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Question: Explore how artists have expressed gender in art practice providing evidence from 2 artists and thinkers

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The question I've decided to explore is how artists have expressed gender, and its various deviations, in art practice. The theme is to understand the concept of the development of the changing roles of men and women in today's society. In general, society has concepts about gender characteristics that are socially constructed, these concepts may not be an individual's physiological and biological characteristics, i.e., those that define male or female attributes. Various artists aim to deconstruct the traditional norms, behaviours and roles that are associated with both genders.

In a society, that at large, fails to accept gender role reversal, gender reversal was particularly stigmatised, and the lack of knowledge and understanding was a significant barrier to social participation. The idea of women performing a masculine role is not entirely new, but existing preconceptions could have an effect on society accepting role reversal between male and female. This may be due to traditional concepts, where society expects the norm , i.e., people being brought up from an early age to conform to traditional roles. 'Gender is also one of the first social categories that children learn in today's societies, and thus knowledge of gender stereo types is evident from early childhood'. (Kachel, S, Steffens, M, Niedlich, C, 2016).

During present times, there is an increasing number of concepts and assumptions that the gender roles that we are placed in are synonymously between the sexes, therefore making standard expectations insignificant and irrelevant (e.g men to fulfil a masculine role and females to fulfil feminine roles). The name that we are given whilst at a young age is frequently gendered. This has an influence on the individual/child's future to shape the concept of understanding the roles that is expected by them and the role they are placed in.

(Lindsey, 2016) ‘One of the most important social structures that organises social interaction is status- a category or position a person occupies that is a significant determinant of how she or he will be defined and treated’.

I believe that gender equality is a primary equal human right. Women and Men should be able to live in freedom, without being gendered into a specific category and without being pressured to fulfil their traditional roles.

I will be answering questions that are specifically around the theme of gender reversal, and the concept of expectations by society about how a male and female should behave, by researching artists during the 1900s and artists during present times, with an aim to examine how their pieces of work have affected today's society, and the cultural movement it has made. I will also explore how the gender we are born with can determine our roles in life and our future (i.e females expected to be in charge of the domestic aspects of life and to be more subservient, whilst males are perceived as more dominant and powerful). I will be focusing on theorists such as Linda. L Lindsey, 2016, Germany Celant, 1969, Carl, Bainbridge, 2020 and Amy Blackstone, 2003, who question gender development and gender identity in today’s society. I will be discussing Artists, such as Paula Rego, who challenges the differences in the roles that they are placed in by society.

Fig 1,

This essay begins by discussing the situation of gender stereotypes. It then describes the gradual acceptance within society, of changing roles, and it explores the broad effects of this piece of work, on peoples social and cultural beliefs. I will begin by examining the work of Duchamp, with a particular focus on his work titled *'Rrose Selavy'.* Duchamp developed his alter ego (which he named Rrose Selavy) in the early 1920s. Towards the end of 1920, Duchamp had copyrighted his first work of art under her name, which was titled 'Why not sneeze, Rrose Selavy', 1921.

In 1791, the law in France had been changed, which prevented men being tried for homosexuality if they wore women's clothing. Rrose had an androgenous presence and his gender roles reversal was depicted in his portraiture. His displayed femininity in the photographs were less about tricking the public eye, and more about attempting to tease the purpose about identity and self-representation, particularly in portraits of himself.

Duchamp began to search for his new identity after he finished his first mechanised work of art in 1920. During this time, he became fascinated with movement, he created for himself a unique movement, into another identity. (Hawkins,2015) ’Rrose Selavy first appeared in 1920 […] ’. This is where the idea of a male conducting female attributes were highlighted and challenged.

Throughout his career, Duchamp challenged norms, the creative process was more interesting in his opinion rather than the final products, he didn't view art as a beautiful rarefied thing. Duchamp stated (Ramadan,2020) “Art has absolutely no existence as veracity as truth”. He felt limited in his own body, and he needed to expand his own creative processes and thinking, he wasn't homosexual or bisexual, but used his alter ego to create new and unique pieces of work that were more avant-garde. The fact that he decided to choose a female persona goes against historical expectations.

During the 1920s, gender deviations were not as open and expressed, compared to today's society. Duchamp pushed boundaries to highlight the barriers that surrounded gender stereotypes and roles. The female gender is seen as the weaker gender of the two, and men who dressed as women were/are seen as weak and abnormal. By Duchamp creating this alter ego, he helped create the perception of gender reversal roles, and the outcome shaped the cultural recess of defining sexual and social identity, regardless of gender. Duchamp challenged societies views on traditional gender roles and social concepts. ‘A social concept is something that exists not in objective reality, but as a result of human interaction. It exists because humans agree that it exists’(Bainbridge, 2020). By Duchamp creating this piece of work, it displays to the public, which result to individuals interacting

and discussing about this piece of work, therefore the gradual acceptance and understanding of the roles being reversed.

