

Name: *Ellie Day*

Student Number: *1801019*

Module Course Number: *Research in Context ADAD5003*

BA Course Title: *BA Hons Fine Art*

Tutors Name: *Alexander Duncan*

Word Count: *2514*

Title: *Explore a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess consider primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.*

In the past I have rarely worked on topics that are personal to me or that I feel I have a deep connection with. I wanted a bit of a change as I felt I was not pushing my limits and being true if I didn't explore these themes, as if I was locking out something that could be amazing for me. I have been researching text artists for a while and it is something I have discovered I am really interested in. The artists that have inspired me and influenced my work consist of Tracey Emin, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Anne-Lise Coste and the documentary photography of Nan Goldin to name just a few. I have never created work before this project that has been so personal that I have actually questioned continuing with. My studio is showing my work openly to everyone around it yet I am still unsure if I want people to see it. It is a strange concept. The work is already there yet I still have not decided whether I want it there or not. I started thinking about personal experiences to show in my work and when I think about my life so far there is one thing that stands out massively amongst the rest.

One artist that is heavily influenced by personal experiences is Tracey Emin. Born in 1963, Tracey Emin is known for working in an autobiographical way. Expressing her work through a range of media including 'drawing, painting, sculpture, film, photography, neon text and sewn appliqué' (Tate, 2019) she uses 'her dead pan sense of humour' (Emin, Lauson and Rugoff, 2011) to convey her life stories from 'growing up in a family run hotel in Margate with her twin brother, which she states consisted of "hanging out, drinking, dancing and sex," (Emin, Lauson and Rugoff, 2011) to her adult life. Her practice also has inspiration from 'bad relationships, self-destructive behaviour and emotional hangovers with real-life hard luck stories' (Merck, Townsend and Emin, 2002) Not only does she express deep and emotional topics but she also includes everyday happenings within her work. Emin had a new project space for her 'life and art' (Emin, Lauson and Rugoff, 2011) when she opened up her own museum not long after she had her first exhibition. The sign to this building, 'the Tracey Emin Museum' was the first neon sign work that would soon become her signature style. 'This space doubled as the artist's studio, which was made public' (Emin, Lauson and Rugoff, 2011) and people were welcome to come in and have a drink and chat with Tracey. Inside the museum was the iconic piece 'Everyone I Have Ever Slept With' which gained her attention from the media. Audiences confused this for a sexual piece but in reality it was referring to 'intimate encounters' (Emin, Lauson and Rugoff, 2011) she had with people throughout her life. She included

‘the names of all Emin’s sleeping partners in an appliquéd litany of lovers, friends and family including her twin brother, Paul, and two aborted fetuses.’

(Merck, Townsend and Emin, 2002)



Fig 1 *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* by Tracey Emin (1995).

After having these two abortions and fresh from a ‘personal low, which she refers to as her ‘emotional suicide,’ (Emin, Lauson and Rugoff, 2011) Emin called her debut exhibition ‘Tracey Emin: My Major Retrospective 1963-1993.’ She had graduated from The Royal College of Art in 1989 and was suffering a lack of direction as a painter. This resulted in her isolating herself and throwing all of her work into a skip. Tracey Emin’s work now shows life events and emotions ranging from feeling ‘desperate, angry and tough, to funny, sentimental and full of longing,’ (Emin, Lauson and Rugoff, 2011) with hints of spirituality and afterlife also. I admire how art is Tracey Emin’s entire life. She has completely dedicated herself to her subject with no personal distractions such as partners or family life. She often states that art is all she’s ever known. Emin is influenced and inspired by artists such as Edvard Munch, Egon Shiele and Louise Bourgeois, all of which also express personal self in their work.

