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Research in Practice Proposal

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In this essay, I will be exploring the significance of three key words: loneliness, otherness, and pain. Loneliness and otherness are selected due to their frequent association with innate characteristics of artists. Pain captivates my interest for its potent tether to reality; it possesses the ability to transcend abstract notions and firmly root them in the tangible realm. The research will feature prominent artists such as Anselm Kiefer (loneliness), Kathryn Ashyll (otherness), Paula Rego, and Tracey Emin (pain). The discursive context will be enriched by the insights of philosophers including Nietzsche, Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Sontag, and writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Loneliness



Figure 1 Friedrich, Caspar David, The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, (1817) Oil on canvas

Loneliness, distressing experience that occurs when a person's social relationships are perceived by that person to be less in quantity, and especially in quality, than desired. The experience of loneliness is highly subjective; an individual can be alone without feeling lonely and can feel lonely even when with other people. (Britannica, 2024)

The definition from Britannica reflects a contemporary perception of loneliness as a concept. Historically, loneliness was also viewed in existential terms, as an inalienable part of being human. In the seventeenth century, Hobbes (1981) characterized human life not only as 'nasty, brutish, and short' but also as 'solitary.'

Loneliness is often seen as a widespread mental struggle, echoed in ancient texts like Greek dramas and the Book of Job in the Bible. Aristotle recognized humans' social nature, valuing friendship. However, viewing loneliness as a societal problem is relatively modern, emerging around 1800 amidst significant social changes—secularization, alienation, and intense competition due to technological advancements.

In response to the profound changes arose Romanticism—a movement championing subjectivity, imagination, and nature appreciation. Romanticists prioritized individualism over societal norms, seeking connection with the world and nature's sublime beauty. 'Solitude could be problematic, but in a landscape

forged by God, was one ever alone?' questioned Fay Bound Alberti (2019), encapsulating the Romanticist sentiment.

The quintessential romantic hero is portrayed in Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1817)*. Rejecting urbanization and embracing a harmonious life in nature the solitary figure epitomized the romantic ideal.

Henry Thoreau's *Walden or Life in the Woods* (1854) stands as a timeless and inspiring testament to this philosophy, documenting a personal journey that resonates powerfully even today.

Fictional yet immensely popular characters like Goethe's Werther and Nietzsche's Zarathustra represented romantic heroes transcending societal norms. Solitude, depicted as an essential refuge from societal pressures, was portrayed as a prerequisite for attaining the enlightened status of the Übermensch. This figure, detached from society yet in harmony with their own nature and the essence of the world, rose above conventional moralities to embody a state of superhuman existence.

These concepts simmered in German discourse, profoundly shaping Western society from the late 19th to the early 20th century, only to wane in the aftermath of two world wars. Anselm Kieffer's art vividly mirrors the cultural echoes of Wagner's and Nietzsche's legacy in contemporary German art.

