

Research in Practice Essay, Dissertation Proposal

Gender, Trauma, Religion

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The quality of light by which we scrutinise our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realised.

(Lorde, 1984, p. 36)

In this essay, the main goal is to explore the connection between gender, trauma, and religion. Not only do these three keywords represent my practice the best, but they also are surprisingly interweaved. The research within this paper will help with the development of a dissertation question and will also encourage a broad examination of how the three chosen keywords influence artists and thinkers alike in the future. To acknowledge the connection between these keywords, we will look at works by Kiki Smith, Olia Lialina, and Jia Sung, with the help of various thinkers and writers, such as Judith Butler, Ann Cvetkovich, Cynthia Bourgeault, and more.

We will begin by defining "gender" and its present connotations. There are diverse interpretations of what gender may imply in relation to the body and sex, so it is not surprising to find contrarities amongst them. According to the Human Rights Campaign (2022), gender is "one's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither. [...] [It] can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth." Gender as a whole has been the focus of several theories, but its meaning remains open to interpretation and dependable on background and experience. What we do know is that the discussion behind gender is polarised, with individuals wanting to abolish it as much as they want to abide by it, and that this division is a definition in and of itself. Judith Butler (2004, p. 4) provides a compelling argument of what gender may represent in her book, *"Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity"*:

If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its

gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political gender trouble and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.

Through the analysis of gender, the concept of gender as a performance emerged, which encourages the abolition of normativity and the use of the body as a means of creation or an instrument, even, rather than an object of oppression. It is easy to evade the characteristics that determine what constitutes a male or a female, but this exact elusiveness should not "be regarded as a failure of method or theory. Instead, it is a sign of what gender is" (Dimen, 1991, p. 349). A performative act can easily create a contradiction between the sexual features of a person and their gender because it "may occupy both positions" (Harris, 1991, p. 197), thus influencing certain general aspects, situations, and characteristics that may conflict with the way social settings are expecting a person to exist as. In art, gender performativity and its conflicts serve as a base – artists are free to express themselves while they might be either connected or disconnected from their gender.



1. Kiki Smith - "*Lilith*" (1994)

Kiki Smith's "*Lilith*" (1994) is a prime example of how gender can be represented through art.

According to Hebrew mythology, Lilith was the first woman to walk through the Garden of Eden, and hence Adam's first wife. Because she considered herself Adam's equal and refused to submit to him, she was banished and fled to the demon realm. As a fugitive there, Lilith became "a symbol of female rebellion" (The Art Story, 2022).



2. Dante Gabriel Rossetti - "*Lady Lilith*" (1866-73)

We know of art pieces that depict women as soft, vapid beings, (i.e. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "*Lady Lilith*" (1866-73)), but Smith's "*Lilith*" (1994) is much more than a sculpture – it is a testament to intergenerational female rage. The way the material of Lilith's body is treated is what makes this interpretation so remarkable: the surface is rough and earthy, the features are unpolished, and, consequentially, her body is not a perfect copy of femininity anymore, but a more grotesque and feral variant of the female nude – sitting, insect-like, and ready to attack. "Is she menacing or beseeching? Victim or predator?" (Hyman, 2013). This Lilith utilizes the nakedness that comes with her gender as an advantage rather than a vulnerability and, in this context, femininity is transformed by violence, be it inherited or situational. Smith knows how to challenge the basic features of beauty by rejecting it, which contrasts with how we are used to seeing women in art. This rejection is noteworthy since it generates such an obvious act of gender performativity, that

anger becomes more than a masculine trait – it is the root of the connection between body, sex, gender, and self-expression.

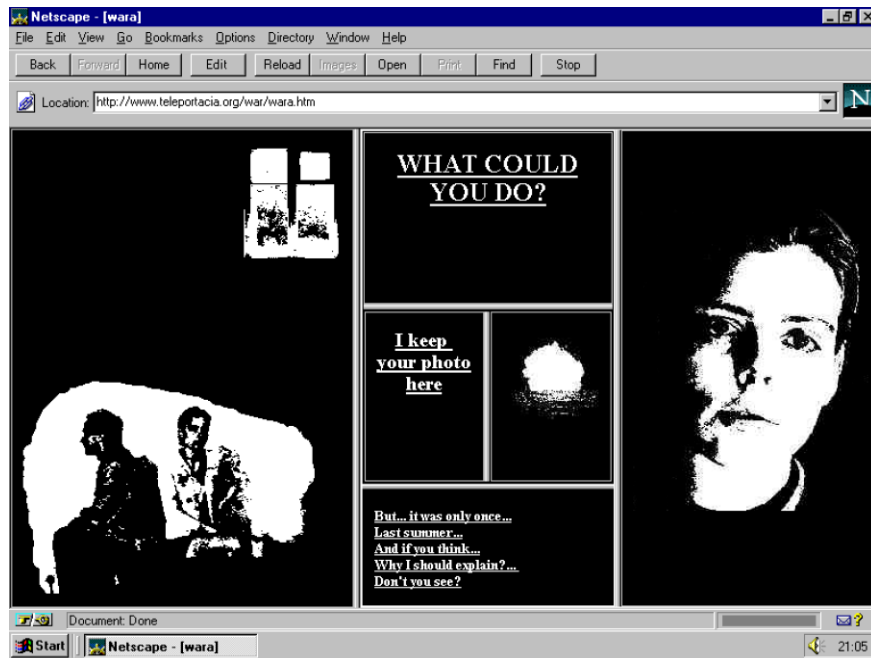
Kiki Smith's *"Lilith"* (1994) is a study of contrasting features – as much as the existence of gender implies various features that conflict – and it easily makes the viewer acutely aware of the way they perceive their own body. As a consequence, the questions "What are the characteristics of a gender-less existence?" and "Can violence influence gender-expression?" surfaced.