Louise Bourgeois was a French-American artist born in 1911 and died at the age of 97. It is clear to see how Emin is inspired by Bourgeois as throughout her long career, she too has explored past experiences and situations that has shaped her life and work. Bourgeois focused her practise on a range of themes including 'domesticity and the family, sexuality and the body, as well as death and the unconscious.' (Weidemann, Larass and Klier, n.d.) She used her practise as a therapeutic process in which she dealt with her difficult childhood. Louise Bourgeois is best known for her incredibly complex large scale sculptures and installation art, often made from materials such as 'marble, plaster and latex' (Archer, 1997) and was also an abundant painter and printmaker. 'Although her work was not related to a particular art movement, her practise had much in common with surrealism and feminist art.' (Tate, 2019) In Tracey Emin's documentary, 'Tracey Emin on Louise Bourgeois: Women Without Secrets, Emin states that Bourgeois' work 'gets into the nooks and crannies of the mind' (Tracey Emin on Louise Bourgeois: Women Without Secrets - Secret Knowledge, 2013) and one piece I feel that stands out in this way is *Spider*. *Spider* is a large scale sculpture made of bronze and granite created in 1994. 'The body of the spider supports a rounded cage-like structure inside which holds a large white egg.' (Tate, 2019) Bourgeois relates the spider to her mother, 'who was a weaver and the manager of the family's antique tapestry restoration business' (Tate, 2019) in a poem she released a year after creating this sculpture, called 'Ode to my Mother.' Spiders are weavers, makers and protectors. They build an architecture out of their body in the same way that the artist creates sculptures from her body and mind. After watching a number of videos and documentaries about Bourgeois, many of the people she had connections with stated that they felt intimidated and never comfortable in her presence. They admitted Bourgeois was 'very confrontational' and that they were 'terrified of her' (2/2 Tracey Emin on Louise Bourgeois: Women Without Secrets - Secret Knowledge, 2019) which is strangely also how many people feel about spiders. Louise Bourgeois slipped in and out of depression throughout her life and in 1994 suffered with severe insomnia. She began to draw in the middle of the night and her creations are referred to looking like they looked into other worlds or the twilight zone. Bourgeois also produced some work just before she died which featured the phrases 'I am packing my bags' and 'I leave my home.'

