Confirmative Praxis Project Report

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MA Contemporary Dialogues: Graphic Design

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Glossary of Terms

Tag: graffiti writers' name/alias/self-named nickname, done quickly. (Walsh, 1996)

Writer: someone who writes graffiti. A member of the subculture. (Macdonald, 2001)

Piece: a painting, short for masterpiece. To paint a word or image with more than two colours. (Macdonald, 2001)

Throw up: a quick outline of a writer's name with a black or white painted interior. (Macdonald, 2001)

Introduction

This report focuses on the work produced for the MA contemporary dialogues final module but also represents a wider body of work and sustained inquiry into gender issues and the power of graffiti for social justice. This module shows development in my practice as a graphic designer and how this has been informed by the semiotic relationship between image and text (Berger, 2008).

My praxis looks at the social construct of gender interpreting the theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith butler and Caroline Criado Perez.

What is my art practice about?

Throughout my life, I have encountered gendered attitudes that have either tried to influence my behaviour, aspirations, or the way I dress to conform to gendered stereotypes or locate me as 'other' (Beauvoir, 2014) and this has influenced the development of my practice. Feminist theory argues that the lives of men have often overshadowed the existence of women. In the recorded history of humans, there exists a gap. Perez (2020) highlights that in the history of humans, there is a data gap. Specifically, a gendered data gap. A startlingly empty space. A silence that has consequences, and that half of history is silence. An absence of the female.

From a second-wave feminist perspective, 'representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth' (Simone de Beauvoir, 2014).

The first recorded calendar was thought to be made by man. But the sequence of 28 carved lines holds a potentially different idea. Any woman with a regular menstrual cycle could tell you why that might not be accurate, and that in fact, it was a woman who invented the calendar (Toksvig, 2004). According to Perez (2020), the language used to describe the history of humanity is gendered. The use of the word 'Man' to represent the whole human species has had a historical impact by using gendered-specific language generically. The hunter-gather was identified as the role of the man. Cave paintings depicting these scenes were assumed to be painted by 'men' because of what they depicted, however through research, it has been revealed that most of the paintings were done by women (Perez 2020).

History, (his story) feminist theorists argue, has systematically written women out of the picture (Ramirez 2022). Female warriors existed, Viking women owned property and had their own money and titles. The 'Birka Warrior' which has a female pelvis was still categorised as a man because they were given a warrior's burial. When it was revealed using DNA testing that the warrior was a woman, critics claimed that they could have just been accidentally buried in the wrong place. Even though, hypocritically, that is never assumed when a male skeleton is found in a similar burial.

My art practice is about challenging gender bias in our society, highlighting how gendered language and social constructs shape how we identify and present ourselves, and how these constructs create limitations on women in the western world. Western culture is prominently patriarchal, designed to privilege the male population. In turn, this creates a gender gap in history and culture. By looking at feminist theory and the works of Simone de

Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Caroline Criado Perez, and Janine Ramirez, I have analysed the principles of how a gendered society is built and looked in-depth into social attitudes towards the representation of women. I have explored how the essence of a woman is captured and recorded from a western world standpoint and that includes multiple, gendered, languages. This gendered language determines how we describe and define gender, social structures and cultural norms that further influence everyday interactions and how we refer to one another within the wider social context.

Judith Butler (2007) states that gender and sex are both social constructs and that we perform these roles. She argues that not only are gender roles culturally and socially determined but that we inculcate these attitudes and collude in playing out these gendered behaviours. So not only are we nurtured externally to fulfil predetermined behaviour traits, but we also play an active role in reinforcing them.

Reflection on action - what worked and what didn't work in practice

There have been several challenges during the development of my practice during this MA programme. One of the key issues has been the way I create my work. Graffiti is an illegal act and for obvious reasons, the production of work for my master's course needs to work within accepted practices and legal boundaries. To fulfil the full potential of graffiti art practice within the context of this course would be illegal and therefore I have compromised my practice by spraying on canvas. Research has revealed that I am far from the only graffiti artist to face this challenge (Banksy, Mr Brainwash, Jean Michael Basquiat, and Ben Eine to name but a few) that have produced work for a gallery context. I believe that my work has

been successful in carrying a powerful message despite locating it within the gallery and not in the urban environment and will explore this further in this report.

