

Question 1: Explore how artists have approached the concepts around 'gender' in art practice; providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

Student name: Bethany Jenkinson

Student Number: 2210538

Program of study: Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context (BA)

Module: ADAD5003 Research in Context

Tutors: Alexander Duncan / Holly Slingsby

Word count: 2,263 (excluding title page, table of contents, list of illustrations and reference page)

Table of contents

Figure list.....	1
Introduction.....	4
Cindy Sherman's <i>untitled film stills</i>	5
Feminine Identity.....	6
Tracey Emin's <i>My Bed, Terribly wrong</i>	8
Marina Abramovic <i>Rhythm 0</i>	10
Rachel Maclean <i>Make Me Up</i>	14
Conclusion.....	16
References.....	18

Figure list

- Figure 1.** Tate (n.d.). ‘Untitled Film Still #48’, Cindy Sherman, 1979, reprinted 1998. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sherman-untitled-film-still-48-p11518> (Accessed: 11 December 2024) 6
- Figure 2.** Tate (2014). ‘Terribly Wrong’, Tracey Emin, 1997 | Tate. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/emin-terribly-wrong-p11565>. (Accessed: 11 December 2024) 9
- Figure 3.** Tate (2015). Tracey Emin, ‘My Bed’ – TateShots | Tate. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/emin-my-bed-l03662/tracey-emin-my-bed>. (Accessed: 11 December 2024) 10
- Figure 4.** Tate (2015). Tracey Emin, ‘My Bed’ – TateShots | Tate. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/emin-my-bed-l03662/tracey-emin-my-bed>. (Accessed: 11 December 2024) 11
- Figure 5.** www.kunsthhaus.ch. (n.d.). Marina Abramovic´ – KUNSTHAUS. [online] Available at: <https://www.kunsthhaus.ch/en/besuch-planen/ausstellungen/marina-abramovic/>. (Accessed: 12 December 2024) 13
- Figure 6.** www.youtube.com. (n.d.). Rachel Maclean: Cutting up the Canon of Art History | HENI Talks. [online] Available at: <https://youtu.be/EUKmMUNS-qM>. (Accessed: 12 December 2024) 16

The Significance of Self-Identity in Feminine Art: Exploring Personal Expression and Cultural Representation.

Introduction

A Woman's selfhood and identity has been put aside through the means of inequality and their identification as the inferior version of men, for so long that it's become normalized in society to see the philosophical understanding of self-identity in the viewpoint of a man rather than a woman due to the lack of power and attention. In the idealized world of the male stance being the most correct and absolute I question Simone de Beauvoir's declaration "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (Anderson, Willett and Meyers, 2021), which suggests that the woman is not the subject but something lesser than. In this essay I will investigate the ways in which self-identity is explored through female artists and how the feminine regard to the self can be portrayed.

One way in which feminine self-identity is represented is through the works of Cindy Sherman and the way she transforms into the subject through her self-portraits, her myriads of characters that characterize femininity, androgyny and masculinity. She demands her existence to be recognized and challenges societal gender norms by means

of diminishing the line between reality and fiction. Her famous black and white self-portraits '*Untitled Film Stills*', in particular '*Untitled Film Still #25 (1978)*' one of her earlier stills which show Sherman posing as a fictional unknown character, where she embodies the different types of women that would appear in movies such as a housewife, prostitute, damsel in distress, and so on. Her characters give light to the hold on female stereotypes that are idealized in film that could potentially give the viewer insight of the vulnerability and complexity of real women that go through these things in real life. (Lesso, 2021) Some of her portraits make viewers feel unsettled as Shermans way of not making the portrait 'look good' in the conventional way but in the way that makes you contemplate. (Tate, 2019). Cindy Shermans characters that portray women in film as the non-conventional notions of femininity, protest the male gaze often shown in film, and offer a new appreciation and representation for women who aren't perfectly constructed for the screen. She is humanizing women and emphasizes this visually, by the peeling prosthetics, chaotic wigs, and messy makeup, she instead curates the imperfection that was forbidden in film. "The feminist presence, both behind and in front of the camera, is a minority one" (Gamman and Marshment, 1994).



