019)

This piece does not desexualise the female form but instead, says that a woman's body is not only a vessel of sexuality but also of strength, hope, rebirth and knowledge. This is backed up by Schneeman's general principles and ideas. In her book *'More Than Meat Joy'* originally published in 1979 Schneeman says "I thought of the vagina in many ways – physically, conceptually: as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the source of sacred

knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation.” (Autor: Carolee Schneemann and McPherson, 2000, pp. 234-5)

Early feminist artists have been criticized by the feminists of today for their heavy use of vaginal imagery as this insists on a gender binary and it is no longer the case that to identify as female you must have this biological characteristic. Despite this, this representation of women in art is a compelling viewpoint that many female artists, and feminists in general, have been inspired and driven by.

To conclude my dissertation proposal, I have fully explored each of my three key words and presented opinions backed up by research into issues regarding women in art and the wider world with reference to basic dictionary explanation and theory. I have presented examples of both negative and positive representation of women through the medium of art and drawn attention to important and influential feminist artists of the postmodern period. Through the research process of this proposal, I have discovered that there are strong links to feminist art and the postmodern art movement and that the primary difference between first wave feminists and postmodern feminists is that there is slightly more freedom to create and display work. Using this design freedom to promote feminist theories and ideals, feminist artists have both drawn attention to and played a key part in the deconstruction of patriarchal restrictions previously placed upon women. When baring in mind all of this information in mind it is clear that the connotations placed on depictions of the female form in art have drastically changed throughout the course of history, which finally leads me onto my proposed dissertation question, ‘How has the depiction of the female form through art and media changed over the last 100 years, and how has this positively impacted on cultural change?’

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