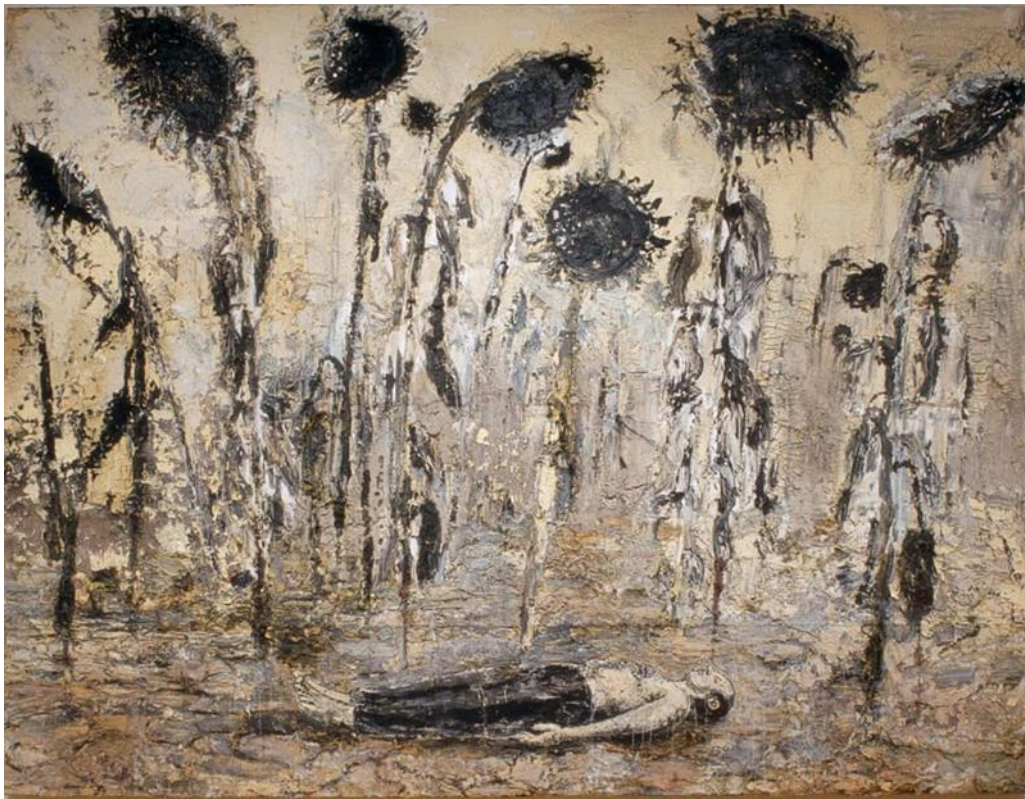


Figure 2 Kieffer, Anselm *The Orders of the Night* (1996), Oil on canvas

Kieffer's painting *The Orders of the Night* (1996), titled after a verse from *the Book of Job* (n.d.), reflects existential themes in Kieffer's work. Though his art typically

features a romantic figure amid vast landscape, there's a poignant shift: the once proud figure now lies defeated on the ground, symbolizing humanity's struggle with history and mortality. Despite this, the painting reveals the figure as a testament to human resilience and self-reflection. Both solitary and integral to the landscape, the figure finds solace in nature, embodying both solitude and loneliness. While the imagery exudes melancholy, it also holds the promise of rebirth, symbolized by the presence of sunflowers.

The loneliness may be considered in two ways: the existential loneliness which inevitably is a part of human experience, and the loneliness of self-alienation and self-rejection which is ...a vague and disturbing anxiety.

Existential loneliness is an intrinsic and organic reality of human life in which there is both pain and triumphant creation emerging out of long periods of desolation. In existential loneliness man is fully aware of himself as an isolated and solitary individual while in loneliness anxiety man is separated from himself as a feeling and knowing person. (Moustakas Clark E., 1990)

Loneliness manifests differently across time. Today, Moustakas notes a widespread loneliness anxiety, attributing it to disrupted labour cycles and broken community connections. In modern society, individuals may feel like mere cogs in a machine rather than creators of value, a concept rooted in Marx's *The Capital* (1867).

The 21st century introduces its own complexities to the loneliness problem. Global digitalization, accelerated by the pandemic, has elevated loneliness to new heights. While the internet fosters global connections and digital communities for niche groups, it also diminishes face-to-face interactions and physical engagement in modern society. The rapid expansion of social media has engendered distorted perceptions of peers' lifestyles, leading to negative self-images and subsequent depression especially among younger generations.

Loneliness encompasses a spectrum of emotions—from desperation and agony to moments of temporary or even pleasurable solitude. It's not a singular feeling but a blend of various emotions, including anger, resentment, fear, sorrow, grief, and shame. Often, it stems from a sense of 'otherness', a theme illuminated through identity debates where marginalized groups, such as women, ethnic minorities,

and the LGBTQ community, voiced their struggles for recognition. The correlation between being perceived as 'other' and experiencing loneliness due to one's identity is explored further in the next chapter.

Otherness

Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("Us", the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them", "Other") by stigmatizing a difference -real or imagined-presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination. To state it naively, difference belongs to the realm of fact and otherness belongs to the realm of discourse. Thus, biological sex is difference, whereas gender is otherness. (Staszak Jean-Francois, 2008)

Loneliness can pervade even bustling urban landscapes teeming with people.

What fuels this sensation is the subjective perception of one's "otherness." This feeling of being "other" may arise from overt factors like race, nationality, or cultural disparities, or it may stem from subtler sources such as personal struggles, traumatic experiences, diverse ways of thinking, or belonging to a subcultural group. The concept of The Other finds broad application in gender discourse too.

The rise of feminism in the 20th century shifted the spotlight onto women's position in society as a suppressed minority, relegated to the role of "others" compared to the male-dominated default. Second-wave feminist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir succinctly captured this dynamic with her words: 'He is the subject, he is the absolute – she is the other.' In her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), de Beauvoir articulated how in patriarchal societies, female identity is constructed by men to serve their interests, thus portraying women as the "other" sex.