The greatest hindrance has been finding a space for my exhibition. Originally, I pre-empted there being some issues so ahead of time I requested a space that I would be allowed to spray on. After being told I could not use my preferred space I understood that the location change was so I could complete my final piece as desired. However last minute I was told that this was no longer allowed, and at the last minute finding a solution and adapting my final piece. I acquired two 8x4 foot wooden boards that I painted white. I took them into the spray booth and applied my piece and installed the boards on the wall. I find it ironic that it's either do it their way or no way. I've had to compromise creatively, and it draws a direct comparison to the attitudes of the world to graffiti in an institutional lead environment.

O'Doherty's seminal essay 'The White Cube' (1986) argues that the white cube gallery space is far from a neutral environment and is instead a highly charged space steeped in social and cultural values that not only influence the visual aesthetic of the work but influenced the meaning of the work itself.

Early modules in the MA have facilitated generative practice that has led to a developing a continuum of work investigating gender issues including 'the thought experiment' after the death of Sarah Everard and the written assignment for the 'co-existent practices' module investigating the representation of women and public realm sculpture. This provided a theoretical and practical grounding that has underpinned much of the work in this final module. My ideas have not consolidated, however, rather they have evolved over time

drawing upon the critical thinking encouraged by peer review and tutorial engagement that has continued to challenge my thinking and refined my practice.

My feelings about the work

I feel that the social justice, gendered discourse, that I'm highlighting and discussing through my work is an important one. There is a deep personal connection to the works I'm producing as a woman and a creative practitioner. Throughout my life, I have challenged gender stereotypes since childhood having experienced the constant feeling of never conforming to the dominant gender roles and behavioural expectations of society. That feeling of fighting to be accepted as you are and who you are is not a new topic but certainly a vital one and one that has validity within my work and life experiences.

Creating roles and labels that reduce, or entirely deny, the pluralistic identities of women help maintain the status of patriarchal power. Being able to disrupt that ideology and challenge it creates waves and imbalance. To point out gender inequalities in our society does not point blame solely on one party or another but rather on the cultural values perpetuated by powerful institutions that privilege white, middle-class, male power. It is my intention to create a dialogue for change and understand that our society is not designed to benefit everyone.

I find it baffling that the issues women faced in the 1800s are still relevant today. There is a continued struggle to meet roles and social expectations and pressure to have a clear identity that conforms to social norms so you can be labelled according to social parameters.

Why I chose this practice

My work utilises the key principles of graffiti. It's unapologetic, proud and refuses to conform. However, it is noted that in my practice, I follow and abide by the constraints of the law and societal rules. Because of the lack of anonymity within the context of formal study, I must bear the weight of potential repercussions. If for example, I went along with the original plan for my final piece and sprayed directly on the wall, I would be in serious trouble. This is the reason graffiti artists create work anonymously with pseudonyms. For example, Banksy's identity is a secret and those that do know are bound by contracts with their own ramifications. In this instance, Banksy has used a loophole to use the law to protect their identity.

I choose graffiti because of its powerful, political, and rebellious significance. As a tool, it can be used to communicate directly with the public. From a simple 'tag' to a 'piece' a graffiti 'writer' uses the entire cityscape as the canvas, exhibition, and gallery. It takes confidence and fearlessness to break the rules. If you don't question and speak out about issues they will never be resolved satisfactorily. Action is needed to make progress. Those in power need to be held accountable and graffiti is a platform to do so. Graffiti is largely a male-dominated subculture (Macdonald, 2001). To use it to challenge the mainstream on women's issues creates a dichotomy between such a gatekept and male-dominated subculture. Using an art form that is used heavily during protests and natural acts of anarchy is a means to challenge the establishment in a way that engages the public by using these pre-existing connotations within the subculture. I have utilised this for the benefit of the work produced.

Contextualising my work in relation to other artists and theorists

Artists that have influenced my work are, Joe Charman, Mr Brainwash and Guerrilla Girls. Visually and aesthetically, I have been inspired by the works of Charman and Mr Brainwash, with the use of spray paint and stencils on canvas. They are both categorised as street artists yet ironically neither paint on the street. Rather, they paint on canvas and display work in gallery spaces. The Guerrilla Girls, however, create work with strong meaning and use their work to highlight issues within the art world and the academy. They put up their work in public spaces reaching a wider audience than in a gallery-based location. I would argue that they are true street artists. Unlike Charman and Brainwash, the Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous group of female artists. Their work often focuses on gender and racial inequality. The group was formed in 1985 in New York (Guerrilla Girls, 2020), the birthplace of graffiti, which overtook the city in the 1970s (Macdonald, 2001). Different elements of the Guerrilla Girls' practice have influenced my own including my choice of key techniques, processes, and skills that these artists utilise in their practice greatly impacting upon my praxis.

