

Interpreting a Bed.

*A glance at the reception of Tracey Emin's My Bed (1998) and
the challenges of self-representation.*

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Summary

In this dissertation I will be discussing one of the decisive periods of Tracey Emin's career; the year 1999. I will approach this period through art criticism and a close reading of newspaper articles dealing with Emin's work displayed at the Turner Prize exhibition. In addition I will discuss how the self-representation in her work, particularly in the installation *My Bed* (1998), and her performance in media is related to women's self-representation in art in the late 20th century and how this may have reflected on the criticism.

My primary sources for this dissertation will be critiques of Tracey Emin's works in the Turner Prize exhibition at Tate Gallery in London from October 20th 1999 to December 31st 1999, published in British national newspapers during the period 1999-2000. I will be looking at 23 articles from the newspapers *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Times*. These articles are critiques and commentaries of the exhibition, the candidates and commentaries to the announcement of the winner of the Turner Prize 1999.

Emin's work is clearly influenced by expressionism but it is also influenced by the 1970s feminist art in the use of personal experience and the use of techniques from crafts. I will discuss the themes of self-representation and subjectivity in the light of texts by Marsha Meskimmon and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Women's art production in the 20th century has been especially engaged in self-representation. Self-portraiture is not and has never been an exclusively male genre, but the attitudes towards women's self-portraiture and autobiographical work has been different. Traditionally it has been seen to be merely personal and narcissistic. Women have traditionally been the object in art, and being simultaneously an object and a subject "is to stage a crucial intervention" according to Meskimmon. In the 20th century many women artists have produced self-portraits that comment on the discourse that defines the "woman". By taking control of the representation of these themes Meskimmon claims that the artists are challenging the traditional representations of women.

Emin opposes the reading of her work as feminist art, and claims that it portrays general human experiences. Sometimes she contradicts this in her comments about her work, and the general attitude in the reception of her work seems to be that it deals with themes that can be seen as gender specific. I have chosen to interpret the feminist implications of her installation *My Bed* through Amelia Jones' concept of *parafeminism*, which she presents in her book *Self/Image. Technology, representation and the contemporary subject* (2006).

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is a sum of coincidences. As I had to choose a subject to write about, I remembered a conversation I had six months earlier. I was discussing fémmeages made by Miriam Schapiro with a friend, when she brought up Tracey Emin and her appliqué work she had seen earlier. She could not remember the name of the work, just that it said “I want an international lover, who loves me more than the world.” I was intrigued, and wanted to learn more about this artist, who sounded so direct and unapologetic.

This interest was laid to rest because of other work at hand. But I am glad I chose to pick up my interest in Tracey Emin when I had to come up with something to dedicate two years of my life to. I still do not have a clear idea what I feel about her work, and her. I am still fascinated by the range of questions and reactions her work creates, intrigued by her energy.

I wish to thank Trine Krigsvoll Haagenen for the initial inspiration. I also wish to thank my advisor Anne Wichstrøm for her guidance and encouragement. Many thanks to my family and loved ones for their support, understanding and patience. I especially wish to thank Daniel Mikkelsen for being there for me through this process.

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Introduction

In the 1990s British contemporary art and popular culture experienced an unprecedented boom. One of the most well-known and successful artists of this period is Tracey Emin. Her direct works of her rags-to-riches life, her media performances and blunt openness have caused controversy, and she has received both praise and critique for her work and personality alike. In this dissertation I will be discussing one of the decisive periods of her career; the year 1999. I will approach this period through art criticism and a close reading of newspaper articles dealing with Emin's work displayed at the Turner Prize exhibition. In addition I will discuss how the self-representation in her work, particularly in the installation *My Bed* (1998) [Fig. 1], and her performance in media is related to women's self-representation in art in the late 20th century and how this may have reflected on the criticism.

The year 1999, was significant for Emin's career in two ways. She was nominated for the Turner Prize 1999, which gave her enormous visibility also outside of the art world. In addition, the end of the decade was a moment of change for the art scene that was prominent in 1990s London. Emin is usually considered one of the main figures in the group of young British artists or yBas, a group of newly graduated artists who rose to fame in the early 1990s with their provocative work that borrowed strategies from the 1960s avant-garde and contemporary popular culture. By the end of the decade they were no longer seen as a unified group and some of the biggest yBa stars such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin continued their ever more successful careers in their separate directions. The attention the yBas gained was no longer just positive, in the way it had generally been earlier. The yBas were seen as an integral part of the new "Cool Britannia" raising the profile of new British art and culture, as the country tried to re-launch its image after the Thatcher years and the recession of the early 1990s. At the end of the decade attitudes towards the British art scene started to change, and one of its central critics, the art historian Julian Stallabrass named it *high art lite*. In his critical review of the 1990s art *High Art lite. The Rise and Fall of Young British Art* he claimed that their work looked like art but that it did not have any substance.¹

For Emin's career the 1999 Turner nomination and her *Every Part of Me's Bleeding* solo exhibition at Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York the same year were valuable. These gave her work more exposure in mainstream media as well as in art publications and established her name in the international market. The sales of her work rose following these exhibitions, as did the prices they commanded. In the beginning of the 21st century Emin turned

¹ Stallabrass, Julian. *High art lite: the rise and fall of young British art* (London: Verso, 2006), 3-5, 11, 297.

from a known, though controversial artist into an A-list celebrity, participating in fashion, advertisement and in numerous television and radio performances.²

0.1 The Turner Prize

I will start with an introduction to the Turner Prize and its history. The Turner Prize was issued for the first time in 1984, as an attempt to promote contemporary British art and to function as marketing for Tate Gallery³, which was responsible for the jury and for awarding the prize. From 1991 the rules were changed so that only any under 50 years old outstanding artist working in Britain could be shortlisted for work done in the previous year. In addition the television channel Channel 4 became the main sponsor of the award. The other changes were the reintroduction of the shortlist and the introduction of the exhibition for all of the shortlisted. Furthermore the prize went up from £10.000 to £20.000.⁴ These changes created a much wider interest and more publicity for the Turner Prize than it had before. During the nineties it became one of the most notable art awards in Britain. The media coverage of the prize shows, exhibitions and the nominees aided the development of art celebrities, which had been an unknown phenomenon in Britain until then. Before the 21st century there had been little dialogue between artists and contemporary culture in a broader sense. The Turner Prize and the exhibitions around it have been accused of both carnivalism and populism, as well as of elitism.⁵

In his article about art prizes in contemporary Britain, John Street writes that there are prizes for all kinds of cultural endeavour, and art prizes have become a kind of spectator sport. The boom in modern art prizes started in the mid-1900s, but the first arts prize was the Prix de Rome, established in Paris in 1663. According to Street, the rise of art awards was due to the end of sponsorship by the academies in the beginning of the 20th century. This is related to the corporate presence increasing in arts in general as a result of the new right's ideological opposition to public subsidy, the introduction of tax incentives for sponsors, and corporate attempts at re-branding. The Turner Prize as well as other prizes attract a great deal of media speculation and discussion. Street suggests that the prizes not only create discussion but also

² Merck, Mandy. "Bedtime" in *The Art of Tracey Emin* ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 133.

³ In 2000 Tate Gallery was divided into Tate Britain and Tate Modern. I will be referring to it as Tate Gallery as it was still known in 1999.

⁴ Each of the nominees receives £5000. The prize was increased to £40.000 in 2004.

⁵ Stout, Katharine, Lizzie Carey-Thomas and Nicholas Serota. *The Turner Prize and British art* (London: Tate, 2007), 15, 18, 75, 82.

affect the image of the different parties involved in the prize; the sponsors, the institutions awarding the prize, the nominees and the winners. This again affects the sales of cultural products and can also have an effect on popular discourses around aesthetics. All of this can be seen as a constructed media event to accomplish these goals. The critics of art prizes have seen them as avoiding responsibility, as repeating the myth that such judgment of cultural artefacts is even possible and as “consumer guides”, informing the public what kind of cultural they should be consuming.⁶ The prize is often criticised, especially for its closed nominating and awarding system. The Tate’s director Sir Nicholas Serota admits the choices are often highly subjective. Still the Turner Prize has been widely acknowledged as the most prominent art award in Britain. But during its run the authority and critical standing has fluctuated. During the late 1990s and early 2000s there were also new awards for contemporary arts set up, such as Beck’s Futures award in 1999, which competed for the same media attention as the Turner Prize. Some of these awards died out a few years later. Pooke suggests this to be due to a change in fashion, as contemporary art was no longer associated with the cutting edge.

Pooke notes that during the history of the prize there has always been a significant gender imbalance. Only three female artists had been awarded the prize: Rachel Whiteread (1993), Gillian Wearing (1997) and Tomma Abts (2006). It is also unusual for the shortlist to include more women than men, with the exception of the all female shortlist of 1997.⁷

In 1999 Tracey Emin was one of the four nominees for the Turner Prize, and took part in the subsequent exhibition at Tate gallery. The reasons for having Emin on the shortlist were that her work “showed a continuing vibrancy and flair for self-expression, a frank and often brutal honesty, and her versatility across a wide range of media.”⁸ The other nominees were Steve McQueen, Steven Pippin and Jane and Louise Wilson. The jury that year consisted of Bernhard Bürgli, Director of the Kunsthalle in Zurich, Sacha Craddock, a writer and critic, Judith Nesbitt, the Head of Programming at Whitechapel Art Gallery, Alice Rawsthorn, representative of the Patrons of New Art⁹ and Nicholas Serota, Director of Tate Gallery.¹⁰ McQueen won the prize that year. There was a record of 140.000 visitors to the exhibition.¹¹

⁶ Street, John. “‘Showbusiness of a serious kind’: a cultural politics of the arts prize” *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 27, no. 6 (London: SAGE Publications, 2005): 819-823.

⁷ Pooke, Grant. *Contemporary British Art. An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2011), 47, 50-51.

⁸ “The Turner Prize 1999: an exhibition of work by the short listed artists” (London: Tate, 1999).

⁹ Patrons of New Art (PNA), is group of 200 that was set up in 1982 to help with the acquisition of new art to the Tate. This group is responsible for setting up the jury fro the Turner Prize, and has a representative in the jury. The PNA and the Tate are those who have the most to gain from the publicity created by the event, as the

Although Emin did not win the prize her work caught the most media attention, and the most widely discussed work was her installation *My Bed*. The work consists of an unmade bed with soiled linen, surrounded by empty bottles, dirty underwear, used condoms and other waste. The fact that Emin claimed that this was an actual bed she had spent a week in added to the discussion. The tabloids participated eagerly in the discussion regarding the line between Emin and her work, if such a line exists. Also the old question of is this really art was picked up again.