Figure 1Untitled Film Still #48 by Cindy Sherman 1978

By focusing on the meaning of identity itself, I can deduce that the overall definition is said to be a person's sense of self encompassing the memories, experiences, relationships and values that make up your sense of self and how you differ from other people through actions and circumstances. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024) It's also said that when one has a clear sense of purpose, it often reinforces their identity, that guides them to make choices and enforces a sense of self. However, by imagining a scenario where a person was somehow void of all these elements, could they still share the same understanding of

what it means to be oneself despite the lack of memories, experiences and relationships. To build on this, the study of metaphysics which consists of the basic structure of reality and deals with the concepts of identity, causation, substance, and kind which is a topic that goes beyond physics and is a “study that transcend the mundane concerns of Newton and Einstein and Heisenberg” (Jenkins et al., 2007) Feminist thinkers seek to understand the ways social categories such as race and gender intertwine with social structures such as sexism, patriarchy, racism and white supremacy. (Jenkins et al., 2007).

Regarding the feminine identity, the word had been lost through the fact that women were restricted from forming their own identity, to be defined by societies gender roles in relation to men. For example, man's wife, sex object, mother, housewife, and never defined by their own actions, experiences, relationships in society. (Friedan, 1963) In art history its known that the white male perspective was more commonly dominated throughout time and left female artists without representation, almost like a rejection to the feminine self-identity. Its prevalent that female artists throughout history were under-appreciated and excluded from art itself in which “Women were not encouraged to pursue a professional career (Nochlin,1978). On the contrary, they had to occupy themselves with domestic tasks and motherhood.” (Vink, 2018) This disallowed women to freely express their identity and explore their selfhood and allowed a greater divide between the sexes. This in fact obscured the right to be seen as who you are instead of what role you play. The underrepresentation of women in art history can be attributed to three main factors: patriarchal systems, structures and stereotypes which contribute to the gender hierarchy imbalance and the disadvantages women artists face throughout history. Mary Kelley was

one of the central figures in shaping feminist thought in the arts, known for her approach to challenging patriarchy through a conceptual and theoretical lens. Instead of focusing on biological notions of female power, she drew on psychoanalysis to critique gender dynamics. (Artspace Editorial, 2017). “

Tracey Emin is another important artist who explores the feminine identity, focusing on personal truth and the contemporary experience of being a woman. Her work offers intimate glimpses into women's lives, capturing raw and honest moments. One of her most famous works ‘My Bed’ is an installation where she spent four days in her bed and displayed it in the Tate Britain. This portrayed her vulnerability and strength simultaneously mirroring the quote “no happy women ever writes” (Kelley, 2017), as the tumultuous events in her life inspires her work. For example, her work ‘Terribly Wrong’ was influenced by the abortion that she had in 1994. “Emin once expressed that seemingly contradictory themes like aggression, beauty, sex, and memories of pain and violence are all connected in her work.” (Graf, 2022). By sharing her own story, she creates an atmosphere of openness and empowerment for women who share the same experiences, allowing others who don't have a voice to feel comfortable, creating a sense of community.