Fig 1: Guerrilla Girls, 2019. MoMA Epstein [Poster].

The Guerrilla Girls are a collective, a movement, a resting force against institution passivity. They produce work that is directed to the public. Their work carries important and gritty messages. They fight against inequality and prejudice.

Fig 2: Joe Charman, 2022. The Rabbit Hole [Spray Paint and Stencil on Canvas]

Charman works out of an old shed in his back garden. He utilises social media and records the process of how he creates the artwork. He has made a career by selling his artwork and prints of the originals online. He mainly uses stencils to produce portraits of popular characters from television shows and pop culture. Charman often uses the same stencils of cut-out shapes that help maintain a consistent visual identity with all his pieces.

Fig 3: Mr. Brainwash, 2011. Untitled [Installation].

Brainwash's (aka Thierry Guetta) work is produced largely for gallery and exhibition spaces. He utilises the space by incorporating mass-scale pieces engaging directly with the context of the surrounding area of the gallery.

Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex*, is full of revelations about how society conditions women as the other and how that feminine role defines what we interpret as the social construct of what it means to be a woman. She states that there is the subject and the object. Women are usually put in the role of the object.

Patriarchy reinforces gender stereotypes that keep women stuck in the role of the passive and the feminine. Simone de Beauvoir was writing her seminal text, *The Second Sex* during the second wave of feminism that was later criticised for privileging white, middle-class women leading to the theory of intersectionality.

In current society, sexism isn't clear-cut. Women have access to education, the right to vote and arguably a moderate degree of body autonomy. And yet as the years have changed and women's rights movements have progressed in society, the contemporary world has become blurry. Multiple perspectives give voice to those who were formerly silenced and are more inclusive breaking down the polarization of binary opposites and opening up a broader discourse. These great feats have brought progress; however, we still live our lives ruled by limited roles even if it might not be as obvious as it was in the 1950s or the 1970s.

Those in power have shaped society and culture to suit them and they do not need to change it. It's against human nature to relinquish control and the fear of that lack of control makes the patriarchy resistant to change.

In Mary Beard's book, *Women and Power: a manifesto*, she states that 'our mental cultural template for a powerful person remains resolutely male.' It has been argued that 'one is not born but rather becomes a woman' (Beauvoir, 2014).

The lives of men have often overshadowed the existence of women. In the recorded history of humans, there exists a gap. Caroline Perez (2020) highlights that in the history of humans,

there is a data gap. Specifically, a gendered data gap. A startlingly empty space. A silence. That half of history is silence. An absence of the female.

Harmful stereotypes are perpetuated through gendered language and the lack of awareness of gender data is what has helped maintain the inequalities in society, which, however possibly unintentional or intentional, is designed specifically for men. This lack of awareness of this data has created a society that benefits predominantly the male population.
The world is designed to benefit men because society was built by them. Simone de Beauvoir says, 'Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth.' (Beauvoir, 2014).

As women, have you ever wondered why: phones are too big for your hand, rooms too cold, and clothing never has big enough pockets (Perez, 2020)?

But sometimes the gendered language is not always used generically. Professional roles are gendered. Even if many do not realise it. For example, the term chef is perceived as male. But the term cook is perceived as female.

Caroline Perez (2020) looks at the Spanish language. Each word has a feminine or masculine association. She illustrates her point through an example.

> The generic masculine is also used when referring to groups of people: when the gender is unknown, or if it's a mixed group the generic masculine is used. So a group of one hundred female teachers in Spanish would be referred to as 'las profesoras' –

> but as soon as you add a single male teacher, the group suddenly becomes 'los profesores'. Such is the power of the default male.
>
> (Perez, 2020, p.20)

Butler (2007) claims that there is no stable gender that exists with the actions to express gender arguing that 'society peddles the illusion of a stable gender identity'. Whilst Perez (2020) states that 'the consequence of living in a world built around male data can be deadly'.