Emin says that she was surprised by the reactions to the exhibition, and to *My Bed* in particular. She claims that she was not expecting such reaction since there had been very little controversy around it when it was shown in New York and Tokyo earlier.¹²

0.2 Material, Approach and Methodology

My primary sources for this dissertation will be critiques of Tracey Emin's works in the Turner Prize exhibition at Tate Gallery in London from October 20th 1999 to December 31st 1999, published in British national newspapers during the period 1999-2000. I will be looking at 23 articles from the newspapers The Guardian, The Independent and The Times.¹³ These articles are critiques and commentaries of the exhibition, the candidates and commentaries to the announcement of the winner of the Turner Prize 1999. I have chosen to restrict my sources to British press. In this way the production of the work and the reception has a similar cultural background. In his article "Showbusiness of a serious kind." on art prizes John Street argues that in addition to the three main stakeholders in the arts prizes; the sponsors, the culture industry and the organisers, also the mass media can be seen as significant participant of the event. It is complicit in delivering the news of the prize events, and has an interest in the outcome. It also has an interest in the branding through these events. The gossip and controversy associated with the arts prizes supply material for the media's use, and this creates an opportunity for the prizes to create a profile and to articulate its cultural values. This goes both ways, as the media outlets can also use the events to articulate their stand to appeal to their audience. To create the most coverage it can be beneficial for the organisers to choose celebrity judges or nominees. The nomination of Emin in 1999 could be interpreted as

members of the PNA have a direct interest in the market for modern art.

<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/history/1999.shtm> (accessed 25 August 2010).

¹⁰ Tate Britain, <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/history/1999.shtm> (accessed 25 August 2010).

¹¹ Tate Britain, <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/history/1999.shtm> (accessed 12 October 2009).

¹² Gracie, Carrie. 2009. *The Interview*. Radio program, guest Tracey Emin. London: BBC World Service, 13.6.

¹³ The complete list of the articles is included.

such a move. According to Street all prizes are constructed around a narrative starting at the announcement of the competition and the judges, then followed by the nominees, and culminating in the announcement of the winner.¹⁴ I will be tracking this narrative in the newspaper material I have chosen.

I wish to focus on so-called broadsheet newspapers, because I would like to look at how the popular culture and mass media attitudes are reflected in them, and how they affect all levels of thinking and writing. Also, these are the newspapers aimed at the public that attends galleries and museums. I think this will give me better chance to look at general attitudes towards the themes I have chosen, as opposed to using tabloid writing as a source; the tabloid press' main intention is outspokenly and obviously to feed the sensationalism in order to make a profit. In addition many of the critics in the newspapers I have chosen as my sources are some of the more renowned art critics in Britain. I will be looking at national publications, though they are mainly London based.

The dissertation is divided into two parts. The main subject is a close reading of the critique of Emin's work in the material I will present in chapter 2. I wish to find out how the autobiographical nature of her work is understood, and what kind of attitudes the writings reflect on the fact that her persona and her artistic work are usually perceived to be inseparable. The questions that I will be posing regarding the material will be: how her celebrity status is treated and discussed in the texts, or is it, how her gender is discussed, or is it, and how her performance in the media is perceived. I will also be discussing other central issues that come up in the articles.

This will be followed by an analysis of the work *My Bed*. In my reading I will use the concepts parafeminism, as presented by Amelia Jones, and self-representation in autobiographical art and self-portraiture, as presented by Marsha Meskimmon. I will give a short presentation of these concepts later on. I will also compare the findings in the material to my reading of the work. In my analysis of the work I will be looking at it as a self-portrait. The artist herself has described it as "a self-portrait, but not one that people would like to see.". The piece has changed its form since it was exhibited for the first time in Tokyo in 1998. My analysis will be based on how it was exhibited at the Turner Prize 1999 exhibition.

¹⁴ Street. (2005), 830-832.

0.3 Theory

Emin's work is clearly influenced by expressionism but it is also influenced by the 1970s feminist art in the use of personal experience and the use of techniques from crafts.¹⁵ Stylistically and thematically Emin's work has been compared with the work of artists such as Mary Kelly. As a part of the feminist consciousness-raising project, groups for women artists emerged in the late 1960s. Their aim was to deconstruct the myth and experiences of femininity and women's lives and bodily experience. One of the aspects in the material choices was the attempt to legitimise textile works and the use of found objects deemed as "feminine", hence inferior, as art. Much of the work was performances, collages and installations based on personal experiences, visualising the statement "personal is political". Much of the work was based on collaboration, as one of the goals of feminist art of this period was to debunk the modernist idea of the artist genius. As Rosemary Betterton asserts in her article "Why is my art not as good as me?", Emin's art can be said to have a stylistic and thematic background in the 1960s and 1970s feminist art, which also employed lived experience and crafts.¹⁶ One of the differences between Emin's work to those of her predecessors is that hers is not explicitly politically intended. Also the cultivation of the artist persona that Emin participates in can hardly be seen as rejecting the idea of a genius artist.

One of the ongoing themes in Emin's work is self-representation. Self-portrait as a genre developed during the Renaissance. It came to have its own sub-genres, such as the artist at work, and it is viewed by feminist art-historians as representing male subjectivity, and the male artist as the creator and as the mythical genius. Self-portraits have traditionally been straightforward images mimicking the artists' outward appearance. In the 18th and 19th centuries the autobiographical was considered too intimate to be high literature, but that attitude changed during the 20th century. This can be said also about self-portraits. Since the 1970s the presence of the artist's body has blurred the line between conceptual art and self-portraiture and the artists have increasingly been physically present in their work. Visual autobiographical art has grown beyond visual likeness, and it now includes visual, textual, voiced and material imprints of subjectivity.¹⁷

Women's art production in the 20th century has been especially engaged in self-representation. Self-portraiture is not exclusively male genre and has never been but the

¹⁵ Merck, Mandy and Chris Townsend. *The Art of Tracey Emin* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 12.

¹⁶ Betterton, Rosemary. "Why is my art not as good as me?" in *The Art of Tracey Emin* ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 24-25, 29, 35-37.

¹⁷ Borzello, Frances. *Seeing ourselves: women's self-portraits* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 167, 170.

attitudes towards women's self-portraiture and autobiographical has been different, according to among others Marsha Meskimmon, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Traditionally it has been seen to be merely personal and narcissistic. Women have traditionally been the object in art, and being simultaneously an object and a subject "is to stage a crucial intervention" according to Meskimmon. In the 20th century many women artists have produced self-portraits that comment on the discourse that defines the "woman". The issues that have been prominent are the sexual and gendered body, maternal body, politics of domesticity, sexuality, body image, aging, sexual violence, class and ethnicity. By taking control of the representation of these themes Meskimmon claims that the artists are challenging the traditional representations.¹⁸

The assumption that the recollections are accurate and represent the truth has been a common understanding in interpretations of autobiographical work. But Smith and Watson argue that autobiographical text is not a transparent practice, but enacted life narrative and a performative act. One of the traditional ways to read autobiographical work is the *psychobiographical* reading, in which the work is interpreted only to present certain, often traumatic, experiences of the artist life. This has been the case in many of the readings of Frida Kahlo's painting, and it can also be said to be the case with the reception of Tracey Emin's work.¹⁹ According to Meskimmon this approach usually detaches the work from its cultural, stylistic and social context, assuming a strong link between the personal sphere and women, as well as not recognising the artist as a conscious subject taking part in the act of telling and producing the narrative.²⁰

Emin opposes the reading of her work as feminist art, and claims that it portrays general human experiences. Sometimes she contradicts this in her comments about her work, and the general attitude in the reception of her work seems to be that it deals with themes that can be seen as gender specific. I have chosen to interpret the feminist implications of her installation *My Bed* through Amelia Jones' concept of *parafeminism* which she presents in her book *Self/Image. Technology, representation and the contemporary subject* (2006).²¹

According to Jones parafeminism exists side by side with previous feminist theory and practice and draws from them. Just as with the earlier theories the parafeminist subject is

¹⁸ Meskimmon, Marsha. *The art of reflection: women artists' self-portraiture in the twentieth century*. (London: Scarlet Press, 1996), xv, 1, 9, 11, 14, 65, 73.

¹⁹ Smith, Sidonie, Julia Watson. *Interfaces: women, autobiography, image, performance*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 4-15.

²⁰ Meskimmon. (1996), 73, 79.

²¹ Jones, Amelia. *Self/Image. Technology, representation and the contemporary subject*. (London: Routledge, 2006).

embodied, gendered and sexed. At the same time it is non-dogmatic and open for new interpretations of power tied to the feminine. Jones describes para-feminism as *politics of positionality*. This position is not fixed but is in constant motion. Jones argues that para-feminist work concerns the corporal, but opposed to earlier feminist art it is not judgemental or praising, but represents living subjects in and as a part of their social and visual environment. It is in the representation of the body that Jones finds the strength of para-feminism. She writes “as Foucault notes, the body is the field through which power is simultaneously experienced, challenged, and given new forms.”²² In this Jones sees gender taken up as a question, not as an answer. Jones’ examples are photographs and video work, but the general arguments of para-feminist art can be in my understanding applied to other media as well.

Jones writes that para-feminism does not apply for the type of art that reflects the “bad girl feminism”, as she calls it, because of the way it has been commodified, as the strategies of the earlier feminist art are appropriated without sustaining the politics. She also finds newer feminist art ahistorical because of the lack of recognition of the work done by women artists before them.²³ I am assuming that she includes Emin’s work in this category, though she does not explicitly say so. I would argue that para-feminism as a concept can be used to describe Emin’s project, since one of its core themes is corporal experience in the contemporary world. What Jones reads to be the essence in the “Bad Girl” image is the use of the young female body as an advertising stunt. This seems like a very shallow interpretation when applied to Emin’s work. While some of the work Jones is referring to are plain celebration of wanton behaviour, she does not seem to take into account the subject matters outside drunkenness and sexual adventures, or the implications this behaviour has, nor the variety of emotions displayed.

According to Jones in para-feminist art, the identity ascribed to it by the spectators is intertwined with the “identity” they perceive as attached to the artist. The works also do not speak in a uniform, secure voice, but display confusion, disruption and even hysterical experiences.²⁴ I find this descriptive also of Emin’s work *My Bed*, and I wish to elaborate on that later on.

²² Jones, Amelia. “1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art” *X-tra Contemporary Art Quarterly*, http://www.x-traonline.org/past_articles.php?articleID=184 (accessed 12.10.2010).

²³ Jones. (2006), 213-214.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 237-238.

0.4 Structure

The dissertation is divided in three chapters. The first chapter will give a short introduction to Emin's life and artistic career. To provide a background for the next chapters I will be looking at how she came to be in a position of an "art star" in the British art scene of the 1990's, and the general direction of the reception. The first chapter also includes a short presentation of the work *My Bed*. In the second chapter I will present the findings in the newspaper material I have selected, followed by a discussion regarding the reception. Third chapter will present my analysis of the installation *My Bed* using the theoretical framework presented in this chapter. I will also discuss the findings concerning the autobiographical aspects introduced in chapter two. This will be followed by a conclusion.