If I want to define myself, I first have to say, "I am a woman"; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious.

(Beauvoir, 1949)



Figure 3 Guerrilla Girls, Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into The Met. Museum, 1989, poster

The feminist artist protest group, the Guerrilla Girls, emerged to combat discrimination against women artists and artists of colour in the art world, later expanding their focus to broader social issues. Operating primarily between 1979 and 2003, their activities included women artists exhibitions, organized protests, media campaigns, and publishing books, all aimed at dismantling the 'stale, male, pale, Yale' perspective on art history.

The Guerrilla Girls strove to elevate female artists from the position of 'others' to the mainstream, advocating for their equal acceptance alongside white male artists. While their efforts yielded significant impacts, the ongoing battle for equality persists, both within society at large and specifically within the art world.

The category of Other is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies; the division did not always fall into the category of the division of the sexes (...) No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself. Village people view anyone not belonging to the village as suspicious 'others'. For the native of a country, inhabitants of other countries are viewed as 'foreigners'; Jews are the 'others' for anti-Semites, blacks for racist Americans, indigenous people for colonists, proletarians for the propertied classes. (Oxford Academic, 2015)

Immigrants or ethnic minorities often experience a sense of being outsiders among insiders, highlighting another dimension of otherness. An intriguing exploration of this dynamic can be found in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's remarkable novel *Americanah* (2013), where the concept of blackness as a unifying factor in Africa is challenged. The protagonist, Ifemelu, a Nigerian student, grapples with the complexities of being perceived as a "Black Person" upon moving to the USA from her native Nigeria. Not only does she find herself at odds with the typical black immigrant stereotype in America, but her self-perception undergoes a transformation, leading to an identity crisis upon her return home. Having gained experiences abroad, she becomes the 'Other' to her Nigerian friends too-'an *Americanah*.'

One compelling exploration of otherness in art can be seen in the performances of Kathryn Ashill, a contemporary Welsh queer performance artist. Examples include films based on Ashill's life performances *Fools Gold* (2021) and *Gunsmoke City* (2023). Ashill's work is characterized by surrealism and comedy, drawing from fragments of her autobiography, observations of people, local history, and Welsh

landmarks. Notably, she extensively incorporates full drag into her performances, portraying male characters.



Figure 4 Kathryn Ashill (2024), photo from Anastasia Sevcovas personal archive

In Ashill's artworks, otherness emerges as a deliberate and nuanced exploration of gender identity and cultural heritage. Skilfully weaving together elements of her working-class, small mining town background with her queer identity, Ashill enhances the theatricality of her performances, as seen in *Fools Gold* (2021).

Unlike the Guerrilla Girls' confrontational approach, Ashill celebrates otherness in her oeuvre. Her playful performances offer a unique blend of humour, history, drag, surrealism, and sentimentality.



Figure 5 Gunsmoke City (2022), still image

Gunsmoke City (2023), based on the narrative of a fake cowboy town in the Swansea Valleys village of Seven Sisters, employs theatricality and amateur dramatics to embrace otherness.

This approach encourages genuine questioning of gender and cultural identities.

The discourses intersect in a non-aggressive manner, fostering space for meaningful reflection on otherness and queerness in modern society. This gradual erosion of the strict distinction between 'us' and 'them' allows for deeper exploration and understanding.

Pain

Feeling lonely or like an outsider can induce considerable psychological discomfort and pain. This chapter will delve into various representations of psychological and physical pain in visual arts. Pain has a rich history as a subject in art, dating back to medieval times. One of the most influential painted images from this era depicted the crucified Jesus Christ, illustrating both physical and spiritual suffering as a catalyst for spiritual transformation.



Figure 6 Souza F.N. Crucifixion (1959). Oil on board, 183.1 × 122 cm. Tate Modern, London.

Experiencing intense physical pain can isolate an individual who was previously fully engaged in society, transforming them into a solitary sufferer. Pain has the capacity to completely disrupt a person's ability to communicate and share their experience with others. As Elaine Scarry illuminates in her captivating book on the psychological effects of pain:

Physical pain is not only itself resistant to language but also actively destroys language, deconstructing it into the pre-language of cries and groans. (Scarry, E. 1987)

When language falls short, visual art—whether through still or moving images—can serve as a medium to express the inexpressible. Sigmund Freud, in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921), supported Aristotle's theory of art as catharsis. According to this theory, art provides a space for spectators to experience pain in both an enjoyable and purgative manner. Freud argued that art enables individuals to revisit and process their traumatic experiences psychologically, eventually overcoming past traumas.