The memory of trauma is embedded not just in narrative but in material artifacts, which can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value.

(Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 20)

The definition of trauma has existed for decades and it has been subjected to a range of interpretations, a part of them more or less accurate than the ones we use today, but the one we will be focusing on is the psychological kind. Trauma, like gender, is affected by various factors, including background, identity, contextual situations, and so on. There is an evident connection between it and gender as well, because "embedded within the history of trauma discourse are debates about gender and sexuality as well as about the relation between private and public spheres" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 41).

In art, trauma is not a foreign inspirer, because it may provide subjects for artworks or override other sources of inspiration. Looking back to works from the history of art, we can deduct that a portion of them contain "frequently repeated motifs and portrayal" (Gerevich, 2017), to draw attention to the experience of their maker. However, "in order to understand psychological trauma we have to understand traumatic memory" (Hunt, 2010, p. 165), and only after this we can start to truly look at works of art at their true value.



3. Olia Lialina - "My Boyfriend Came Back from the War" (1996) (excerpt)

Olia Lialina's "My Boyfriend Came Back From the War" (1996) is a piece of Internet art that focuses on telling the story of two estranged lovers.

What makes this net.art worth mentioning is its interactive characteristic – by clicking on intertitles and various pixelated imagery, the viewer is thrown into a digital tomb filled with trauma, infidelity, and guilt. The expressiveness of this piece is also enhanced by the use of black and white, contrasting colours that have contradicting symbolism – one representing death, the other purity. Lialina has an interesting way of presenting these heavy subjects by using text that reads like the first draft of a poem.

In my teens I came up with the sentence 'My boyfriend came back from the war, after dinner they left us alone'. And I always wanted to complete it as a poem, but the next lines never came. Years later, still confused about the phrase, I made it into an ambivalent dialogue with the browser.

(Lialina, 2016)

Glimpses into the boyfriend's memories signal the presence of a traumatic experience – a war aircraft above two soldiers. "Memories of the past give an indication of how the future

might be if only one could survive the war.” (Hunt, 2010, p. 167) When we think of war, we frequently think of PTSD and violence – whether that violence occurred on the battlefield or as a result of it at home.



4. Excerpt from *"My Boyfriend Came Back from the War"* (1996) that depicts a war flashback

By clicking more, we find the girlfriend speaking: the sentences "It was only once..." and "He was my neighbour," signal infidelity (induced by absence, violence, or both), followed by "Don't kill him" and "Forgive me", two contrasting statements that not only convey the girlfriend's guilt but also the decision to carry the blame upon herself. Finally, Lialina concludes the piece with the following dialogue: "will you marry me", the boyfriend asks, and the answer comes as "TOMORROW / No, better next time after holidays and the weather must be better. Yes next month. I'm happy now". While expressive, this final exchange leaves us feeling forlorn.

The pair stays still during their discussion, perhaps looking for a connection with the viewer, whose presence does not influence the course of action, acting rather as a voyeur, who may feel powerless in the face of their situation. Lialina's use of pixelated renderings of

the two lovers raises the intriguing question of whether the presence of the body can influence us enough to relate to art about trauma or not because the body often remembers what the mind does not. As a result, the questions "Can the presence of the body in art help us understand trauma?" and "Would certain artworks be as meaningful if they were free of the trauma rooted in them?" have been triggered.

A material approach to religion does not reduce religion to sheer matter, but understands material forms as a potential locus for the genesis of a sense and sensation of transcendence. [...] There is need for [something] that conveys an absent presence.

(Meyer, 2016, p. 233)

Religion, as the other two keywords discussed above, is vast and interpretable and is frequently dependent on one's relationship to a form of divinity (or lack thereof). If we consider religion as a whole, we will find enough reasons to recognise its link to both gender and trauma; by stripping it of its particular aesthetics, there remains rawness and a need to view things differently by connecting oneself to a concept that serves as a means of coping with external factors.