Chapter 1

How to Become an 'Art Star'. The Career of Tracey Emin

1.1 Life and Artistic Career

As so many accounts of Emin's career also this one starts with her childhood. Tracey Emin (1963-) is of English-Turkish background. She was born in London and grew up in the seaside town of Margate. Her parents were never married, and her father was living between two families until he left Emin's mother when she was seven years old. This coincided with the shutting down of the hotel Emin's father owned and that her mother worked at. The previously wealthy family suddenly became poor. Emin had a different appearance from the other kids because of her father's origin. This, being a twin, and coming from a poor, single parent family are aspects Emin often names as reasons why she felt out of place in Margate. She was raped at 13, after which she felt isolated and eventually six months later began the two years she refers to as her promiscuous period, having casual sex and going out. Soon after being raped she dropped out of school. Emin moved to London when she turned 15, and had several odd jobs. Despite not having the required education she studied fashion for two years. Emin was accepted to Maidstone College of Art in 1984, where she studied printing and painting. She met the nihilist poet and painter Billy Childish in 1982 and was introduced to expressionist painting and stream-of-thought writing, which influenced her painting at the time and continued to do so later on. In 1987 she was accepted to the Royal College of Art, London, where she did her MA in fine arts, specialising in painting.²⁵ Emin has been exhibiting actively since 1993.²⁶

After graduating from Royal Collage of Art in 1989 Emin continued painting, until she fell into a depression following two abortions, of which the first one was botched. The doctor accidentally aborted only one of the twins she was carrying. After these experiences Emin stopped painting for a decade. She picked up arts again after meeting Sarah Lucas in 1992 and they started collaborating. Through Lucas Emin was introduced to the Goldsmiths graduates, who made up the core of the yBas. They opened *The Shop* in 1993, a make do gallery space in

²⁵ Elliott, Patrick. "Becoming Tracey Emin", in *Tracey Emin 20 Years* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2008), 17-33.

²⁶ CV, Thw White Cube, <http://www.whitecube.com/artists/emini/texts/82/>, (accessed 12 October 2009).

an old dentist office where they sold artefacts they made, such as t-shirts, photographs and other small objects. *The Shop* functioned also as a workspace and a social setting. Through this project the gallerist Jay Joplin became interested in Emin's work and arranged for her first solo exhibition, called *My Major Retrospective*, at the White Cube Gallery the same year. The work exhibited consisted of sculptures and installations made of memorabilia Emin had collected and photographic documentation of her destroyed paintings and quilt work. This exhibition opened the doors to the established art world for Emin.²⁷ Emin is to this day attached to White Cube.

During the next years she continued to exhibit her work in several solo and group shows, and toured with her performances in Britain as well as internationally. Two significant shows followed. *The Tracey Emin Museum*; it ran 1995-1998, emulating the concept of *The Shop*, and the group show *Sensation*, at Royal Academy of Arts, in 1997. *Sensation*, exhibiting new British art from the collection of Charles Saatchi made Emin widely known, also outside of the art world. *Sensation* received a great deal of media attention due to the controversial works, such as Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1992), or shark in formaldehyde, and Marcus Harvey's *Myra* (1995), a painting depicting the child killer Myra Hindley. Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* (1995) was depicted in the tabloids as being a fraud and about Emin's alleged promiscuity. *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* was a small dome tent embroidered with the names of everyone Emin had shared a bed with platonically, such as her grandmother or brother, or sexually, such as her lovers over the years.²⁸ In addition to the names there are short histories of these occasions written anonymously. To see these one had to crawl in and lie in the womb like space on a blanket stating, "With myself, always myself, never forgetting".

The exhibition attracted much media attention. The same year Emin's performances in the media also made the headlines. She was a guest in a panel discussion on Channel 4 about the Turner Prize 1997 and the position of painting in contemporary art. Emin appeared drunk on the show, and after mumbling incoherently she walked out of the studio. This made its way into all of the newspapers, broadsheets and tabloids alike. After this she, along other yBas who did not shy away from public appearances and nights out on the town, was often written about in the tabloids and became a minor celebrity in Britain.²⁹ This development has

²⁷ Muir, Gregor. *Lucky Kunst. The rise and Fall of Young British Art* (London: Aurum Press Ltd, 2009), 63-68.

²⁸ The piece was destroyed in the fire of Momart warehouse in 2004.

²⁹ Muir.(2009) 214-215.

continued ever since, and she has willingly participated in interviews, popular television game shows, such as *Have I Got News For You*, and has written a weekly column *My Life in a Column* about her life for The Independent. It ran from April 2005 to March 2009.

Emin was not only taken in by the tabloids but also gained recognition as an artist. She got her own room in Tate Modern in 2004 and she was chosen to represent Britain in the Venice Biennale in 2007. Emin became a member of Royal Academy of Arts in 2007.

Since 1991 Emin has been working with a variety of media including photography, monoprints, video, appliqué works and installations made of appropriated objects. Emin uses her experiences with childhood sexual molestation, rape, abortion, love, sex and anger as the main themes in her work. On the 21st century Emin has ventured outside the visual arts, and written and directed a feature film *Top Spot* in 2004, about the adolescent life in her hometown Margate. In 2005 she gave out her memoir *Strangeland*. Though Emin has given out several books, such as *Exploration of the Soul* (1995) and *Always Glad to See You* (1996) before, those have been illustrated and published in limited editions. Most of her performances have been readings from these books. As with the rest of her work, also her writing is autobiographical.

Emin maintains that she has been strongly influenced by expressionism, especially by the works of Edvard Munch and Egon Schiele. Her raw, emotional approach has led to a large, almost cult following, but also to accusations of making “therapy art”.³⁰ Jeanette Winterson discusses about the confessional aspects of contemporary popular culture and the work of Tracey Emin, and argues that yes, her work is confessional and has a “bear it all” attitude in it, but at the same time she takes it into a much deeper level and turns it into a cultural challenge.³¹ The reception of Emin’s work is mainly focused on authenticity, questions of truth, whether it is too narcissistic, and whether she is continuing development, or if she has stagnated completely. There are also in general conflicting views on whether her work is edited and calculated, or direct, unmediated documentations of her memories.

2.2 Tracey Emin and the yBas

The works of the young British artists, or yBas, of the 1990s are often deemed as emotionally detached and purely surface. Emin stands out in this grouping as her work is all about

³⁰ Stallabrass. (2006), 41.

³¹ Freedman, Carl, Fuchs, Rudi, Winterson, Jeanette. *Tracey Emin: Works 1963 – 2006* (London: Rizzoli, 2006), 6-7.

emotion. This being a loose group with no manifestos or uniformed stylistic ideas, the inclusion was mostly due to social circles and representation in certain galleries and collectors. The artist curated shows of the late 1980s is usually pointed out as the starting point for the history of the yBas. These were often low budget shows in warehouse locations, the most famous of these being *Freeze* in 1988, curated by Damien Hirst. The yBas are usually categorised as neo-conceptualists. The yBa is an inaccurate term, because there was really no shared style, medium or subject to the art of the yBas, but a similar packaging and attitude of a generation are usually seen as the commonalities that ties these artists together. Right from the start there was an interest in the use of mass media for marketing, and this was often done quite aggressively. This generated much media coverage and also led to a wider audience for contemporary art in Britain than what had been before. For example the 1997 exhibition *Sensation* had a record audience of 300 000 visitors. The artists had also gained a new awareness of how the art market functioned. Their solution was to create their own art world instead of trying to get in to the existing one. This is often seen as a consequence of the international art market crashing in the late 1980s. Also in Britain the state's support for arts was cut significantly during the 1980s. This lead to artist having to seek commercial funding more aggressively.³²

There were also some shared themes in the works of the yBas. Some of the ongoing themes in the works of that time were the questioning of identity, originality, authorship and authenticity, familiar from avant-garde of the 1910s and 1960s. But as these were often mixed with popular culture elements and everyday things, the approach was seen as deliberately anti-intellectual. Much of the work dealt with the body, the social and the narrative, and with common human experience.³³ These are themes that can be found in much of Emin's production. In their book *Occupational hazard: critical writing on recent British art* (1998) Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass argue that popularity was a part of the 1990s art in several ways, and became a backdrop for arts self-definition in this period. The everyday and popular also became markers of value in art. It can be seen to have the same roots in the subordinate, proletarian energies as British popular culture in general has. Though the writers also point out that this can also be seen as a watered down version of a somewhat radical culture, made by middle class for the middle class.³⁴ A discussion on the

³² Searle, Adrian. "A Decade of British Art" in *Art in Europe 1990-2000* ed. Gianfranco Maraniello. (Milan: Skira Editore, 2002), 41-42, 44.

³³ *Ibid.*, 43, 52.

³⁴ McCorquodale, Duncan, Siderfin, Naomi, Stallabrass, Julian. *Occupational hazard: critical writing on recent British art* (London: Black Dog Publ. 1998), 23, 54, 75.

avant-garde elements of the yBa, and the integration of life and art can be found in the dissertation *Damien Hirsts Mother and Child Divided og britisk visuell kultur på 1980-tallet* (2007) by Erik Christian Nielsen.³⁵

The yBas managed to achieve an unprecedented popularity for British contemporary artists. This also led to widespread criticism. During the 1990s the public interest in contemporary art became much larger than before. The media interest is one element of this, but there are other explanations as well. According to Adrian Searle the growing interest and enthusiasm towards contemporary art might not have so much to do with growing understanding as with the dumbing down of art.³⁶ According to Simon Ford the only unifying characteristic in the yBas work is the mythologisation of the “movement”, and it has been criticised by many for appearing to be avant-garde without having any critique of the establishment. Ford also claims that it not an actual art movement because it was created by collectors, critics and dealers, and not as a way for the artist themselves to raise issues and express critique.³⁷ One of the yBas loudest critics has been the Marxist art historian, art critic and curator Julian Stallabrass. In his book *High art lite: the rise and fall of young British art*, he defines the art of the 1990s in Britain as high art lite. By this he means that the artwork of the yBas is all surface and no substance. It appears to be art, but is actually not. He claims that the work by the yBas include no critical elements, and can therefore not be considered as high art of any interest. Stallabrass argues that also the growth and diffusion of the middle class has resulted in an increased interest in contemporary art.³⁸

According to Stallabrass the yBa came to their end in 1999. The not so well defined group became even looser, and it lost much of its relevance by becoming too predictable, and by merging with of the art establishment. Stallabrass argues that many of the artists, while still popular, seemed to be running out of ideas and also the production and the costs of the new works seemed to undermine the idea of critique even more than before.³⁹

³⁵ Nielsen, Erik Christian. *Damien Hirsts Mother and Child Divided og britisk visuell kultur på 1980-tallet*, Master's Thesis, University of Oslo, 2007.

³⁶ Searle. (2002), 53.

³⁷ Mulholland, Neil. *The Cultural Devolution. Art in Britain in the Late Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 135-136.