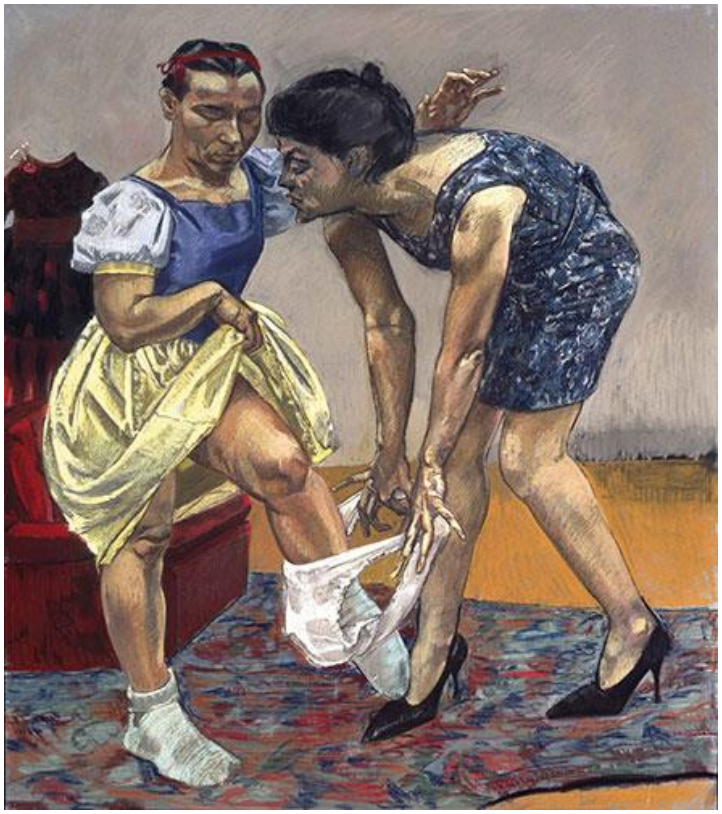

Fig 2,

Gender roles are normally conceptualised as behavioural expectations by society that are based on biological sex, therefore we are placed in a group. (L Oliffe, J, 2012) 'Gender builds on biological sex to give meaning to sex differences, categorising individuals with labels such as women, man, transsexual among others. These categories are socially constructed, as humans both create and assign individuals to them'. Traditionally, for men to behave in a masculinity perspective, they are expected by society to present attributes such as power, strength and competitiveness, and condemned to veil emotion and affection. I will be exploring the work of Paula Rego (1995), with a particular focus on the painting *'Snow White and her stepmother '.*

In this piece of work, there are two individuals, one with masculine features and the other Individual with feminine features, and the concept of the theme is surrounding Snow Whites tale. In this particular piece of work, Rego concentrates and focuses on what a female encounters and experiences throughout their life, also the folk tale that may surround the proposition of being feminine and a woman. Rego confronts the reason that why women must rationalise into being a wicked witch or the concept of being an attractive young princess. (Michalska, M, 2018). 'Paula Rego dresses women in the famous Disney costume to expose the fallible value we tend to assign to youth […], Rego comments this way on how the society imposes on women imagined expectations of youth and beauty'. This statement focuses on the fact that women are meant to be attractive, beautiful and that they are traditionally meant to be princesses, which is gendered into a specific focus group, because that's what their expected norm is.

Rego was interested in bodies, as the sites and actors of stories. In her pieces of work, the bodies have an important role of telling the public a story. Fairy tales and poems have a significant presence into her practice. Rego focuses on the female experience, the uncomfortable dynamics of power and desire of the male gaze.

The theme of gender and femininity recur frequently through her practice. In the image *'Snow White and her stepmother, 1995*', the individual who's getting changed, has masculine features, these could possibly symbolise the role of masculinity, whilst he is expressing gender role reversal, by wearing feminine clothes i.e a dress. (Gicher, J, Roach, M, 1992) 'Dress is a powerful means of communication and makes statements about gender role'. Her work expresses, the reversal of gender, which as itself is a powerful statement. It claims that our gender or name that we are born with, should not have an impact on how

we should socially be constructed and behave. (Grady, D, 2018) ’The idea that a person’s sex is determined by their anatomy at birth is not true, and we’ve known that it’s not true for decades’. In today’s society there is an understanding and acceptance of gender equal rights.