Art operates within the realm of emotions, feelings, and senses, and few subjects are as immediate and impactful as pain. Pain has the power to anchor any artwork, preventing it from becoming too detached from visceral and complex life experiences.

In her remarkable work *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2013), Susan Sontag persuasively argues for the importance of visual art's ability to depict the suffering and horrors of war. She disagrees with Guy Debord's assertion that authentic social life has been replaced by its representation, stating that:

To speak of reality becoming a spectacle... suggest, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world (Sontag, S. 2013, p.99)

While the ideas of simulacra by Debord and Baudrillard captivated the minds of many relatively sheltered and privileged straight male intellectuals, the lives of women in the 20th century were still fraught with pain that demanded attention.

One compelling example where art successfully addressed a specific issue with significant impact on the lives of millions of women is Paula Rego's *Abortion series* (1999).



Figure 7 Paula Rego (1999) The Abortion series, pastels on paper

In 1998, a referendum to legalize abortion in Portugal failed. In response, Paula Rego created a series of etchings, paintings, and pastel drawings titled the *Abortion series (1999)*. The collection depicts solitary female subjects undergoing illegal abortions, captured just before or after the procedure.

The women and girls, their bodies and faces contorted in pain, endure their suffering in secret, domestic locations without proper medical or psychological support, grappling with their traumatic experiences in total isolation.

It highlights the fear and pain and danger of an illegal abortion, which is what desperate women have always resorted to. It's very wrong to criminalise women on top of everything else. Making abortions illegal is forcing women to the backstreet solution. (Rego, P. 2019)

The powerful impact of the series helped draw attention to the issue, eventually leading to a shift in societal stance. Consequently, the second referendum in 2007 succeeded in granting women rightful control over their bodies and ensuring their deserved access to safe medical care.

The pain experienced by the women depicted in *the Abortion series* lacks spiritual meaning; it is not transformative. Instead, the excruciating and senseless pain stems from the criminalization of women's choices in an unsympathetic patriarchal society that neglects female needs and rights.



Figure 8 Paula Rego Abortion series Untitled I (1999) etching, 20x29 cm

The power and pain depicted in these etchings remain all too relevant today, as similar political decisions continue to impact the lives of millions of women, as shockingly illustrated by the world abortion laws map.



Figure 9 The World's Abortion Laws Map

Pain disproportionately affects female lives compared to male ones. Even a healthy woman who has been fortunate enough to avoid any sexual violence in her life is likely to experience period pain every month for several decades of reproductive activity. Furthermore, events such as childbirth, miscarriage, abortion, IVF attempts, endometriosis, and menopause can significantly impact a woman's life, subjecting her to physical pain that may not be experienced by her male partner.

A raw and deeply personal reflection on the experiences of womanhood is found in the stunning body of work by Tracey Emin. In her video piece, *How it Feels* (1996), Emin candidly addresses her own experience with a botched abortion.

Despite living in a country where abortion is legal, the artist grapples with the challenges of accessing and undergoing the procedure to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Through the video, Emin explores her complex emotions and wrestles with the overwhelming physical and psychological pain, as well as the subsequent trauma, of this difficult experience.



Figure 10 Tracey Emin (1995) *From memory - My abortion*, monoprint

Emin further explores the sensitive and traumatic theme in a series of drawings and monoprints. It's intriguing to compare Emin's monoprint *From Memory - My Abortion* (1995) with Paula Rego's *Abortion series*. Rego's women, according to the artist's own words, are depicted as survivors rather than victims of adverse realities. They embody the qualities of real people stoically enduring the pain and shame of illegal abortions, meant to represent individuals in authentic circumstances.

In contrast, Emin's works offer a more introspective and intimate account of a person navigating a harrowing experience. Symbolic in their linear simplicity, the female figures, scribbled in uneven, broken lines, convey raw emotions and the enduring pain of traumatic memories.

In Emin's works, the pain is not solely tied to abortion; it emanates from the entirety of the female experience. The monoprint *Terribly Wrong* (1997) encapsulates this essence perfectly in both its name and imagery: something is fundamentally amiss in the experience of being a woman, whether it's the ordeal of abortion, miscarriage, or the aftermath of rape. The female existence, as depicted by Emin, is characterized by a constant mixture of confusion, pain, loss, shame, and desire.