³⁸ Stallabrass. (2006), 302.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 286-287.

2.3 Trademarks and ‘Art Stars’

Tracey Emin really seemed to strike a cord with the British audience. One of the reasons suggested for the popularity of Emin’s works by a broader audience is the considerable media-attention given, which has presented her works for an audience not accustomed to visit galleries. Some other reasons suggested are the use of visual strategies familiar from pop culture and the personal, and easily recognisable narrative in her works. Stallabrass claims that, as opposed to other artists known for their publicity stunts such as Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, Emin also seems to promise depth, something that makes the superficial fame more complicated.⁴⁰ Stallabrass claims that Emin’s works are her selling of her memories, not actual works of art, but as what he calls for “therapy art”. He sees Emin’s celebrity as problematic, because it undermines the idea of the authentic, primitive self, the core of her works.⁴¹ It is difficult to grasp what exactly Stallabrass finds problematic with Emin as he does not wish to discuss her work as art. It is my opinion that the publicity is not entirely problematic. I would argue that it should be seen as a part of her artistic career and as a part of building the narrative in an around her work.

Popularity did not seem to be so popular in all circles, but not everyone has a negative view on celebrity. In his article “the Trademark of Tracey Emin” Ulrich Lehmann presents the idea that Tracey Emin could be read as a trademark. Lehmann uses Charles Baudelaire’s idea about *poncif*, a trademark, as an aesthetic marker that distinguishes the artist’s work. He sees this as something most artists since modernity have used. At the same time as the marker individualises the work to be recognised as the artist’s, it also needs to be repeated to have this effect. As the trademark makes the works more recognisable, it also interferes with the process of interpretation. The trademark places the work in the oeuvre of an artist, and guides the interpretation.⁴² In Emin’s case the public appearances can be seen as way to build up her trademark. The artist’s trademark is not necessarily always a personal one. Lehmann uses Damien Hirst’s dot paintings as one example. But in Emin’s case it is, as they always refer back to her biography. This according to Lehmann compromises the distance needed for an autonomous creation. Each work is thus read as autobiographical and self-referential and other themes in the work are obscured. But the use of such intimacy as trademark also

⁴⁰ Merck, Townsend. (2002), 9-10, 17.

⁴¹ Stallabrass. (2006), 36, 42-43,

⁴² Lehmann, Ulrich. “The Trademark of Tracey Emin” in *The Art of Tracey Emin* ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 60-62.

distances it from the commercial aspect of the trademark, which Lehmann sees as an interesting strategy for using a trademark in contemporary art market.⁴³

The artist's trademark was first supposed to be a sign of originality, a guarantee of the artist's subjectivity. It has later turned into a commercial strategy. Lehmann argues that trademark is not just about selling the artist but about making her subjectivity in her work easily recognisable. The clear presence of the artist's subjectivity in the work is easier for male artists according to Lehmann, because their bodies are not automatically read as consumable objects. For female artists subjectivity means "dealing intimately with her own eroticized and even sexually objectified body".⁴⁴ It is the controlling of the reading of the subjectivity that Lehmann finds interesting with Emin. Her active participation allows her to create a strong and easily recognisable public persona she can use.⁴⁵ This creation of a public persona can be read in different ways; some see it as hindrance to recognising the work as the main focus, others interpret it as a warholesque artist as a work of art solution. According to Ulrich Lehmann Emin presents herself in photojournalism in the same settings where she has produced photographs, wearing the designer clothes she has included in her photographs as well as in her monoprints. This can be seen as controlled use of her trademark. In Emin's case the trademark is not just a recognisable artistic style, but also always refers back to her biography. This leads to the trademark losing most of its commercial potential and focusing on the personal.⁴⁶

The use of and interest in the media caused some of the yBas to become what John Walker defines as art stars. This means that their lives and personalities became more important than the actual work they were doing. According to him this has to do with the shock tactics that were used, but also with the growing need for "infotainment", random information to fill up column space as the amount of media outlets expanded. As other celebrities they were now distinguished by an image or trademark, not by achievement, and essentially functioned as commodities. It is not usual to make this transition from artist to national celebrity, but there were several of the yBas who did it. They have used this status in a variety of ways. As well as creating a market for her works, Emin has also participated in numerous advertisement campaigns and in charity work. It can be said that the major celebrities tell us something about the society and its cultural aspiration, in line with art.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid., 76-78.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 63, 70.

⁴⁶ Merck, Townsend. (2002), 66-67, 77-78.

⁴⁷ Walker, John A. *Art and Celebrity* (London : Pluto Press, 2003), 2, 5, 13-15, 19, 21.

Emin has worked actively with her media image and has by no means been shy about the spotlight. Lehmann asserts that at the same time Emin is afraid that every aspect of her life, such as private parties, is seen as a part of an artwork Tracey Emin.⁴⁸ This goes somewhat against what Outi Remes argues is Emin's persona and work as a complete work of art. In her article "Replaying the old stereotypes into an artistic role: the case of Tracey Emin" Remes writes about Emin's public persona and wishes to find out whether her public persona is a result of a more complex mode of interaction than usually thought. According to Remes Emin's willingness to exploit her position as a celebrity figure sets her apart from many of her contemporaries such as Gillian Wearing and Rachel Whiteread, whose work does not depend on their persona or lifestyle.⁴⁹

Remes argues that Emin's consciously constructed public persona is reminiscent of the likes of Andy Warhol. She questions whether it is possible to understand her "self" and if it is even necessary. Remes writes that the amount of gossip in the British newspapers and magazines has risen from 10 % to 40% in the last two decades. With gossip there is an expectation that somehow that piece of information will reveal the truth about the person. As with Andy Warhol there has been a huge interest in finding out the "truth" about Tracey Emin. According to Remes Emin's public performance borrows from Warhol's strategy of multiple not fixed persona constructions.⁵⁰ This differs from Lehmann's argument about a recognisable trademark. I would argue that there are elements of the confusion present in Emin's public persona, but in my opinion it is due to her eagerness to expose all aspects of her life. This is an uncommon strategy in mass media, which seems to prefer two-dimensional characters, as opposed to covering the multiple sides most people possess.

According to Remes, Emin's public persona can be compared to that of the male artist conceived as a genius. Emin's early interest in expressionism is often quoted, and in her work there are similarities to works of Edvard Munch and Egon Schiele. But since Emin has moved away from her expressionistic style Remes finds it more accurate to compare her public persona to that of Andy Warhol. She finds Emin's employment of the contradictories between avant-garde and consumer culture, and her ironic engagement to the art business and common culture to utilise the same strategies as Warhol and Peter Blake. Remes also finds similarities in the working methods of Emin and Warhol, such as excessive keeping of diaries, collecting of personal objects and the use of working environments that depart from the customary artist

⁴⁸ Stallabrass. (2006), 41.

⁴⁹ Remes. Outi. "Replaying the old stereotypes into an artistic role: the case of Tracey Emin." *Women's History Review*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2009): 560, 564-566.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 563.

studios; *The Shop* and *Silver Factory*. Remes also notes that the likes of Warhol have paved the way for Emin. She also points out that this is an aspect that Emin is aware of, as she is quoted saying that “The reason why I’m popular as an artist in this country is because it suits the psyche of the nation at this time. Ten years ago, my work wouldn’t have had any currency, any popularity at all. Before in this country, you had to be accepted.”⁵¹ This makes Emin a representative of her own time.

The Turner Prize 1999 nomination and the discussion it raised set Emin on the celebrity map. Mandy Merck quotes Emin saying in an interview six months after the Turner Prize 1999 exhibition closed: “I’m not an outsider at all. [...] I go to all the parties.”⁵² Merck sees this as a sign of changing times. However the interest towards celebrities and all aspects of everyday living does not seem to have diminished in the decade following Emin’s rise to fame. In the next chapter we will see that Stallabrass is not the only one with a critical view of Emin’s celebrity and her approach of uncompromising openness. But first I will give a short presentation of Emin’s installation *My Bed*, the centre of attention in this dissertation, and shortly discuss recent literature on installations as artworks.

2.4 *My Bed*

My Bed is an installation consisting of a queen-size bed with white linen, three pillows at the end of the bed, and duvets and towels twirled into each other. On top of the blanket lies a pair of nude pantyhose and white underpants. On the left side of the bed there are two suitcases bound together with a rope. One is of an older model and brown, the other one is made of blue plastic. On the right side of the bed there is a dark blue rug which looks like a piece from a wall-to-wall carpet. It is the same length as the bed and approximately half of its width. On the carpet by the head end of the bed there is a small wooden stool, and on it a candle, an ashtray filled with cigarette butts, a pack of cigarettes, condoms, a small pile of Polaroid pictures and some pill packets. On the rug by the bed there are vodka bottles, paper towels, a bottle of Orangina-soda, slippers, a stuffed animal, a packet of cigarettes, scissors, batteries, a hand mirror, a belt, a tube of lubricant, coins and notes, an empty carton of cigarettes, a pregnancy test packet, newspapers, a glass, used underwear, photo booth pictures and other discarded everyday items. All of the pictures included are feature Emin.

⁵¹ Ibid., 564-565.

⁵² Merck, Mandy. “Bedtime” in *The Art of Tracey Emin* ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 133.

This is how it was displayed at the Turner Prize 1999 exhibition. The elements in the work shift places from exhibition to exhibition. Deborah Cherry's article "On the move. *My Bed* 1998 to 1999." looks at the evolution of the work from its first exhibition in 1998 to the Turner Prize 1999 exhibition. This offers an interesting view into how the work developed and emphasises the unstable character of the piece. *My Bed* was shown for the first time in Tokyo, then in New York and after that in London. The work was first presented at the Sagacho Exhibition Space, an alternative gallery in Tokyo, with the name *Better to have straight spine than a broken neck*. Cherry gives a description of the installation:

In an elongated space with windows ranged down one side, the bed was placed at an angle, a rope noose suspended from the ceiling, and juxtaposed to a wooden coffin box beside which were two bound suitcases. A collection of drawings was exhibited on the long wall and two neon signs gleamed in the distance. To approach the bed was to pass the coffinbox and the suitcases, moving deep into the space in which the bed was theatrically staged. In a dramatical interplay of spatial geometries, emptiness counter pointed the cluttered wall, brilliant white contrasted with the dull surfaces of paper and the sheen of rumpled linen, flat horizontality was set against the strong vertical rope.⁵³

The work reappeared in New York in 1999 at Lehmann Maupin Gallery with the name *My Bed*. It was exhibited along with neon work, drawings, video and textile work and smaller installations. Cherry writes that the installation was approached through a maze of installations and still and moving images, which set it in a spatial narrative. It was also not set in the main gallery, as the installation *The last thing I said to you is don't leave me here* (1999) was shown there.