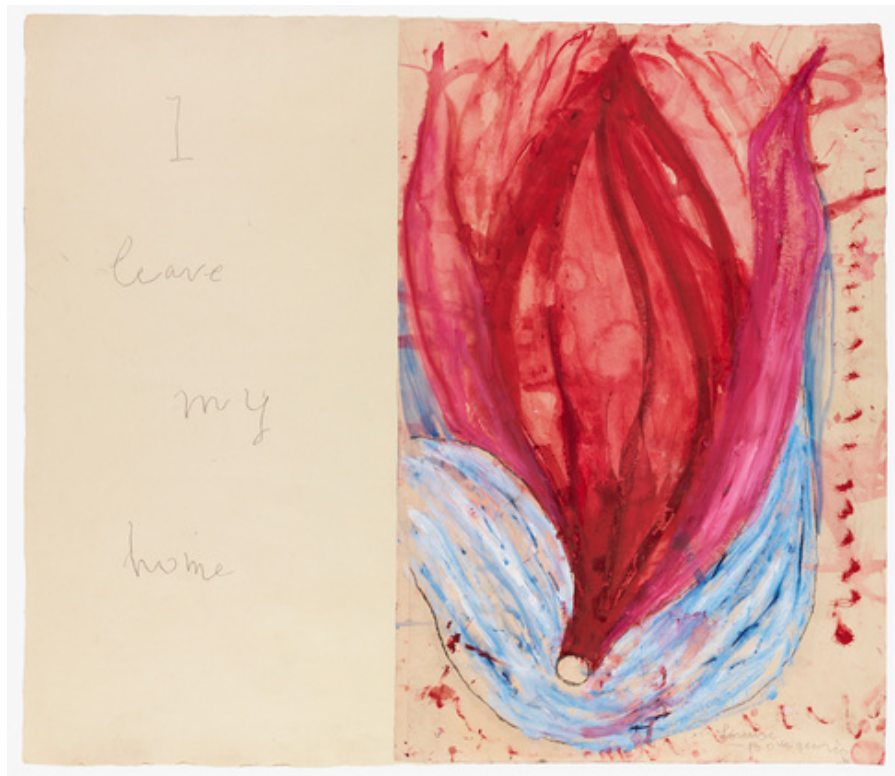


Fig 2 *Untitled, no. 4 of 6, from the series, I Give Everything Away*

The one thing that stands out for me when I think about my life so far is self realisation and coming to terms with something that I did not really want to find out about myself in the first place. It is a strange concept because being gay is something that has always been there yet when you actually realise it about yourself, personally I found it very hard to come to terms with. As coming out is something that has heavily impacted my life and growing up, I wanted to incorporate this in some of my more personal text work. I want to be able to show exactly what the whole questioning process is like. I want people that go through the same thing to look at my work and relate completely to what I am saying and what they are seeing. Whilst starting this project I was surprised to realise that it was actually proving difficult for me to jump straight back into the mind set of a questioning teenager. I was surprised because there was a time in my life where this was the only thing I could think about at all times. I was meant to be sitting exams yet the only thing on my mind and the only questions I am struggling to answer is whether I like her or I want to be like her. Even right up to just before I started actually working on this project I thought it would be so easy to have lots of things written down about how I used to feel, but then I realised those feelings feel so distant now and as if they was not me that felt them, in some way. In a way I am so grateful for that because that is all I wanted, to not feel those things anymore, and that is what I got. When I used to listen to people who had already come out, the key phrase I would hear all the time was 'it gets better' and there was me literally feeling like I was on some sort of waiting list to join those people on the other side with no time frame estimate

on when I was going to get there. That is why I created a piece that says the phrase 'it gets better' roughly wrote on a piece of cardboard. It is such a throw away term when it lands on the ears of someone that actually needs to hear it, yet you realise its truth and need to be heard when you no longer need to hear it. What a wasted phrase and important piece of knowledge.

The more I looked at these themes, the more tangents I began to discover. I started to think about the effect my self discovery would have had on family and friends and this coincided with finding a box of old family photos on slides. I enjoy photography and especially the idea that, within film photography, the light from that very moment when the photo is taken is, in a way, captured in the film. I am hugely inspired by the work of Nan Goldin who is an American photographer born in 1953. Goldin's work 'explores LGBT bodies, moments of intimacy, the HIV crisis, and the opioid epidemic.' (Google Arts & Culture, 2019) There is a quality to Nan Goldin's work that everything that is in shot is exactly where it should be placed. No item or figure is moved to appear more aesthetically pleasing, the photo is taken exactly how that very moment wanted to be. When comparing photographs like this to the ones found in the old family photos, I came across similar scenes. One of my favourites is a slide of my Nan and Grandad sitting on their bed drinking a cup of tea and laughing with each other. A moment where nothing particularly interesting is happening, yet the photographer obviously thought that sincere moment was worth capturing. I am so glad they did as it is beautiful. I began to draw from some of the photos I found using a stick and black ink. Illustrations inspired by Tracey Emin's way of approaching figures, I also incorporated text which stated some phrases that reminded me of my family, particularly my Nan who played a big part in my life, from growing up. The majority of the phrases I used would not have been easily understood by the viewer although I liked how it could almost be nonsense to some people, yet mean so much to me at the same time. Sentences I wrote by the illustrations included 'staircase shoe shops,' 'you'll wonder what you've got' and 'get the Argos catalog out.' After showing these pieces to classmates, everyone had different views on what the words meant to them and I appreciated how the work started to get people thinking about their own childhoods.

Another artist that creates text pieces with themes of sexuality and language is Derek Jarman. Born in 1942, Jarman 'was an English film director, stage designer, diarist, artist, gardener, and author.' (List Challenges, 2019) Jarman was well known for his 'views on homosexuality, his never-ending public fight for gay rights and his personal struggle with AIDS.' (MUBI, 2019) In '1986 Jarman was diagnosed as HIV-positive.' (E-flux.com, 2019)

This news resulted in Jarman allowing his practice to taken on an activism role to raise awareness of AIDS. He created a series of paintings in the 1990s which contained

'phrases related to government policy, tabloid hysteria and public fear of the AIDS crisis'

(E-flux.com, 2019)

In the painting *Fuck me blind*, 1993, which uses black, red and yellow oil paint on canvas, the words look as though they have been scratched into the paint with anger. Even the background of the text looks like claw marks conveying an attempt of escape from something that has taken over his life. The view I have of Jarman's work having hints of anger is possibly tainted by my personal experiences on the subject, as well as something else I also related to within the work. The backgrounds of the 'slogan paintings' look hectic and busy, resulting in the viewer having to look up close and in detail at the text to decipher what it reads. For me, this is a good example at how my mind felt when working my way through those times. You have to look through the frenetic scene to allow yourself to read and understand the message.

