

Research in Context Essay

Question 1: Explore how artists have expressed Gender in art practice providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

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Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on him and they still give him much trouble at times... Future ages will bring him new and probably unimaginably great advances in this field of civilization and will increase man's likeness to God even more. But in the interests of our investigations, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character.

(Freud, 1930, pp. 28-29)

Throughout the last 60 years, the question of what gender is has surfaced and, as a consequence, the question of what determines it. What can gender be, if not a cumulation of traits that represent the person in a certain period in their life? In this regard, it is similar to how an artist might view their art as: a cumulation of what represents their beliefs, their body, and their life, suspended in time.

In today's world, gender became a recurring topic; it is seen as both an oppressor and a liberator, with people wanting to abolish it as much as they want to abide by it, which creates an interesting contradiction. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2021), gender is "the physical and/or social condition of being male or female", but can we define gender as a whole containing two parts? Sex and gender are seen as separate concepts nowadays, and even though they frequently gravitate towards each other, sex does not always determine gender. Christine Delphy (1993, p. 3) states that "the idea that both genders are independent of both sexes has progressed", whilst "the aspects of 'sex roles' and sexual situations which are recognised to be socially constructed rather than biologically determined has grown". Therefore, gender can be influenced by many factors: by knowledge, feelings, experiences, and it is dependent on "racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (Butler, 1990, p. 4), so it should not be seen as a fixed construct.

Given that gender is not a fixed construct, we may deduce that it is not continuous. It is a part of who we are, of course, but it is as prone to change as any other feature of ours; we can compare it to changing our clothes even. While being so versatile, gender can be seen as many things: as a curiosity, as a question, as a rebellion, as a refuge, as an answer. Although it is "a fairly recent concept" (Holmes, 2012, pp. 1-2), its influence is considerable.

With the above in mind, the concept of gender as a performance emerged, emphasising how people perceive themselves outside of the gender binary and treat their bodies as a means of creation, rather than as something that exists to supply the making of art. Judith Butler (2004, p. 21) makes a compelling argument about the relationship between the body and the social space in her book, *"Undoing Gender"*:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where "doing" and "being done to" become equivocal. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine.

A large number of artists have contributed to the development of what gender can look like from an artistic point of view and what can result out of the relation between art, the body, and gender. In order to acknowledge this relation and its importance, we will look at works by Louise Bourgeois, Yishay Garbasz, and Marlene Dumas, with the help of various writers and thinkers, such as Judith Butler, Jean-Paul Sartre, and more.



Figure 1. Louise Bourgeois - "*Nature Study*" (2004)

The work I will introduce first is Louise Bourgeois's "*Nature Study*" (2004).

Once described as a "reluctant hero of feminist art" (Ferrier, 2016), Bourgeois treated her life experience, as well as her relationships with other people, as a continuous inspiration for her creations. The main themes in her art were sexuality, gender, family, and death, themes that she treated with an incredible sense of intimacy. "Like the title of her work, 'I Do, I Undo, I Redo', she spent her life reflecting on and contributing to her own personal relationship with art" (Hauser & Wirth, 2017).

"*Nature Study*" (2004) is the prime demonstration that the artist knows how to transform her ideas into silent, but powerful, effigies. Bourgeois is simply "pushing the boundaries and traditional categorisation of gender through the assemblage of forms" (Phillips, 2012). This sculpture, executed in porcelain, reveals an anthropomorphic body that

is soft in its compliance, despite the claws that sprout from its paws. Even with its otherworldly look, there is no denying the pure humanity that seems to almost breathe out of its over polished pores. A passage from Jean-Paul Sartre's (1966, p. 505) book, *"Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology"* is one that we can associate with this sculpture:

I feel my skin and my muscles and my breath, and I feel them not in order to transcend them toward something as in emotion or appetite... but as a passion by which I am engaged in the world and in danger in the world... The being which desires is consciousness making itself body.

The connection between "Nature Study" (2004) and the subject of gender is quite evident: the ambisexual genitalia depicted in the sculpture represents both the nurturing and vengeful nature of the self. This work eloquently shows how the care of a parent can take an animalistic turn to protect its child, the love shared between the two beings knowing no restriction.