Cherry does not expand on the reception of the Tokyo show, but she writes that the New York show was well received by critics who saw Emin as a bearer of earlier feminist art traditions and taking a critical stance to the traditions of conceptual art. She contrasts this with a short presentation of the reception in Britain as the work was shown at the Turner Prize exhibition. Cherry attests that the reception was bordering on hostile. The critics saw the work as a presentation of Emin's life story, which they repeated eagerly. According to Cherry this is partly due to this story making "excellent copy for press that thrives on sensation and relishes a certain philistinism."⁵⁴

At the Turner Prize 1999 *My Bed* was exhibited in the middle of the main room of Emin's exhibition. Cherry lists the work exhibited with it: a blue-painted wall showing her drawings and monoprints, the neon *Every Part of me is Bleeding* (1999), a blanket work, *No Chance* (1999), and in a separate room, a changing selection of videos including *Why I Never*

⁵³ Cherry, Deborah. "On the move. *My Bed*, 1998 to 1999" in *The Art of Tracey Emin* ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 136.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 142-144.

Became a Dancer (1995), and Tracey Emin's *CV. Cunt Vernacular* (1997). The suitcases had become a part of the work and the small items lying on the right side of the bed remained the same. But the noose was gone. What constitutes the work remains an open question for Cherry. Is it to be seen as just the bed itself, or as an interaction with all of the works displayed with it? The intermediality and the juxtaposing of still sculptural elements with sound and moving images refuses a stable reference point. This is according to Cherry one of the reasons critics seek stable reference in the artist herself.⁵⁵ I find it difficult to look at it independently without its interaction with the other work shown, and without knowing the "artist persona". Though I do not think the "answer" is found in the autobiographical details, as many of the critics seem to think, I would argue that *My Bed* works as a fraction in Emin's artistic project, and it should be read as a part of it.

My Bed is an installation, thus by definition it is difficult to read it without taking in consideration its surroundings. In his recent book *Contemporary British Art. An Introduction*. Grant Pooke looks at installations made in the 1990s Britain. Like Emin many of her contemporaries have worked widely with installations, and it has been common to incorporate installations to a repertoire consisting of works in a variety of media. Just as with other aspects of the yBa artists work, Pooke sees the use of appropriated material and improvisation as common elements in the installations of this time, as a consequence of the decline in the art market in the late 1980s and the recession of the early 1990s. Also the cues from such artists as Marcel Duchamp, Meret Oppenheim and Kurt Schwitter's are present in the works of many yBa artists. Pooke refers to Stallabrass in writing that one of the ways installations worked in the early 1990s was as response to consumer capitalism, as the work could be only enjoyed in situ; the viewer was forced to attend the venue. Also the scale of much of the installation work presents an experience not offered by television or DVD.⁵⁶

Pooke quotes Claire Bishop's book *Installation Art* (2005) in defining installation art as something that has a literal presence in space. It demands an active encounter with the viewer and is "embodied". The art historian Jonathan Harris defines the genre as: "artefacts commissioned and designed to be located within a particular indoor or exterior place or space... and intended to generate their meaning and value from their relationship to – as part of the chosen environment."⁵⁷ Installations are usually defined as site-specific and non-site-

⁵⁵ Ibid., 138, 141.

⁵⁶ Pooke. (2011), 125.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 126-127.

specific.⁵⁸ *My Bed*, as well as other installation works by Emin, belongs to the latter category of non-site-specific installations. The work has been presented in many different spaces with a variety of work, though usually surrounded by other works by Emin.

According to Pooke installation art operates around various registers of engagement: visual and perceptual, physical and tactile, emotional and affective. He refers to Michael Fried's critique of minimalist art and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as he writes about the relationship between an installation and the viewer. Fried condemned minimalist art as theatrical, and criticised its reception for being dependent on experiencing it in time and space and lacking the immediate optical "presentness" abstract painting has. Likewise Merleau-Ponty argues that phenomena and objects around us have a cumulative and experiential dimension. Thus art objects are mediated through all our senses and not just vision. Pooke borrows Claire Bishop's categorisation of installation art in his account on British installation art in the last 25 years. Bishop divides the types of installation art to four categories of which third are the installations that accent bodily experience and response. Emin's work belongs to this category, as her installations explore corporal experiences. Bishop sees the recent direction of installation art to be that of movement in the work and around it. According to Bishop this heightens the experience of the work, and reflects the phenomenological, psychoanalytical and post-structuralist ideas of complex and unstable human subject.⁵⁹ The ideas of the multi-dimensional experience of a work of art and the instability of the artist and viewer subjects are central to Amelia Jones's concept of parafeminism, and I will discuss this and how it manifests itself in *My Bed* in Chapter 3.

Pooke sees placement and locality as recurrent themes in Emin's installations. He argues that this is an integral part of the sincerity and accessibility present in the work that encourages an emotional response to the work, whether it is emphatic or sceptical.⁶⁰ In the next chapter I will take a closer look at what kind of response this work encouraged in the British newspapers in the autumn of 1999.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 126-127.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 131-132, 134.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 152.

Chapter 2

Turning a bed into column inches. How the newspapers reacted to the Turner Prize 1999 exhibition

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will be introducing the newspaper material I have chosen to interpret. First I will give a short introduction to the types of texts I will be discussing and to the writers. This is followed by a chronological presentation of the findings. The findings are represented in six sections. First, the announcement of the nominees, June 3rd 1999. The second part concerns the time around the opening of the exhibition late October 1999. In the third part I will look at commentaries on Emin, in the fourth the audience and in the fifth part commentaries on the Turner Prize itself. The sixth and last segment includes the reactions to the announcement of the winner November 31st 1999. Some smaller news articles about Tracey Emin were published throughout the autumn 1999 which are not included here, because they are mainly news about the sale of her work, or are not directly linked to the exhibition, such as interviews. After the presentation I will be discussing the findings and how they relate to the questions I am interested in. I wish to find out how the autobiographical nature of her works is understood, and what kind of attitudes the writers have on the apparent inseparability of Tracey Emin's persona and her work. The questions that I will be posing to the material will be, how her celebrity status is understood and discussed in the texts, or is it. To what extent her gender is discussed, and how her performance in the media is perceived. I will also be taking a look at other central issues in the articles, such as the public attending the exhibition.

2.2 The Art Critics

I will now give a short presentation of the art critics. I will do this newspaper by newspaper, starting with the writers at The Independent. David Lister is the arts editor of this newspaper, and started as an arts correspondent in 1988⁶¹. David Lee is a former editor of Art Review, and from 2000 the editor of The Jackdaw. He is often described as reactionary in his views,

⁶¹ *The Independent*. <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/columnists/david-lister/>, (accessed 13 December 2009).

and in 1997 he engaged in an open correspondence in *The Guardian* with Tracey Emin about the state of The Turner Prize, of which he has always held a sceptical view. Tom Lubbock has been an arts critic for *The Independent on Sunday* and *The Independent* since 1990. He has also published several books, mainly about drawing and illustration⁶². Natasha Walter is a reviewer, columnist and feature writer, and has worked for *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and BBC. Walter has published several non-fiction books, and is an advocate for women's rights.⁶³

Adrian Searle has been an art critic at *The Guardian* since 1996. He is a curator and has taught at several art colleges. He has also written for other newspapers and art magazines such as *The Independent* and *Frieze*. Adrian Searle was a Turner Prize juror in 2004.⁶⁴ Fiachra Gibbons is an arts correspondent, and Tim Adams is a staff writer for *The Guardian*. Gordon Burn was both an author and a journalist. He has written about a variety of subjects from art to sports to celebrity.⁶⁵

Dalya Alberge was an arts correspondent for *The Times* from 1994 to 2008, and is currently a writer at *The Guardian*. Richard Cork is an art historian, curator and the senior art critic at *The Times*.⁶⁶ Michael Bracewell is a writer and a cultural commentator. He has written both non-fiction books on popular culture and fiction.⁶⁷ Richard Brooks is the arts editor at *The Sunday Times*.

2.3 The Material and What was Left Out

The material consists of different types of texts. There are three reviews of the show that were published when it opened at the end October 1999, and three "second reviews" as the winner was announced November 31st 1999. The general attitude of these reviews is boredom; either being bored with Emin, the other artists, or with the Turner Prize. There are 11 news articles, three from when the shortlist was announced, mainly focusing on video as a medium, unsurprising nominees and speculation on that year's likely controversy. Many of the writers seem surprised at the choice of video art for that year, and the stylised and emotionally distant

⁶² *Cornerhouse*. <http://www.cornerhouse.org/events/info.aspx?ID=1239&page=0>, (accessed 13 December 2009).

⁶³ Natasha Walter. <http://natashawalter.com/about.html>, (accessed 16 February 2010).

⁶⁴ *The Guardian*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/adriansearle>, (accessed 13 December 2009).

⁶⁵ *The Guardian*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jul/20/gordon-burn-obituary>, (accessed 13 December 2009).

⁶⁶ Buck, Louise. *Moving targets 2. A user's guide to British art now* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), 216-217.

⁶⁷ *Contemporary writers*. <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth168>, (accessed 21 September 2010).

approach of most of the nominees. This was taken up in many of the texts, even though this was not a new media or a new approach in the late 1990s. Three of the texts are about the announcement of the winner and mainly express relief over McQueen's win. The emotionally appealing art of Emin was deemed too easy to understand. The other news are about the rearranging of the work *My Bed*, the record attendance, the financial gain from the publicity and from selling *My Bed* and an "exposé" on Emin's past as a figurative painter. There are also special reports and commentaries from the time of the exhibition opening and the announcement of the winner. All of these articles were published between 4th June and 31st December in 1999 in the London based newspapers The Guardian, The Independent and The Times. The central texts for my questions are the reviews of the exhibition, as it opened and as the winner of the award was announced, as well as two of the commentaries; one written in defence of Tracey Emin (Gordon Burn) and one that takes up Emin's gender in relation to her role as an artist (Natasha Walter).

The four central issues in the articles are the autobiographical nature of Emin's work and her background, the Turner prize as an institution, the public's interest in the work *My Bed*, and Emin's financial gain from the exhibition. As I have already stated the writers express a variety of opinions on these subjects.

Many of the writers have strong opinions about the Turner Prize, and this was not the first time the competition had caused controversy. Here I will be focusing on Emin and the reception of her work, and leave out from the selection many of the shorter commentaries ridiculing her work or discussing the economical aspects. During the autumn of 1999 there were also other newsworthy incidents that took place around and in the exhibition, and I will write shortly about a selection of them here as they are connected to the work I am discussing, and recur in some of the articles. The Culture Secretary of the time, Chris Smith, took part in the discussion expressing his view that there is too much focus on conceptual art at the Turner Prize. This was a discussion that has been going on in the press throughout the 1990s, and Smith was by no means alone in this view. But this was the first time a government representative decided to voice participate in the discussion. The general and expected attitude towards the award and exhibition seems to be that it is deliberately provocative, which may or may not be true.