Artists, through their work, aim to provide joy, inspiration and to critique political, economic, and social systems, that are influencing communities to engage in a social gathering to discuss topics that may be taboo or personal to them. Batard stated ’I think the role of the artist is, to take whatever it is they believe in and put it out there so the public can see it (Batard,2017). Art is a powerful form that connects with people's emotions, and explores new possibilities. Art can engage with the question of gender, can instigate individuals to encounter a new experience and perception of the understanding of changing gender roles. That is what Rego aims to mentions, the female experiences, and what is expected by society. Rego expresses in her work what she is passionate about, to critique the traditional social roles. (MacNeill, K, Coles, A, Kokkinos, A and Robertson, M, 2018) ‘Art and creative activities have been widely adopted as a mechanism to work with disenfranchised and minority communities to empower and build resilience and wellbeing’.

Fig 3,

I will also be exploring the work of Victoria Sin, with a particular focus on her performance titled *'A view from elsewhere, act 1, she postures in context, 2019'*. I intended to examine this particular work of art because she highlights the reverse of gender norms. The portraits that are displayed in the image were photographs taken during the 1970s, predominately of drag performers. Their aim was to show non-normative identities existed. This piece of work was a part of an exhibition called *'Kiss my genders'*. The exhibition '*Kiss my Genders*' introduces itself with the belief that gender is not fixed but a fluid concept. The idea is that gender can be in multiple forms, it can be challenged, reconsidered and may be rejected by society.

While entering the first space of the gallery, there is a very high ceiling with concrete features. The installation captures the public's attention. There is a long white cloth with fragmented projection, which reveals several bodies, one in particular is Victoria Sin, who is a very well-known artist. She creates her pieces of work around the idea of drag, with focusing on challenging misogyny and racism. In the video, Sin started verbalising sentences

in a normal way, but as she progressed, she began repeating words or even syllables, therefore distorting sentences.

The characteristics of male individuals are meant to be strong, masculine and a notion of power, but Sin shows that anyone can be powerful and that their sex doesn't define their future. During each scene, to some individuals it may disturb them, because it’s not how men are meant to behave traditionally. (Eagly & Wood,2015).‘General differences between the behaviours of the genders are the result of the social roles they were placed in’. Children are brought up to fulfil a role that is expected of them, the behaviours of individuals are effected by the social roles that we are placed in.

Personally, I believe that the piece of work Sin created was powerful, the video was projected on sheets that had bends and folds in it, which makes Victoria seem distorted. The question of gender identity and the reversal of the role being on display to the public is important, and how it is displayed makes us think how the public may perceive it, the gaze of other people who are conditioned to believe a male is to fulfil a masculine role is challenged. Sin has addressed the masculinity and femininity in her work, she has also investigated how media and individuals shape the expectations of men.

Gender roles and behaviours are constructed on the dissimilar expectations that groups and society have on people, based on society’s values and beliefs about gender, and also their sex. (Blackstone, A, 2003) ’Gender roles are sometimes created on the biases of stereotypes about gender’. We are brought up by adults explaining what is expected by us to achieve because of the social role we are placed in. The artists I have mentioned have brought a new

insight on accepting the fact that the organs we are born with don't define who we are. The artists I have researched have brought up a subject that is sensitive and controversial to some individuals, because it’s not the traditional norm. It’s important for these traditional roles by society to change, individuals should be able to express how they feel, without being shamed of how their masculinity or femininity is perceived. The social role we are placed in shouldn't determine our future. I believe that an environment can influence or gradually increase an individual's behaviour and their beliefs.

(Blackstone, 2003) ’Gender roles are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environments and they give individuals cues about what sort of behaviour is believed to be appropriate for what sex. Appropriate gender roles are defined according to a society's beliefs about differences between sexes’.

Through my research of gender roles reversed, I have concluded that there has been progress, through the years, in the acceptance by society, of changing gender roles. But there seems to be some inequality still, between the sexes, i.e males remain more dominant in the art world. (Gillard, 2019) ’Despite all the progress made, men still dominate positions of power’. Even though we are more understanding of equal rights and the acceptance of the gender roles being reversed, the male gender has a significant sense of power remaining in some countries, that they are have the position of power.

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Figures

Fig. One : Duchamp, M (1920-21) 'Rrose Selavy' [Gelatin silver print]

Fig. Two : Rego, P (1995) 'Snow white and her stepmother' [Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium] Courtesy of The Whitworth, The University of Manchester.

Fig Three : Sin, V (2019) 'A view from elsewhere, Act one, she postures in context' [installation] Hayward Gallery, London.