As mothers, as daughters, as artists, but most of all as women we all have a stake in displacing the bio-maternal determinism that lies hidden in the seemingly benign representations of motherhood. Women artists have always worked in a Catch-22 situation and the catch is motherhood.

(Isaak, 1996, p. 140)

The three pairs of breasts can be seen as contradicting features: they are perceived as objects of sexuality, of vulnerability, yet in Bourgeois's sculpture, they exist to empower and dismantle any misogynistic thought. "We are all vulnerable in some way, and we are all male and female." (Bourgeois, 1985, p. 2)

What I consider the starting point of my curiosity towards gender philosophy is Louise Bourgeois's art. Feelings, for her, dictate the exterior – or how her art comes to life. There is animosity in her art as much as there is softness and love, and these characteristics are, I

believe, what every person that struggles with gender expression searches for to feel understood.



Figure 2. Yishay Garbasz - "*Becoming*" (2010)

The second work I will talk about is Yishay Garbasz's "*Becoming*" (2010).

As a photographer and installation artist, it comes as no surprise that Yishay Garbasz is fascinated by borders, especially those situated between gender and sex, the ones that make trauma be "inscribed on the body" (Messerschmidt, 2021). When she is not photographing the deserted places of the world, she is using her body as a malleable matter to provoke the mind, taking inspiration from her life as a transgender woman.

Many portraits of transgender people are limited to 'before' and 'after', the 'black and white' of sex: male or female. [...] I explore the visual changes in my body through the process of the transition, the slight changes that span many months and, in some cases, years. The grey rather than the 'black' or 'white' of male or female.

(Garbasz, 2010)

Standing tall at almost 8 feet, "*Becoming*" (2010) is a monumental zoetrope that depicts the changes Garbasz's body went through in the span of two years. Heavy both material-

wise and subject-wise, this piece not only brings awareness to the fact that transgender people have to go through double standards and transphobic societal expectations, but it also shows the reality of a body that is everchanging, despite any step-backs it may encounter. By using "explicit exposure to demystify gender transition and replace anxieties about crossing the border between male and female with playfulness" (Shandler, 2017), Garbasz shows to the audience that she is not frightened by the uncomfortable aspects of gender or the difficult questions surrounding it. Her works are a wake-up call and a starting point in asking ourselves: do I reside at the centre of gender binarity or do I exist outside of it? Is it something I support or something I reject?

In "*Becoming*" (2010), Garbasz's self-portraits move fast and with force, blurring the lines between what is considered male and what is considered female. Pure, unbridled gender performativity replaces desire in this context. This zoetrope is not a confession, but more a message of I am here and I exist, despite your rules and misconceptions, a message directed at the persons who deny the genders of others and at those who battle with their own internalized human-related phobias. "We have no say in other people's genders or existence. It's not a debate." (Garbasz, 2020)

When looking at any of Yishay Garbasz's creations, I think of one of Kazimir Malevich's sayings from his essay, "*From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism*" (1915): "Only dull and impotent artists veil their work with sincerity. Art requires truth, not sincerity" (Bowlit, 1976, p. 119). In Garbasz's work, there is nothing but unashamed truth, driven by the wish of showing reality as accurate as it is. In my opinion, that might be just the greatest thing a person hopes to find in the art they are consuming, whether they struggle with their identity or not.



Figure 3. Marlene Dumas - "*Magdalena (Venus)*" (1995)

The last work I will introduce is Marlene Dumas's "*Magdalena (Venus)*" (1995).

Interested in the connection between the human condition and emotions, what Dumas creates is as critical as it is free-spirited. Most of her pieces appear to be portraits, but they transcend the ordinary meaning of one. Focusing on themes such as "race and sexuality, guilt and innocence, violence and tenderness" (Horlock, 1997) and gender, her works depict a state of mind or a certain feeling, rather than actual people.