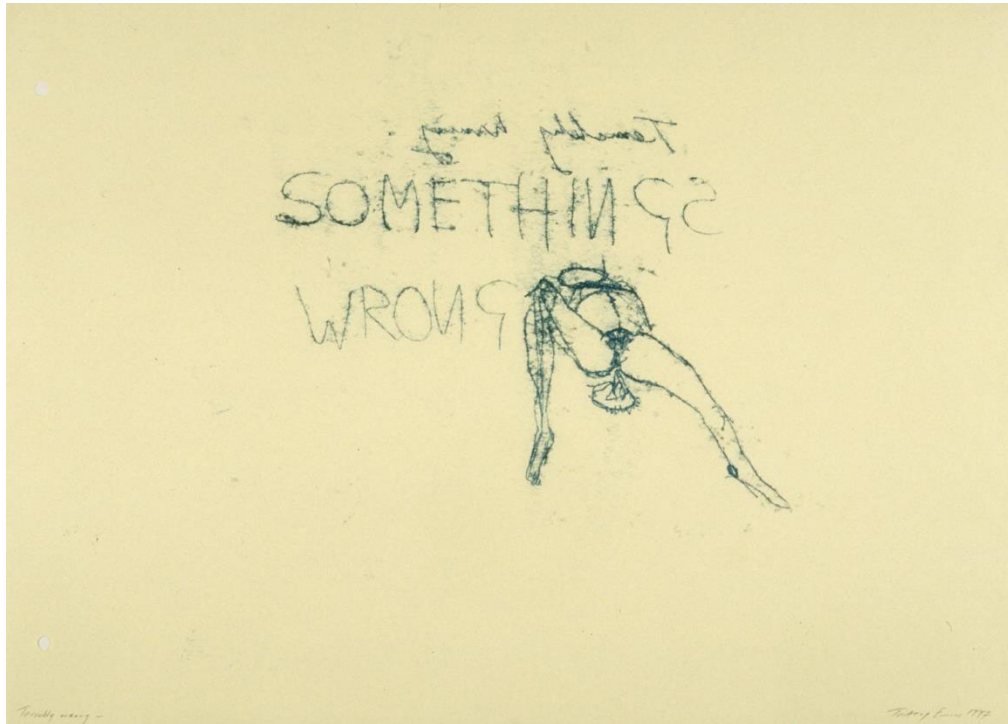


Figure 2 *Terribly Wrong* by Tracey Emin 1997



Figure 3 *My Bed* by Tracey Emin 1999

Marina Abramovic is a Serbian conceptual performance artist who's famously known for her rhythm series, her performance rhythm 0 took place in Nopales in 1974 where she stood still for 6 hours straight with 72 objects presented on a table with a note saying:

“Instructions

There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired.

Performance

I am the object.

During this period, I take full responsibility.”

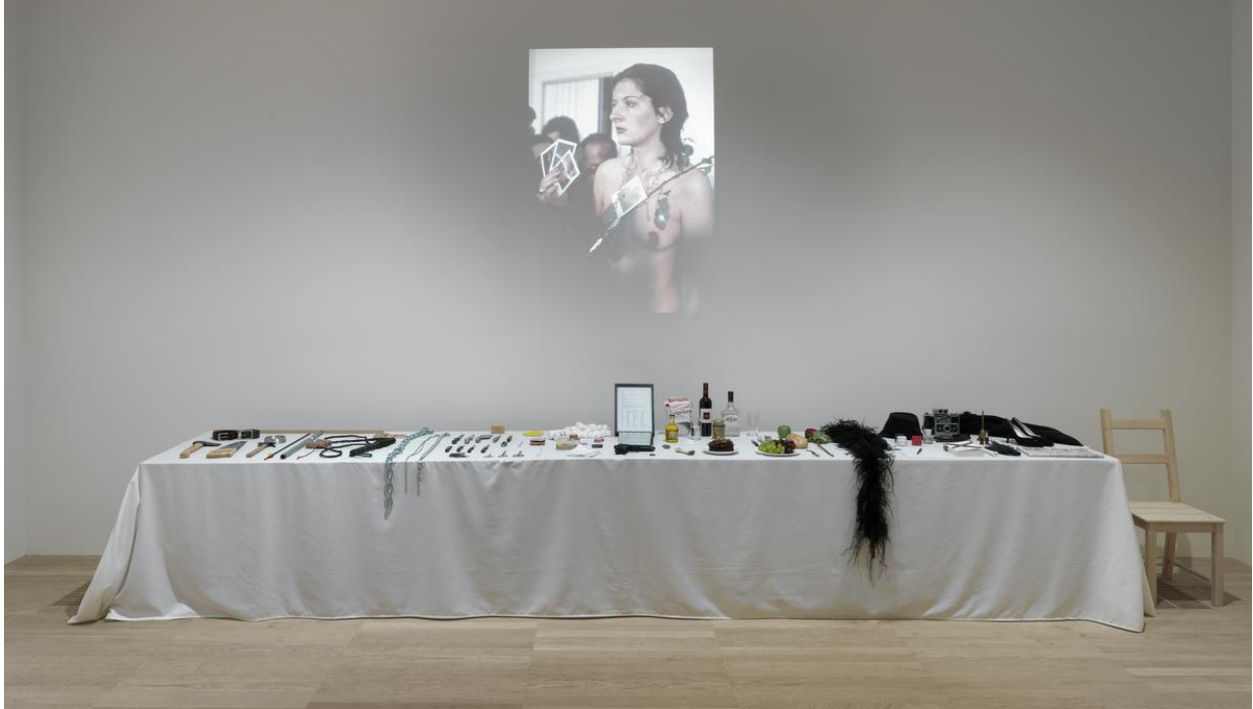


Figure 4 *Rhythm 0* by Marina Abramovic 1974

On the table there were various objects, ranging from a rose, grapes, a feather to more provocative items like razor blades, a gun and a single bullet. She wanted to see how the audience would respond to these objects and what they would do to her. To test societies' morality given the chance to do anything they wanted without the fear of consequences. The audience started off tame and gentle, for example giving her the rose to hold, treating her with kindness. However, as time passed, the audience began to test the waters by scratching her with the thorns of the rose. When she didn't react, their behavior grew bolder and more violent. Some cut off her hair, and then, emboldened by her passivity, cut