Gaps and limitations

The limitations to my practice are internal and external. For my research approach, I have looked at predominantly western artists and theorists. In addition, external limitations such as the university's rules and guidelines prohibit my work from being located within the urban environment. Compromises have been made to the work which has affected the context of the final piece and ultimately informed and mediated the meaning of my work.

Action plan: plan for exhibition

The action plan for the final exhibition was originally to have 6-10 canvases', a TV showing a video of my process and finally a sprayed 'Piece' on a wall. That plan has had to be changed due to rather inconvenient factors like the university health and safety rules. Instead of spraying directly onto the walls, the plan was revised to throw up a piece over two 8x4 foot boards lined up in a landscape format. The final piece was 16 x 4 feet 'throw up' full of bright colours contrasting with the bare white walls of the exhibition space to draw the eye of the viewer and invite them to engage with the work. For the accompanying works, I opted for a more traditional canvas surface, which consisted of 6 spray-painted and

stencilled canvas pieces. Although there were many compromises, the exhibition action plan was executed as close to the original plan. There was a surplus of extra space which allowed for the video installation to be implemented.

My final submission included multiple artworks. The majority of the pieces are on canvas. These artworks were produced through the 'graffiti' style. This categorisation of graffiti in this context is hazy as graffiti is defined as being 'writing or drawing scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place (Oxford dictionary, 2023). Street art is 'Graffiti' that is allowed by the council and Murals are when a private company commissions an artist to paint on a private wall (Walsh, 1996). Institutional terminology defines graffiti as an illegal art form. Yet by painting on canvas, I have removed the illegal element integral to graffiti's definition thereby nullifying its label. Then it must be proposed what is graffiti when it is legal yet not paid for or judged by the council. How do you categorise something when removing it from its context?

This work has been informed by Judith Butler's theory of 'performance' and the process of painting these pieces is integral to the overall message conveyed through my praxis. Painting over, also known in the graffiti community as a 'go over', is when one artist goes over another's 'piece' (Chalfant & Cooper, 1984). This is often considered disrespectful, however, in my work, the act of painting over messages is empowered by replacing the negative words with powerful ones. These original words can no longer be seen but they are still beneath the surface.

The overpainting in my work illustrates the layers of society, the injustice that ripples through history exist outside the parameters of view; nesting, brewing and lingering. Influencing the infrastructure of our culture and the foundation that we have built in the western world. We accept the world as we see it because it is all we have ever known (Dawson, 2021).

The video installation, 'Cover Up', demonstrates not just a visual portrayal of my process but everything that is omitted from the pieces that remain unseen to the eye. The phrase 'know your place' has been painted over. The connotation of this phrase relates to the athlete, Allyson Felix. In her own words, Felix faced gender injustice after her employer did not support her maternity and was given the ultimatum to choose between her professional career and motherhood. She was told to 'Know her Place.' She rose above this clear gender prejudice and embraced the harmful message and made it her own. Behind each canvas, this message resides as a symbol to be more than what society tells you to be.

> I was tired of asking for change. I knew I needed to create it. A future where no woman or girl is ever told to know her place.
>
> (Felix, 2022)

Fig 4: Georgia McDonald, 2022. (Stills From) 'Cover Up' [Video Installation].

Butler (2007) states there is no stable gender that exists with the actions to express gender. Society peddles the illusion of a stable gender identity.

> If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.
>
> (Butler, 2007)

Butler (2007) shuts down the gap and closes the dichotomy that feminists have created as sex being biological and determinative and gender identity as fluid. Butler is challenging the narrative and saying that they are both constructed.

Butler uses de Beauvoir's work as a springboard.

Human beings have an essence that is expressed in gender. We create ourselves with our actions and behaviours. We create meaning in our lives. If we just passively accept things,

we think we cannot change for the illusion of a peaceful mind, and we make ourselves passive recipients of restricted ideologies, we make a prison for ourselves in these actions.

> The adoption of the 'feminine', both in the language of speech and the language of the body, can be seen as a marker of a moment of permissive transgression, when the boundaries between the exoteric and the esoteric worlds are breached to irradiate the former with the lucent charge of the sacred. In and for an instant, the boxing of our lived experiences into 'gender' categories is used to overcome the limitations of such 'gender', and also of other hierarchies and boxes.
>
> (Pollock, G. & Sauron, V.T., 2007, p.235.)

If you passively accept the way things are then they will never change. We often choose to become the object or the other to fit society's parameters. Often though it is a society that labels the individual as the other and the choice is removed from the self.