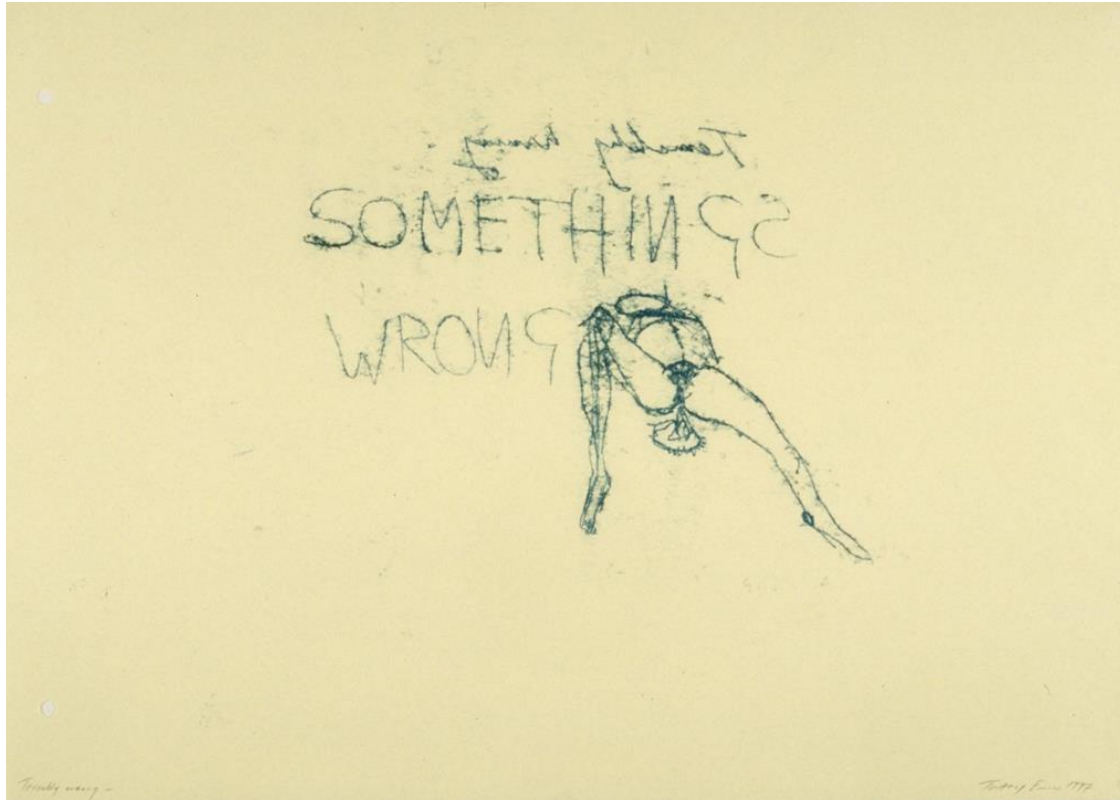


Figure 11 Emin, T (1997), *Terribly Wrong*, monoprint, Tate Modern

Rego's works are intended to shed light on women's pain within a specific social and political context, aiming to raise awareness of the challenges they face. On the other hand, Emin's works offer a deeply personal narrative stemming from her own traumatic experiences. Both perspectives are crucial for comprehending the position of women in modern society, fostering thoughtful reflection on gender identity, and advancing the ongoing struggle for equality while combating sexual harassment and the exploitation of women.



Figure 12 Rego P. (1999) Abortion series, pastel on paper

Conclusion

The three analysed words are closely interlinked as concepts. Otherness often leads to feelings of loneliness, and loneliness can engender psychological pain. Experiencing pain, whether physical or psychological, can isolate an individual and exacerbate loneliness. Each of these three concepts has been the subject of numerous artworks and plays a significant role in social, political, and creative contexts.

My research has heightened my awareness of ongoing feminist endeavours aimed at improving the status of women in the modern world, as well as the enduring impact of pain on women's lives. Additionally, I encountered several captivating academic works that explore the connections between the portrayal of pain in visual art and its ethical dimensions.

The question that could serve as the focal point for my further investigation is:

How can art actively contribute to enhancing the status of women in society and alleviating their suffering? Subsequently, some pertinent sub-questions to consider include: Can art effectively reduce the prevalence of pain in women's lives? Is it ethically sound to depict pain or suffering as subjects of art? These questions can offer a highly versatile foundation for my investigation next year, with the results promising considerable benefits for me, both as a woman and as an artist.

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