her body with the razor blades, one man took her shirt off and covered her eyes with it before walking behind her and groping her breasts. No one in the audience thought to interject or stop him; they simply just stood and watched. This is an example of what's known as the *bystander effect*, which is “the reduction in helping behavior in the presence of other people” (Hortensius and de Gelder, 2018). One woman in the audience was the only one to show any compassion, she put Abramovic’s shirt back on her, wiped away her tears, and applied plasters on her cuts but no one else showed any sense of humanity. Toward the end of the performance, a man loaded the gun and placed it in Abramovic's hand and pointed it at her head. Only then did the audience protest and stop him, only once it reached the point her life was at stake did anyone try to intervene and help her.



Figure 5 *Rhythm 0* by Marina Abramovic 1974

The difference between the men and women's reactions affirms the idea written in this quote

“Early studies of sex/gender differences in empathic ability employed questionnaires (e.g., the Empathy Scale (Mehrabian and Epstein, 1972) showed that women scored higher on self-reports of empathic ability in studies with

different sample sizes ranging from 20 to 600” (Eisenberg and Lennon, 1983)

This indicates that women have more empathy in dealing with situations where something unjust is happening to another woman.

This performance left Abramovic with trauma that she still deals with today. After the performance she gave a statement in which she said, “The experience I drew from this piece was that in your own performances you can go very far, but if you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed.” (Burton, 2023). In saying this, Abramovic highlights the helplessness she experienced by handing over control to the audience, where the line between art and moral decay was brought to light, revealing how easily boundaries can be crossed when there are no consequences. She also confessed that when the gun was pointed at her neck she was “ready to die” (Burton, 2023). Even well into her seventies, she still bears scars from the cuts she endured during the performance.

Despite experiencing all of this, Abramovic does not consider herself a feminist. She said “I am not a feminist artist. I am woman, but I am not the woman artist, I am just an artist.” (Whitfield, 2021). This quote highlights her resistance to being labeled as a ‘feminist artist’ or a ‘woman artist’ she is just an artist. However, considering her experiences and the society where women are still treated as lesser than men, her work continues to explore themes central to feminism, such as the body, vulnerability, and feminine identity. Similarly, just like how Marina Abramović doesn't call herself a feminist, both she and

Tracey Emin make art that address these themes contributing to the development of feminism in the contemporary world.

Rachel Maclean is a Scottish video artist and filmmaker whose work includes the use of green screen, sheeny style computer-generated visual effects combined with over exaggerated costumes and makeup to create surreal, almost otherworldly scenes. She states that she “would like people to be unsettled” (Rachel Maclean, www.youtube.com, n.d.) by her work. Maclean often transforms herself into various figures varying from twisted versions of authority figures, mythological beings, or warped representations of today’s culture. In her film ‘*Make Me Up*’ it shows the main character ‘Siri’ going through trials, with obvious consequences, that help her grow and gradually understand how the world is shrouded in iniquity. Maclean’s character uses the voice of Kenneth Clark who was a British art historian, and broadcaster, his voice symbolizes the dominating power of a man's voice contrasting with the female characters who can't speak which highlights the importance of having a voice and to be heard. In the end, the women gain liberation and get their voices back, which take the form of singing and how coming together to sing Ethel Smyth’s ‘*March of the Women*’ as a collective brings a sense of togetherness and the act of taking back the power. Adding to this, Maclean’s mentions the assembly of female voices taken from different angles on feminism, “for the audience it’s quite exciting to see, that kind of restraint and to see this almost release of voices, and the power that comes with that” (Rachel Maclean, www.youtube.com, n.d.). Her work often brings up the themes of voice, whether it be a domineering voice or one yet to find courage to speak, which oppose the notion that a woman is “incapable of a voice in her own existence” (Friedan, 1963). In

Maclean's work she explains that using comedy in her work is a way of taking back power from men, and as such she says that "there's a power in comedy, and so much of the history of comedy has been men making jokes at the expense of women" (Rachel Maclean, www.youtube.com, n.d.) which "Some theorists have proposed that the humor of women functions to create solidarity and build intimacy, while the humor of men functions as a form of status competition." (Crawford, 2003).