There were also other things happening at the exhibition. On October 25th 1999 two Chinese performance artists, Xi Jianjun and Cai Yuan jumped into the bed, the main object in

Emin's *My Bed*, and had a pillow fight, shouting "This is art. I am art."⁶⁸ They claimed it was a part of the work itself, and that they had an agreement with Emin about doing this. Emin denied this contact, and after this the work was fenced off with a rope.⁶⁹ As a consequence of the performance, Emin had to rearrange the objects of the work, and *The Independent* reacted to this by questioning the originality of the work now that it had been changed. Terry Judd at *The Independent* writes,

Should the artist have replaced every piece exactly as it had been originally? Or was that just a touch conventional? Should she have allowed it to evolve, a comment on her new life as a successful artist superimposed upon the bed she has left behind as a suicidal youngster. [...] But if the bed is not exactly the same as it was two days ago, is it a faithful representation of the one she lay in so many years ago? Does the alteration take away from the mystery? If every stroke of the artist's brush is significant, is this the same work of art it once was? Was the re-arrangement by accident or design? Ms Emin was not available to offer explanation; her office said she had "gone away".⁷⁰

This comment seems a bit out of place, taking in consideration that it is a conceptual installation made with found objects, and the fact that the piece had been evolving since it was first exhibited. In her article "On the move" Cherry goes through all of the changes *My Bed* had been through from the first show in Tokyo in 1998 and to the Turner Prize exhibition. The consistent parts of the work have been sheets, pillows, a towel, pantyhose, the bed, a small table, bottles, slippers, cigarette packs, condoms, contraceptives and Polaroid pictures. The setting of the installation had changed from exhibition to exhibition as it had been shown with a variety of Emin's other work.⁷¹

There was also another disturbance to the piece, when a 42-year old woman attacked it with the intention to clean up the messy bed. In *The Daily Mail* she is quoted saying "'Tracey is setting a bad example to young women,' and 'Everyone always finds it hard to be clean. It was my duty to clear up the mess.'"⁷²

Emin's performance in the media is commented in several of the articles, but only one of them discusses it at length. It is also worth noticing that she seems to be the only artist of the five nominees willing to comment the articles, although in most cases it is not clear whether the others were asked to comment or not. Emin's gender is not explicitly commented in most of the texts apart from one article which takes up the implicit attitudes of some of the

⁶⁸ There are different accounts on what Xi Jianjun and Cai Yuan shouted, but these phrases come up in most of the sources.

⁶⁹ Merck. "Bedtime" and Cherry "On the Move", (2002), 127, 146-147.

⁷⁰ Judd, Terry. "Variation on the theme of the unmade bed," *The Independent*, October 25 1999.

⁷¹ Cherry. (2002), 136-141.

⁷² Morris, Lucie. "Tate that! Housewife 'cleans up' Turner exhibit as two artists use it for a pillow fight," *The Daily Mail*, October 25 1999.

other writers. But some of the texts are clearly written with a patronising tone and with comments suggesting that she is not taken seriously.

2.4 The Nominees

The first articles covering the Turner Prize of 1999 came out on the 4th of June at the time of the announcement of that year's short list. The Guardian had the largest coverage with an article and an accompanying introduction of the five artists: Tracey Emin, Steve McQueen, Steven Pippin and Jane and Louise Wilson. The Independent published one short news article and The Times had an article that included introductions of the artists. The main focus of these pieces was about video as a media, as all of the nominated artists worked with it in some form or another.

The Independent's article reads in its entirety as follows,

The video installation was declared the artists' tool of the hour by the Turner Prize jury yesterday when it revealed the four nominees for this year's prize, three of whom use videos to show their work. The shortlist for the pounds 20,000 prize contains some of the biggest names in the young BritArt scene, and comprises works that the jury believes should be accessible to the public. Indeed, one of the films was said to be "hilarious" by a jury member.

The four nominees are: Tracey Emin, who was one of the hits of last year's Sensation exhibition with her embroidered tent *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*; Steve McQueen, the sculptor and minimalist film-maker; Steven Pippin, who films himself with washing machines turned into cameras; and Jane and Louise Wilson, identical twins who create multi-screen video installations.⁷³

This piece appears scarce and un-speculative compared to those of the other newspapers. The only aspects mentioned here are humour and accessibility. Accessibility is an aspect that is written about in some of the other articles as well, and is an issue that divided the critics. The tone is neutral when the artists are introduced and only discusses their work, not their personal lives.

The Times sets the speculative tone in their article about the nominees by starting with "this year's selection is as provocative as ever. The Turner Prize is synonymous with controversy".⁷⁴ Emin is the artist who gets the most attention here. Her background is presented, as well as her rise to fame with "the tent" at the *Sensation* exhibition in 1997 and the money she earned with it. In the artist presentation Mr. Wilson is quoted,

⁷³ McCann, Paul. "Video wipes out painting as a way of winning Turner Prize," *The Independent*, 4 June 1999.

⁷⁴ Alberge, Dalya. "Turner Prize officially round the bend," *The Times*, 4 June 1999.

Mr Wilson said that her work was "extremely confrontational", but "is redeemed by its honesty, good humour, self-awareness, poetry and ultimate innocence". He added: "She touches largely on issues common to all, not least sexuality, mortality and the creation of meaning in life."⁷⁵

But they do take up other opinions as well,

The Turner Prize jury hailed her as a serious and influential artist with a "vibrancy and flair for self-expression". Others were less impressed. David Lee, Editor of *Art Review* magazine, said: "They seem to have concentrated on installation, film and video at the expense of anything one can normally recognise as art. Any list with Emin cannot be taken seriously."⁷⁶

It seems a bit premature to be starting this kind of a discussion on her work at a point where it had not been presented yet. Most of the artists were nominated based on work shown outside of Britain, where it had not caused any controversy at that time. The statement most likely refers to previous work by Emin and the experiences from previous years Turner Prize exhibitions, not the work she was actually nominated for.

The Guardian dedicates most of its space for the announcement of the Turner Prize shortlist and the various opinions about it. Though all of the nominees are presented in the main article about the nominees, here too Emin gets more coverage than the others. The beginning of the article seems to be leaning towards sensationalising Emin, as the writer covers some of her most frowned upon stunts.

All of the artists shortlisted for this year's Turner Prize use film or video and most of them star in their own work - most notoriously Tracey Emin, who enlivened the 1997 Turner circus by staggering drunk out of a post-award television debate declaring, "I'm off to phone my mum." [...] Although the *bête noire* of the traditionalists, Emin - best known for her tent of names, *Everyone I've Ever Slept With*, and the wall hanging *Mad Tracey From Margate, Everyone's Been There* - is hugely influential among young artists, and jury member Sacha Craddock compared her to the legendary sculptor Louise Bourgeois.⁷⁷

The scandalous television appearance is brought up in many of the texts I have chosen here. The article also follows a format that is seen in other texts later, where Emin's public appearances are first discussed and then a curator or a critic is interviewed, as if to reassure us that it really is art we are writing about.

The scandalising tone does not continue in the rest of the article where there are comments about the nominees from the critics David Lee, Matthew Collings and Adrian Searle.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Gibbons, Fiachra. "Turner prize focus shifts to film," *The Guardian*, 4 June 1999.

Critic Matthew Collings said it was inevitable that film-based artists should come out on top. "The Turner Prize is not setting an agenda - it is simply reflecting what is going on. Over the last five years it has become an incredibly accurate barometer of the art world. And what is happening is that a lot of young artists are experimenting with film and video installations.

"Personally, I am not besotted with installation art and videos but it is quite interesting how many others are. There is quite a moronic trendiness around it and I am not sure how much of the work will last. I would prefer to look at a nice Picasso or a Jackson Pollock myself. Picking a lot of camera-based artists is not outrageous or evil or wrong, it just shows how everyone's visual references are set by TV. Even my old mum can read all its meanings."⁷⁸

Here too, the accessibility of the work and the references to everyday life are mentioned. These are often characteristics related to British art of that time. But Collings, who has written several books on the British art of the 1990s, seems critical of these qualities here. The others interviewed were focusing more on the individual artists than the medium.

Guardian art critic Adrian Searle said the final shortlist had a "horrible inevitability" about it. "That Jane and Louise Wilson are there, and that Steve McQueen at last accepted his nomination, came as a relief . . . The inclusion of Steven Pippin is the only real surprise. [...] But David Lee, editor of *Art Review*, one of the prize's fiercest critics, was scathing about the selection. "Why Emin is on the list I'll never know. I never knew her appalling poetry and embroidery was so highly valued. I suppose it is only right that the Turner should now be dominated by flickering amateur videos. After all, it's the only thing that the fashionable young things want to see these days."⁷⁹

David Lee is the only one to comment on Emin in this article. Given his history with Emin this comment is not surprising. But *The Guardian* dedicating a disproportional amount of space for Emin is. Most of the article seems to be focused on Emin. Of the five artists she is the most known to a wider audience, even though all of the nominees were fairly well known artists by this time. There seems to be a desire for building controversy around the prize in this article, even though nothing controversial had happened.

In the article introducing the nominees all of the artists were given the same amount of space. Emin is presented as follows:

Now 35, the bad girl of British art has mined her own life for her work. Caused a minor sensation with her tent embroidered with names, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* 1963-1995. Either loved or loathed, two major shows in New York and Japan have bolstered her international reputation.

Adrian Searle's view:

Tracey Emin is perfect for a TV channel-sponsored prize. There's no danger of her wilting in the light of publicity. Her confessions, her stories and little films are funny and touching, but it seems to me that the objects she makes from them are less interesting than the stories themselves. Emin's influence on younger artists worries me: all those tenth-rate students who believe that whingeing on about themselves is enough to be an artist are deluded. Emin is a storyteller. Give her the Booker.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ "The Trendsetters" *The Guardian*, 4 June, 1999.

Here Searle is still fairly neutral and playful in his comments about Emin, something that will change over the course of the year. This is one of the few texts where her work is the main focus. Emin's interest in publicity is mentioned as well, but it is not given much weight here as in for example the accompanying article, where Emin's public appearance is written about in more detail.

2.5 The Exhibition Opens

Between the announcement of the nominees and the opening of the exhibition, some articles and interviews about Emin and the Turner Prize were published. These are not included here, since they are not directly involved with the exhibition and fall outside the scope of this chapter.

As the exhibition opened there were reviews in all three newspapers. In *The Times* Richard Cork takes a descriptive approach and keeps his tone neutral. He does however dedicate a lot of space in his review for detailing Emin's past. Emin is given approximately the same amount of space as the other nominees, but as the other nominees are discussed in relation to each other, Emin's work is discussed directly in relation to her background.