By shifting the view of biological sex as natural and essential to the view that nothing is natural or essential, then all aspects of the body and identity may become fluid. That we construct the self by our behaviour, desire, performance, and power.

The inspiration behind the piece 'Fuck Hope Take Action' came from my summarisation of Butler's theories of gender and identity. By challenging the passive and actively seeking change rather than waiting for someone else to do something. The use of colours in this piece is predominately pink and blue. Both are semiotically considered signifiers of gender. In current society pink represents the female and blue the male. However, in Victorian times these signifiers were reversed, blue represented female and pink represented male. Inferring those representations of gender are not bound or fixed. By alternating these colours for each word and taking turns using one dominant colour with the shading of the

other. This is to further demonstrate that the individual self is not set to the binary values of pink or blue. But rather an amalgamation of these signifiers (Berger, 2008). The construct of our own identities is not binary they exist in a paradigm of different and contrasting characteristics.

Fig 5: Georgia McDonald, 2022. 'Fuck Hope Take Action' [Spray paint on Board].

Butler (2007) critiques feminist theory. Arguing that feminism was wrong to view women as a group of people who share common characteristics. We reside in a world where people are categorised into groups and these groups form the foundations of our identity. Even with the great strides, the feminist movement has made for society it still perpetuates a binary distinction on the construction of woman, gender, and sex.

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.

(Butler, 2007)