Figure 6 *Make Me Up* by Rachel Maclean 2018

In conclusion, the exploration of feminine self-identity in art highlights the ongoing struggles women face within a society shaped by gender inequality. Through the works of artists like Cindy Sherman, Tracey Emin, Marina Abramović, and Rachel Maclean, we see how personal expression and cultural issues are explored in powerful ways. Sherman's self-portraits challenge traditional ideas of femininity, while Emin's intimate installations reveal the complexities of women's experiences. Abramović's performances test the limits of human behaviour and expose gender-based power dynamics, and Maclean uses humour and surreal imagery to amplify women's voices. These artists not only reclaim space for women in art but also reshape how feminine identity is represented, offering new perspectives on self-expression and social roles. Their work encourages a deeper understanding of gender, power, and identity, contributing to a more inclusive view of art and society.

References

Anderson, E., Willett, C. and Meyers, D. (2021). *Feminist Perspectives on the Self*. Fall 2021 ed. [online] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-self/#CritClasApprSelf>. (Accessed: 10 December 2024)

Artspace Editorial (2017). *Get Your Feminism(s) in a Row: Mary Kelly in Conversation with Douglas Crimp*. [online] Artspace. Available at: https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/book_report/get-your-feminisms-in-a-row-mary-kelley-in-conversation-with-douglas-crimp-54696. (Accessed: 10 December 2024)

Burton, P. (2023). *'I was ready to die': Marina Abramović on 'Rhythm 0'*. [online] faroutmagazine.co.uk. Available at: <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/marina-abramovic-rhythm-0/>. (Accessed: 12 December 2024)

Cambridge Dictionary (2024). *IDENTITY* | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary. [online] Cambridge.org. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/identity>. (Accessed: 11 December 2024)

Crawford, M. (2003). Gender and humor in social context. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35(9), pp.1413–1430. doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/s0378-2166\(02\)00183-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0378-2166(02)00183-2). (Accessed: 10 December 2024)

Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Gamman, L. and Marshment, M. (1994). *The Female gaze: women as viewers of popular culture*. London Women's Press.

Graf, S. (2022). *10 Artworks That Made Tracey Emin Famous*. [online] TheCollector. Available at: <https://www.thecollector.com/10-artworks-that-made-tracey-emin-famous/>. (Accessed: 11 December 2024)

Haslanger, S. and Ásta (2018). *Feminist Metaphysics*. Fall 2018 ed. [online] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-metaphysics/>. (Accessed: 10 December 2024)

Hortensius, R. and de Gelder, B. (2018). From Empathy to Apathy: The Bystander Effect Revisited. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 27(4), pp.249–256.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417749653>. (Accessed: 11 December 2024)

Inwagen, van and Sullivan, M. (2007). *Metaphysics* (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). [online] Stanford.edu. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaphysics/>. (Accessed: 10 December 2024)

Jenkins, K., Cull, M., Haslanger, S. and Ásta (2007). *Feminist Metaphysics*. [online] Stanford.edu. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-metaphysics/#MetaQuesFemiSign> (Accessed: 11 December 2024)

Kelley, M. (2017). *Private Woman, Public Stage*. UNC Press Books.

Lesso, R. (2021). *How Cindy Sherman Redefined Self-Portraiture (7 Artworks)*. [online] TheCollector. Available at: <https://www.thecollector.com/cindy-sherman-self-portraits/>.

(Accessed: 9 December 2024)

Tate (n.d.). *Getting to know Cindy Sherman – Interview*. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/cindy-sherman-1938/getting-know-cindy-sherman>.

(Accessed: 9 December 2024)

Vink, F. (2018). *Why are female artists underrepresented?* [online] Diggit Magazine. Available at: <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/underrepresentation-female-artists>. (Accessed: 10 December 2024)

Whitfield, Z. (2021). *'I See Myself As A Warrior': Marina Abramović On Art, Feminism, And Her History-Making Royal Academy Retrospective*. [online] British Vogue. Available at: <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/marina-abramovic-interview>.

(Accessed: 11 December 2024)