Never shy about exposing her own messy life, Tracey Emin now invites us into her bedroom. At the centre of the opening space in the Tate's new Turner Prize show, her double bed is displayed in a shamelessly rumpled state. The sheets are discoloured by murky spillages, while the torn pillows ooze feathers. As for the heap of belongings dumped on the floor alongside, they are frankly repellent. No knickers could be more darkly stained, no ashtray more befouled with cigarette butts. The entire deposit seems to be festering, but Emin has no qualms about revealing its manguiness. In her work, all English inhibitions are flung away. With a frankness she may well have inherited from her errant Cypriot father, Emin has already described in mortifying detail her 1990 abortion and the rape she suffered at the age of 13. Memories of her gruelling girlhood in Margate continue to feed the appliqué blankets and spidery drawings she produces today. Such a confessional approach could easily be mawkish or self-pitying. But Emin, even as she discloses her vulnerability, toughens her work with a welcome strain of defiance. In the second room, a video called *Why I Never Became a Dancer* makes powerful use of traumatic spoken memories accompanying blurred, handheld footage of Margate revisited. While we glimpse sand, sea and the Lido Leisure Centre, Emin's voiceover recalls how her attempt to win a dance contest was wrecked by "a gang of blokes, most of whom I'd had sex with at some time or another". When they all started shouting "slag" at her, she ran off the dance floor and escaped to the beach. But instead of ending on a tearful note, Emin tells us that she left Margate and the video shows her dancing alone with wicked delight on her face.⁸¹

During the autumn most of the articles were very focused on the central piece *My Bed*, but at this point the reviews took up also other work shown at the exhibition, such as this article. Cork writes in detail about the upbringing of Emin and seems to find her somewhat exotic,

⁸¹ Cork, Richard. "Celluloid heroes and video villains," *The Times*, 20 October 1999.

with her Cypriot background. Cork sees Emin's direct style as un-English frankness, as a personality trait not as an artistic strategy. In this text all of the work is connected and explained by a biographical factoid. The overall view is fairly positive towards Emin, though not completely convinced.

In *The Guardian* Adrian Searle is not impressed with Emin's work. The beginning of the article where he talks about, and at some point to, Emin his tone is patronising and almost hostile. The rest of the article where the other artists' exhibitions are reviewed his tone is neutral though not enthusiastic. It is also obvious from the beginning when he comments the dirty underwear in the piece *My Bed* as "such a Tracey thing to put them on show at the Tate"⁸², that he has no interest in reviewing Emin's work as works of art, but as just something she does. Searle covers the exhibited work by writing,

Tracey Emin's show is a monument to that frank and often brutal honesty of hers she bangs on about so much. Here's the confessional movie about her abortion, Tracey dancing to the Doors, interviewing herself to camera. Sensible Tracey in jeans and casual top at one end of the sofa. Smoking, drinking, tipsy Tracey in a little black dress at the other. A battle of titanic alter egos slagging each other off, getting to the heart of the problem with Trace.⁸³

Here he only takes up the video work shown. After this general view Searle continues to write about his impression of Emin's exhibition,

This transplanted squalor should come as no surprise. It guarantees attention. At the press view yesterday morning, Emin's space was packed. And now I'm adding to the column inches, colluding in the game: [...] Tracey, you just go on and on, in an endlessly solipsistic, self-regarding homage to yourself. Once I was touched by your stories. Now you're only a bore. Your art has become so closed and predictable. Your drawings are a terrible cliché, and I don't know why you bother making them look so arty. I wish you'd learn how to spell ("Illustration of a memory" reads one drawing) - or is it more authentic to get things wrong? Where can you go from here? Write the novel, get a slot on *Woman's Hour*, change the medium, change the message. [...] It isn't my job to criticise you as a person, but to comment on the art you make. But you leave no space for that. There's nothing to see in your work but you, your mood swings, your sentimentality and your nostalgia. It's all so mawkish, so cloying. You set us all up to put you down. You put yourself down so we'll set you up. And you pre-empt all this in your sessions with yourself on the sofa, to make us love you all the more. I'm not playing any more.⁸⁴

The most striking part about this review is that Searle is addressing Emin by her given name, and addressing her directly. He does not write about the four other artists in this manner. It gives only a vague impression of what is at show, but a very clear picture of what Searle thinks of Emin as a person. As Searle writes he sees Emin and her art as one and the same. By this he does not mean that Emin and her performance is a constant work of art, but sees her art

⁸² Searle, Adrian. "Tracey's pants but McQueen's the real pyjamas," *The Guardian*, 20 October 1999.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

as psychobiographical. This also seems to be the view held by most of the other writers. Searle is the one to state it most plainly.

Searle was not the only one who was bored. Also Tom Lubbock at *The Independent* was bored. Not with Emin, but with the Turner Prize itself. Lubbock's review starts with a complaint about the Turner Prize, which takes up approximately one fourth of the whole article,

The years go by, its audiences grow, but the Turner Prize continues to be an odd business. There are still obvious questions to be asked of it. How are the judges chosen? Why are they always chosen so solidly from within the art world? Have they really all seen the work – often shown abroad – for which the shortlisted artists are cited? Or do they do it all from magazines and catalogues? Etc. [...] No the Turner Prize is not remotely plausible as a competition. But as an exhibition, on the other hand, it can be fine. In fact, that's the best way to see it. [...] But this year it is not. This year it is very boring. And in a way, I suppose, it is good to be reminded, what with the resent stress in kicks, that there is also the opposite problem, and that a hardy strain of dullness has always been around. Steve McQueen's works, for instance, strike me as really classically boring video art, [...]⁸⁵

The nomination and the selection of the winner are not open processes. The idea that the Turner Prize is not plausible as a competition is supported by Terry Atkinson, once a Turner Prize nominee himself. In his article "The Turner Prize: Ordering the Avant-Garde", he criticises the Turner Prize for embracing a certain type of avant-garde subject he finds dated. Atkinson considers the Turner Prize to be an event of mutual celebration where the Tate celebrates its celebrating of the artists it has chosen to represent them. According to Atkinson these aspects make it impossible for the award to be critical.⁸⁶

After his views on the Turner Prize, Lubbock comments briefly on the four other artists and then devotes a third of the article to Emin. This seems to be the only review where there seems to be a greater attempt to interpret Emin's work in a wider context and not just as documentation of her life and experiences,

Tracey Emin needs no introducing. Sometimes I think she could be a good artist. Sometimes – such as with the tent, sewn with the names of "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With" – it seems her art is about the personal in general, though focused on her particular person. And even when it's not that, it can come over as not a bad character-act, [...] Emin's Emin appears in art galleries as essentially an artist *manqué*. That being her act, I mean: the casualty/nutter/narcissist/artist *manqué*, with a desperate rage for self-expression – and exposure.

And maybe she should have her own sitcom. The messy bedroom tableau, *My Bed*, [...] could be its main set (it looks like a set). And each episode, Emin's blistering egotism would triumph over the odds. I think it would be very funny. But obviously this is a slight misdescription of Emin's real act, and its

⁸⁵ Lubbock, Tom. "All mouth and no trousers," *The Independent*, 26 October 1999.

⁸⁶ Atkinson, Terry. "The Turner Prize: Ordering the Avant-Garde" *The Third Text*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2002): 411, 413, 415.

real appeal (to those who like it), which rests on the insistence that we be interested in Emin the real person.⁸⁷

In this review Emin's life story is obsolete, and Lubbock has focused on her public appearances as an artist instead. What is interesting with this text is that it takes up the performative aspect of Emin's work and artist persona, and how it is often decidedly ignored. Lubbock also sees Emin's work in the context of popular culture in general. He then continues to write about the work on show.

Or, to put the thing more disgustingly, there's the issue of suicide. After all, that's the obvious, first glance reading of the bedroom tableau: overdose. And really Emin's whole *œuvre* has a posthumous air, as a bundle of stuff labelled "we should have seen the signs". I guess there must be a sort of calculation in the art world that, [...] Still, I'm afraid that underpinning the Emin cult is precisely this jeopardy, the exiting thought that hey, it's really contingent life and she just might. Yeah. And then, how long would it be before people recovered themselves and were ready with their readings, finding "a reference, perhaps" to Vincent, or to Marilyn? (And actually, even as hypothetical, this is the question you need to put to any claim for a life-as-art: if the artist suicides, does that, too, become an object of appreciation?) So anyway, they'd better make sure they give her the prize.⁸⁸

Lubbock is the only one at this point to write extensively about *My Bed*. His reading of *My Bed* as a scene for suicide seems a bit surprising when one looks at how the work was presented in the exhibition. Though the work was presented with a caption telling that this was the bed where Emin lay depressed for several days. This interpretation would make more sense if the installation was presented as it was in the *Sobasex* and *Every Part of Me's Bleeding* exhibitions, with a noose hanging from the ceiling. My first impression, as that of many others as well, is of sex. The rumpled sheets, the paraphernalia, such as underwear, condoms and lubricant are easily linked with sexual acts. The suicide is a theme that also shows up in an article later on.

2.6 Putting Things into Perspective

Apart from the reviews there were also commentaries and news articles published after the opening. The Times published an article with the headline "Tracey Emin's sordid secret: she can paint." right before the winner of the prize was announced. For Emin is not the only one obsessed with her past, the press seems to be so as well. The story in the article is that The Royal College of Art had decided to display one of Emin's paintings *Friendship* (unknown date) at the school. Former teachers, friends and lovers were interviewed, which makes this

⁸⁷ Lubbock, Tom. "All mouth and no trousers," *The Independent*, 26 October 1999.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

exposé style article a good demonstration of tabloidization of all press. The fact that Emin had painted in art school should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with her work. She has included photographs of her paintings in her work, such as at *My Major Retrospective* (1993), and her two-week performance *The Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made* (1996) also dealt with painting and her sudden inability to paint, among other things. Also at the Turner Prize exhibition Emin included four watercolours to her exhibition, apparently due to the critique on the numbers of painters that had been nominated for the Turner Prize in the 1990s. Many of the writers seem to wish that Emin would move on and change her repertoire, but here is an article that demands more uniformity of Emin's work. This is how Emin's current work was described in the article by Richard Brooks and Nicholas Hellen.

Her work displays sordid details of her private life but Tracey Emin, the star of British shock art and the favourite to win the Turner prize on Tuesday, has concealed one secret that even she finds deeply embarrassing. Evidence of her hidden past as an accomplished painter has emerged days before judges of the country's most prestigious modern art prize consider the merits of her latest work: a soiled, unmade bed. [...] The discovery has fuelled critics' claims that her confessional style is a carefully calculated performance. [...] Disgruntled associates suggest that other aspects of her popularity owe more to artifice than to confessional art. This weekend two demonstrators, who last month stripped half-naked to wage a pillow fight on Emin's bed, claimed they acted with her consent. He [Yuan Cai, a former class mate at Maidstone College] said: "Tracey wanted the publicity. She is that kind of person."⁸⁹

The article also seems to reflect the seemingly wide misconception that Emin's work is not works of art created by an individual conscious of her choices and actions. It states most clearly what others such as Searle, Lee and Cork have expressed more implicitly, that Emin's work is accidental and has no strategy or meaning. This interpretation strips Emin of agency. It seems to be a fairly widespread attitude towards Emin's work, and makes one question if this is part of what causes her to carry on in her seemingly accidental, no-boundaries path with her art. In 2001 she said in an interview with Robert Preece that, after the media frenzy of the Turner Prize, she decided to do just as she pleases, because "They're going to slag me off anyway".⁹⁰ As the artist is aware of the prevalent attitudes to her work perhaps some of her actions and work are just meant as provocations because they seem to work.