Representations of religion and its intrinsic spiritualism in the arts are widespread, especially when we think of the masters, but even today's artists engage with that part of themselves often. There is a specific type of mysticism in such works of art because they "form an interface between matter and meaning" (Meyer, 2016, p. 234), even if they might be created with contempt for religion rather than love. We are most familiar with artworks depicting Christian saints and people, but "no religion of mankind lies in utter isolation from the rest" (Tylor, 2010, p. 381), therefore contemporary artists accept religion and its history as general themes or by dividing it and using what is most relevant to their practice.



5. Jia Sung - "*She Longed to Taste Meat*" (2018)

Jia Sung's "*She Longed to Taste Meat*" (2018) presents religion through the female gaze while combining symbols of occultism with religious portraiture and slight nudity and surrealism. "This love for icons and symbols pulls me toward religious imagery – saints, martyrs, arhats, demigods – despite my lack of any religious convictions" (Sung, 2015).

The female figure in this painting, a dishevelled reimagining of Mary Magdalene, sits next to a red-eyed goat – a symbol of sacrifice, of the profane – that weeps. Sung's absence of religious commitments allows for a more unconstrained approach, bringing attention to otherwise forbidden details. Both of the subject's eyes stare blankly at the viewer, almost confrontationally, yet they express Meyer's (2016, p. 223) reference to religious art's "absent presence". The goat represents a connection to the occult. It is well-known that animals – specifically goats and lambs – were often sacrificed to please the Gods and bring fortune in the past, hence the existence of the phrase "sacrificial goat". The goat's tears fall freely down the canvas – a reference to the crying statues of the Virgin Mary, or an

indication that it is a scapegoat – and the confrontation in its eyes fades completely, making it look obedient and, perhaps, like a perfect representation of how women are intended to be represented in religious art.

When Christianity took hold, weeping became commonplace. The flood really begins in the Bible, where a psalmist declares: “Every night I will wash my bed: I will water my couch with my tears.” [...] Another psalmist says, “My tears have been my bread day and night” [...].

(Elkins, 1941, p. 125)



6. Representation of goat sacrificing in Giulio Romano's "*The Sacrifice of a Goat to Jupiter*" (1536-9)

When we focus on the reimagined Mary Magdalene, we notice her commanding presence and nudity that is not meant to be vulgar, but rather a challenge to how we view holy women's bodies. Mary Magdalene, as opposed to the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, endured a tremendous amount of hostility from Christians, mostly because it was believed that she was a prostitute, which was subsequently proven false. With her breast exposed,

this version of Mary Magdalene almost takes Christ's place in icons, but instead of being a comforting, other-worldly presence, she is "bold and brash, 'out there', witnessing and proclaiming" (Bourgeault, 2010, p. 31), which only proves her relatability and, most importantly, her humanity, a characteristic that is often overlooked in religious art. Sung is perhaps trying to illustrate this human factor by painting her with a monkey's head, ironically – the peculiarity of human existence is often difficult to comprehend.

"She Longed to Taste Meat" (2018) is a piece of art that embraces religious imagery and meanings from a fresh perspective – one that sees saints as flawed, banal, and even strange beings. By considering Jia Sung's painting, the questions "Does religion have a role in the growth of the 'submissive woman' trope?" and "Should we consider only icons to be holy, or can we discern holiness in any artwork based on religion?" have emerged.

Following my exploration of the three keywords, I concluded that there is a strong connection between them – gender, trauma, and religion thrive under careful examination, open-mindedness, and fascination that comes from a place of vulnerability – and all of them have coping mechanisms embedded within. In regard to my practice, these concepts do come from the place of vulnerability I mentioned above, and oftentimes I do not treat them as such, but rather as thoughts that take form and transform into comfort and understanding through what I create. Admittedly, my art serves as a form of therapy frequently, and being able to examine in addition to understanding exactly what makes my creations be mine added new depths to otherwise plain ideas.

As a starting point for the next independent research essay, I propose the following research question: "How can the contemporary human live a trauma-free life while refusing to accommodate both gender ideologies and religious expectations?". This question also

generated some sub-questions that can be investigated further, making abstraction of the ones already presented, such as: "In the context of religious practices, can gender performativity be seen as a form of anointing?", "Can trauma be so deeply rooted into a person's mind that religious practices cannot constitute even a last attempt to cope with it?", "Is gender performativity dependent on trauma?", and "Is non-binarity an accurate characteristic for the bible's depictions of angels?", as well as "How does religion affect the discovery of a new gender identity?"

Gender euphoria, gender dysphoria, feminism, the female gaze, cognitive dissonance, trauma bonding, love bombing, mysticism, occultism, self-flagellation, and religious gaslighting are among the concepts to be explored in next year's independent research essay, with a focus on their effects not only in art but also on the artist's psyche.

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