"*Magdalena (Venus)*" (1995) is one of the many works under the name *Magdalena* that Dumas painted – what is a common trait between them is the dark, almost commanding, aura that surrounds the body. This work holds an important characteristic within itself: defiance; it does not exist to appeal to the male gaze but to defy it, while the subject watches the viewer with silent, but strong, contempt. What compliments the figure most,

though, are the artist's brushstrokes. They are "fast" (Dumas, 2015), confident, giving way to colours that are meant to make this version of *Magdalena* seem all the more confrontational.

I have said before that I don't want the nude, I want the naked. But I do know with the descriptions of things, as with the *Magdalena* paintings, that I was deliberately not looking for seduction, but rather for confrontation. [...] Maybe I thought that confrontation was closer to nakedness than seduction.

(Dumas, 2015)

Various paintings of Mary Magdalene depict her as a person begging for redemption or as a "polar opposite of Maria, the ideal woman" (Artsy, 2014) since she is neither a saint nor a mother figure, thus deeming her unworthy, sinful, rotten. In Dumas's interpretation, the subject's breasts and genital area are covered, yet this detail does not diminish the eroticism that is so prevalent in the artist's works but rather amplifies it. "*Magdalena (Venus)*" (1995) is a force to be reckoned with because she defies tradition by wielding the sensuality resulting from her nakedness as a weapon, rather than as an object of seduction.

[...] women experience alienation, even exile from their bodies as they negotiate traditional norms and roles. Traditions are used often to control female sexuality, and controls of the female body are mystified as being faithful to tradition. [...] Women must pay severe costs for confronting tradition.

(Katrak, 2006, p. 157)

The connection between this painting and gender is exactly what makes it so fantastic: femininity exists inside it as a characteristic that stems from a place of self-confidence instead of weakness, which breaks it apart from many other paintings where we see the figures of women through the eyes of men. "While feminine bodily existence is a transcendence and openness to the world, it is an ambiguous transcendence, [...] laden with

immanence" (Young, 2005, p. 36). In "*Magdalena (Venus)*" (1995), freedom and confrontation are one and the same, and they make femininity look extraordinary.

Marlene Dumas's art, for me, represents a beginning; we see the beautiful, the ugly, the obscene, and we acknowledge the fact that we can be whomever we want to be and live through our vulnerabilities and without fear. Self-expression is an important trait, and I feel that Dumas's works can be a starting point in truly getting to know our authentic selves.

Unsurprisingly, art and gender complement one another. Both have a history of oppression and hesitant acceptance ingrained within them, and both have the potential of helping to change the world depending on how we utilize them in our discourses, everyday lives, and ideas. I believe we can compare them to the mirror in Lavelle's book, "*L'Erreur de Narcisse*" (1939, pp. 11-12), since, just like the mirror, art and gender can add to the confusion as much as they clarify it.

If we imagine Narcissus in front of a mirror, the resistance of glass and metal sets up a barrier to his ventures. His forehead and fists collide with it; and if he goes around it, he finds nothing. A mirror imprisons within itself a second world which escapes him, in which he sees himself without being able to touch himself, and which is separated from him by a false distance which he can shorten but cannot cross over.

Gender, though, is much more than a concept — it is the source of identity, and while its existence implies binarity, we can overcome this outdated misconception through art and freedom of thought and expression. There is strength in numbers, regardless of context, thus art and gender have the capacity to dispel any misjudgement and stigma that surrounds them.

All of the works included in this essay are amongst the ones I treasure most because they offered me solace at a time when gender was a topic I did not want to think about, let alone address. Thanks to heavy research and an open-minded approach, gender became a refuge instead of a source of misery, and it now is a significant influence in both the art I consume and the art I make. In the future, I hope that the connection between art and gender will withstand criticism and stay as honest, unabashed, and powerful as it is today. I will conclude this essay with a passage from Mary Oliver's book, "*Long Life: Essays and Other Writings*" (2004, p. 33), that I believe best explains the connection between gender and life in general.

We must get somewhere—and so the story begins. Truly, the heart delights in it. Adversity, even tragedy, is cathartic, and a teacher. Challenge and personal valour are admired by us all. On the windless days, [...] what is it we do? We lie down and rest upon the generous earth.

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