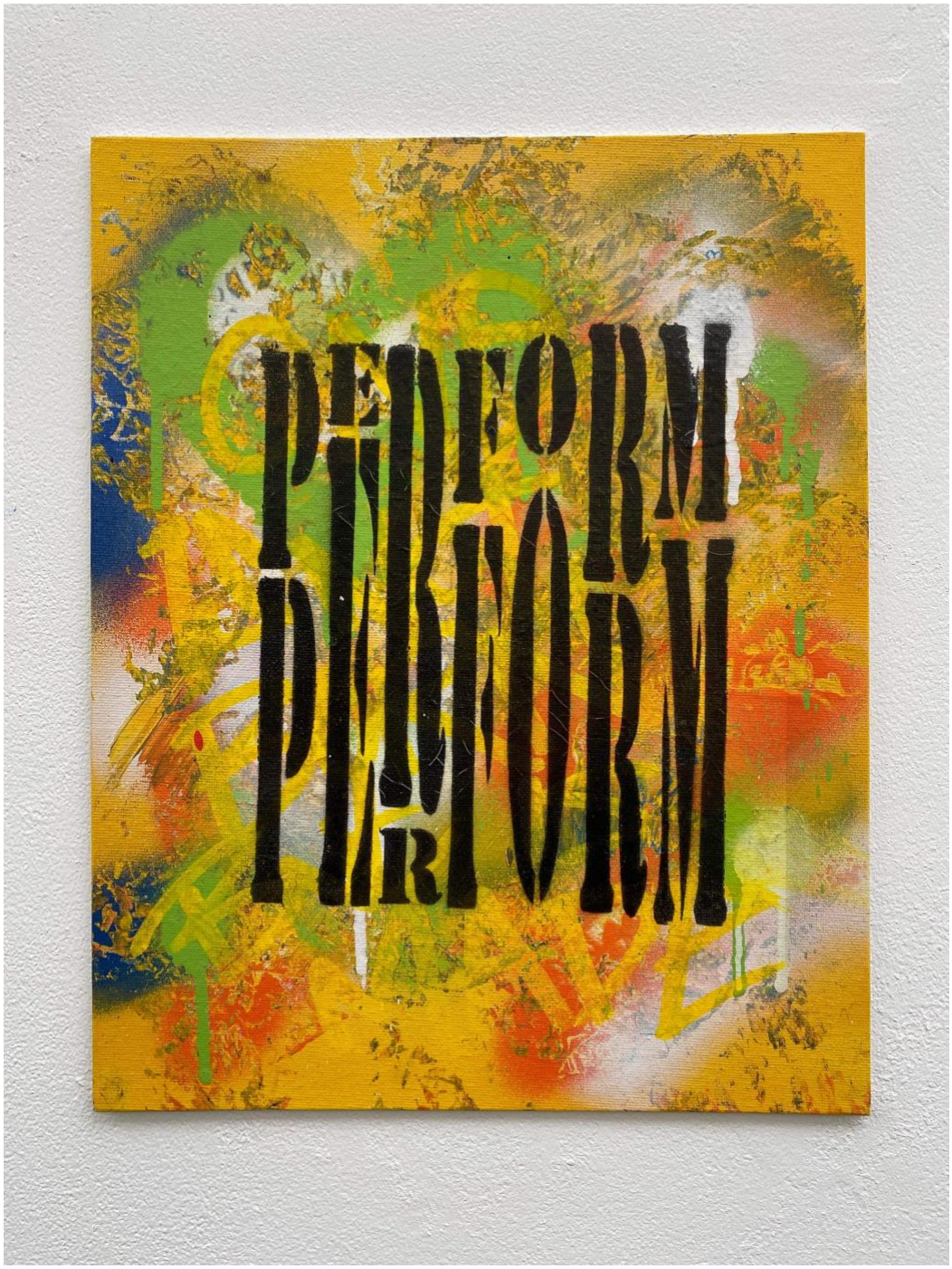

Fig 6: Georgia McDonald, 2022. 'Perform' [Spray Paint and Stencil on Canvas Board].

To paraphrase Butler (2007) sex and gender are performative. In this work, the letters are condensed and stretched, each of a different shape and size. This was done to visually represent the way we stretch ourselves to fit into society's roles.

Figure 7: Georgia McDonald, 2022. 'Reflect' [Spray Paint and Stencil on Canvas Board].

The word is reflected and elongated. Imposed on 28 tally marks. The 28 days of the menstrual cycle.

Fig 8: Georgia McDonald, 2022. 'Radical' [Spray Paint and Stencil on Canvas Board].

Women who speak out against sexism and oppression are often labelled 'radical', 'extreme' and 'threatening'. The selected word 'radical' describes a narrative that reflects negatively on to those its label has been attached to.

Fig 9: Georgia McDonald, 2022. 'Resist' [Spray Paint and Stencil on Canvas Board].

Resist the patriarchy.

Resist the institution.

Resist the conformity of social roles.

Fig 10: Georgia McDonald, 2022. 'Brave' [Spray Paint and Stencil on Canvas Board].

My mother would read a book to me as a child called 'There's something at the letterbox' by Jez Alborough (1998). In this book, the phrase 'be brave billy boy' is used frequently. Throughout my life, my parents have uttered this phrase to me in times of change or adversity. 'Be brave billy boy, have a look and see'. To me, the term means don't be afraid to try, to see what's next and to embrace the uncertain.

Fig 11: Georgia McDonald, 2022. 'F.H.T.A'. [Spray Paint and Stencil on Canvas Board].

'Fuck Hope Take Action' encircles a small icon of a spray can in the middle. This is a symbol of a proposed movement to encourage women not to stand by as the world oppresses them.

Where the practice can develop in the future.

In the future, I hope to take this work further and use my practice to continue highlighting sexism and gender bias in society. Like the Guerrilla Girls and Banksy, I wanted to use anonymity to continue this work in public settings. Making use of the context in which the piece exists to create an impactful resonance between community and place. For example, going to the last known place Sarah Everard was sighted, before she was raped and murdered by police officer Wayne Couzens. Including the location provides a more visceral impact to prevent these issues from going unforgotten or unnoticed. The potential to take my practice further after my MA and devote it to a cause that empowers me. Being released from certain constraints of producing work within an institutional setting means that I can expand my practice further.

If I had the chance to redo the practice what would that look like

If I were to do this again, I'm not sure what I would do differently as this institutional environment caused many restrictions to the work produced, and the ramification of producing the work I would have desired is still the same. But if those ramifications will null and I could work under a pseudonym or anonymously then yes there are a few things I would have done differently. For starters, I would have used the urban landscape as my canvas. Placing the work in different locations that hold significance to women's issues and struggles. I would use fewer stencils and let my work depend more on the visual text rather

that the creation of hidden messages under the pieces. That can only be understood by video recordings of work being produced.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this body of work successfully engaged theory and practice to create a series of individual and cohesive works demonstrating the impact of social roles and gender bias. Exploring feminist discourse through the medium of graffiti has been a successful means to explore the concept of gender inequality.

The gallery context presented challenges in providing an appropriate arena for presenting the content of this work. An art gallery is a highly charged space with deeply engrained conventions that influence the readings of the works exhibited within. The appropriate space for this body of work is the urban landscape. That's where it will find its target audience.

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