In conclusion, I feel the artists I have researched during this project have massively helped me gain an understanding on allowing my practice to convey personal experiences. At the beginning of this project I was unsure on how to convey the ideas I had laying dormant in my mind. In the past, I had explored working with the public in which I approached, and took portraits, of people in the street. I asked them general questions such as 'if you could give one piece of advice to a large group of people, what would it be?' Or 'whats the best thing thats happened to you this week?' And although I enjoyed hearing everybody's different responses and experiencing how each individual reacted differently to my questions, even the differences between men and women reactions, I knew I wanted to feel a personal connection with my work instead of staying in my comfort zone. I felt as though it was, in a way, easier to focus on other peoples lives instead of my own. Once I had carried out the task of photographing the individuals, I felt it was over. Whereas working in this new way, I get the feeling there is always more to say. Since looking at the practices of these artists, I feel as though a door has been unlocked and I have began to process my ideas physically. I am excited to see how my practice will develop and change over time. Although, for now I am pleased with the progress I have made within this new theme that I had, up until this point, been yet to explore.



Fig 3 My current studio 5/12/19

Bibliography-

Tate. (2019). Tracey Emin born 1963 | Tate. [online] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/tracey-emin-2590> [Accessed 26 Nov. 2019].

Emin, T., Lauson, C. and Rugoff, R. (2011). Tracey Emin. London: Hayward Publishing, p. 10.

Emin, T., Lauson, C. and Rugoff, R. (2011). Tracey Emin. London: Hayward Publishing, p. 6.

Tate. (2019). Louise Bourgeois 1911-2010 | Tate. [online] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/louise-bourgeois-2351> [Accessed 26 Nov. 2019].

Tracey Emin on Louise Bourgeois: Women Without Secrets - Secret Knowledge. (2013). [video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiGjzV7Nk48> [Accessed 26 Nov. 2019].

Tate. (2019). 'Spider', Louise Bourgeois, 1994 | Tate. [online] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-spider-al00354> [Accessed 26 Nov. 2019].

Tate. (2019). 'Spider I', Louise Bourgeois, 1995 | Tate. [online] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-spider-i-al00353> [Accessed 26 Nov. 2019].

Google Arts & Culture. (2019). Nan Goldin - Google Arts & Culture. [online] Available at: <https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/m01t1d5> [Accessed 26 Nov. 2019].

List Challenges. (2019). Derek Jarman Filmography. [online] Available at: <https://www.listchallenges.com/derek-jarman-filmography> [Accessed 28 Nov. 2019].

E-flux.com. (2019). Derek Jarman: PROTEST! - Announcements - e-flux. [online] Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/249114/derek-jarmanprotest/> [Accessed 2 Dec. 2019].

Merck, M., Townsend, C. and Emin, T. (2002). The art of Tracey Emin. New York, N.Y.: Thames & Hudson, p.142.

Merck, M., Townsend, C. and Emin, T. (2002). The art of Tracey Emin. New York, N.Y.: Thames & Hudson, p.33.

Weidemann, C., Larass, P. and Klier, M. (n.d.). 50 women artists you should know.

Tate. (2019). Louise Bourgeois 1911-2010 | Tate. [online] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/louise-bourgeois-2351> [Accessed 5 Dec. 2019].

2/2 Tracey Emin on Louise Bourgeois: Women Without Secrets - Secret Knowledge. (2019). [image] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vbhxr6ud8b4> [Accessed 5 Dec. 2019].

Archer, M. (1997). Art Since 1960 new edition. London: Thames & Hudson, p.120.

MUBI. (2019). Derek Jarman: Life As Art – Movie List. [online] Available at: <https://mubi.com/lists/derek-jarman-life-as-art> [Accessed 5 Dec. 2019].