There were also those who wanted to see Emin's work in a more positive light, or at least in a slightly wider context, though the tone is possibly best described as slightly sarcastic. Gordon Burn's article in *The Guardian* is titled "Clever Tracey!" and this is one of the few early articles where *My Bed* is discussed.

⁸⁹ Brooks, Richard, Hellen Nicholas. "Tracey Emin's sordid secret: she can paint," *The Sunday Times*, 28 November 1999.

⁹⁰ Preece, Robert. "Artist over – and in – the broadsheets" *Parkett*, no. 63, (2001): 53.

She got it dead right when she went onto the set of that Turner Prize postmortem broadcast impeccably the worse for wear, and proceeded to do in a symbolic sense what Jackson Pollock had done in a real way many years earlier in the home of some Manhattan collectors: she hitched up her skirt and pissed in the fireplace.

With its stains and messes and embarrassing dishevelment, *My Bed* is a kind of monument to that gesture. Mad Tracey from Margate? Clever Tracey! Look at the column inches the totalled-on-telly sensation racked up. Look how it rocketed Tracey from near obscurity and a council hutch in south London to amass notoriety and illuminated billboards in international airports, huckstering for gin. She didn't have to read her press clippings, suddenly; she only had to weigh them.⁹¹

Calling Burn's article positive may be an overstatement, but at least he affords Emin agency and takes in consideration that her behaviour is not new to the art world. He explains Emin's behaviour by writing "She is a creature of, by, and for the media; a dedicated media tart and headline junkie. But also a serious artist and somebody steeped in art history."⁹² This is close to my own interpretation of her strategy. I find the manner in which Emin eagerly embraces media attention and chooses to participate in building her own image a result of the mechanisms of publicity and media. If one is interested in fame, or at least in building a name, participating in the publicity game is the sensible approach. I would argue that taking an active part in this seems like a more reasonable choice than ignoring this side of publicity. One could also argue that in light Remes' idea that Emin's public persona is a part of her oeuvre, the media functions as a type of a gallery.⁹³

This also sets Emin in a long line of artists who have used their persona as a marketing tool. Emin works in a time where the television and tabloids are the main means of information. Therefore it seems obvious to rely on them if one wants to attain publicity. As I stated in the previous chapter, many artists in the 1990s saw self-generated publicity as a good way to establish themselves in the art market of that time. As I have mentioned earlier many of the writers seem to have the impression of Emin that she has no agency when it comes to her work. This patronising attitude seems to exceed to the critics views on Emin's relationship to the media.

Burn also writes about Emin in the context of other Turner Prize nominees, such as Rachel Whiteread and Damien Hirst, and the scandals they caused in their time. He also compares Emin to Mary Kelly, Mike Kelley and Robert Rauschenberg, and their "dirty aesthetics" as he puts it. At the end of the article Burn makes a slightly strange remark about *My Bed* and its, and some other artworks of the 1990s, relationship to the body.

⁹¹ Burn, Gordon. "Clever Tracey!" *The Guardian*, 26 October 1999.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Remes. (2009), 567.

While studiously avoiding the human body in their work, the Whiteread/Emin generation of artists has been aggressive in their referencing of it. A lot of the titillation and unease that has quickly become associated with Emin's Tate piece probably arises from this bed being read as a metaphor for the human body.⁹⁴

What he means by this is slightly unclear, he does not elaborate on the matter. In Whiteread's case the statement is fairly accurate, as her sculptures deal with room and space, often in relation to people. But in Emin's case the body is rarely absent from her work, more specifically; her own body is often concretely present. In the case of *My Bed*, the body is present, and not present, on a referential level, but it is also quite concretely present in form of bodily fluids. I will be looking closer at the role of Emin's body in her work, and especially in *My Bed*, in the next chapter.

Natasha Walter at *The Independent* was the only writer to explicitly discuss Emin's gender. Her article "It's time for Emin to make her bed and move on" was published shortly after the opening. It is a comment on Emin as a female artist in a male dominated art world and it tries to explain the appeal of the personal in her works. Walter's article cannot be described as a positive reading of Emin, but at the same time she does consider her a serious artist, something not all of the writers do. Walter starts with Emin's popularity among the visitors,

What is drawing people and the activists so eagerly to Emin's work? In the context of the Tate exhibition, you can see exactly why it has a pull. While the other artists there produce exhibits that are more or less baffling and rely for their effect on some kind of critical apparatus, Tracey Emin puts out herself. That produces an emotional effect that's unexpected in a contemporary art gallery. [...] It [the stories of personal trauma] pretty much forces a sympathetic response. Even at the moment when you feel sincerity turning into exhibitionism you are held by its power.⁹⁵

The beginning of the article gives the impression that Walter finds Emin's work affective and, if not moving, at least slightly captivating. But in fact she finds this impact the work has on her problematic, for reasons that never become entirely clear in the text.

But why do we consume Emin's miseries so eagerly? And why wouldn't a young male artist parade his sadness and trauma in a gallery to the same effect? Don't think that by making a parade of her suffering Tracey Emin is revolutionary. On the contrary, she stands at the end of a long tradition of female artists who've gained esteem through self-flagellation. Down the generations, women writers and painters have achieved lasting fame and respect for exhibiting their real-life trauma.⁹⁶

Walter is the only one of the critics who associates Emin's work with the tradition of feminist art. The explicit use of personal trauma has been a choice of many women artists before as

⁹⁴ Burn, Gordon. "Clever Tracey!" *The Guardian*, 26 October 1999.

⁹⁵ Walter, Natasha. "It's time for Emin to make her bed and to move on," *The Independent*, October 25 1999.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Walter writes. She mainly refers to writers in the article, but she could have just as well written about visual artists, such as Frida Kahlo. Still Walter seems to forget that there have been many male artists who used their life experiences as an inspiration for their work. In fact from the rise of romanticism until the rise of formalist oriented modernism the expectation was that a work of art should convey the true feelings of an artist. In the general public this view of the “suffering artist” has prevailed despite the changes in theoretical views. If one looks at the expressionist, mainly male, inspiration of Emin’s work, the personal feelings and experiences are central to their work. Walter continues to write “[...] many of the most-loved female writers in the world have a status partly on our desire to hear a real not an imagined tale of woe.”⁹⁷ And she finds Emin following the path of many of the most noted British women writers.

Without a doubt such self-exposure is effective. Sylvia Plath turned out to be the highest ranking woman writer in a recent survey that tracked the sales of modern classics. But it can also be dangerous. Partly, it can be dangerous for the woman herself. I don’t believe that by documenting her descents into drunkenness and despair, Tracey Emin is necessarily going to rise above her misery. Because she knows that if she does, we no longer want her. Already the Daily Mail has run an unintentionally funny article asking whether her miserable tales are really true. Did she really leave school at 13, get raped, and have 30 lovers before she was 15? Let’s hope Emin doesn’t feel compelled to prove her despair, and follow women such as Plath and Sexton, Woolf and Tsvetaeva, into suicide.⁹⁸

Here Walter seems to forget any other forms of artistic accomplishment their work might have other than conveying emotional experiences. It also seems as though she has an expectation that artwork should be pleasant to consume. In my view one of the aspects in which Emin’s work succeeds is that it is often slightly unpleasant, and thus makes one respond, and maybe consider what is it that is so unpleasant about these mundane tales.

As Walter’s continues to discuss Emin as a bearer of the tradition of women artists she states “Emin’s brand of self-publishing hysteria can also be dangerous to our view of women artists.”⁹⁹ But is being a role model really any individual artist’s responsibility? The show also included two other women artists, working in a very different style, which Walter later in the article appraises. I would argue that we have come far enough with women artists that posing them in a situation where they should restrict themselves one way or another, to be good examples, no longer should be necessary. I am uncertain whether this has at any point even been necessary. Walter’s appraisal of Wilson’s making of works that are “as smart and controlled as anything by either of the men in the show”, shows clearly what she expects of a work of art. She continues to write about expectations in a male dominated art world.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

In a male-dominated cultural establishment, women who choose this style of expression may gain easy attention, but they will also find it hard to win real respect. In our newspapers women artists are still criticised by men, who often slip into patronising tones. In *The Guardian's* review of the Turner Prize exhibition, Adrian Searle called her Tracey – “Aargh! Tracey’s menstrual knickers” – while he referred to all the other Turner Prize nominees by their surnames. For him, as for many other critics, the squalor of her new work was too much to bear, and despite the effect her work is obviously having on the paying public, she is now seen as the outsider in the prize running. [...] In this context, in which men still dominate cultural debate, maybe a woman artist might feel enticed to strip off and cry to get noticed. But those women who explore more complicated and fiercer routes to creativity often end up with more rewarding results.”¹⁰⁰

It is possible that Searle’s reaction, and the way he writes about Emin, has the same background as Walter’s own attitude towards women artists. As far as the texts I am using here can be used as example of more general attitudes towards art, it seems as though Walter is right about Emin’s work gaining her publicity but not necessarily respect. But is this really all that Walter sees in the work? At a closer look Walter’s article seems puzzling, considering that she usually writes from a feminist perspective. She seems to have an interested response to the work, she considers Emin to be a serious artist, and sees her in a continuum of women artists in the 20th century. But at the same time Walter criticises the work for not being “controlled” in the same manner as her male counterparts’. It is as if she considers it to be too feminine to be taken seriously. It seems like an odd demand, since she admits to enjoying the work precisely for it not being like the other work at the exhibition. At the same time Walter criticises the other critics for being male centred, which seems contradictory.

It is difficult to find out what exactly is Walter’s stand on Emin is as she concludes with “So, although for the time being I’m happy to stand with the others at the Tate, watching Emin crying on film or putting out her old tights for our viewing, I somehow hope that one day she will make her bed, leave the house, and do something else.”¹⁰¹ The hope for Emin to do something else seems to be one of the reoccurring themes in the texts I have presented here. It seems as though Walter enjoys viewing Emin’s work, but has a hard time accepting the appeal.

2.7 The Audience

Most of the articles are not written exclusively about Emin, but about the exhibition in general. Many of the writers also commented on the Turner Prize as an institution, and the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

audience that attended the show. So I am going to write about the writers' reactions to the public attending the show; I think it is important to also take a look at what type of a public we are dealing with. The following information is based on a national study of the organization of cultural practices in contemporary Britain by Tony Bennett et al. as presented in their 2009 book *Culture, Class, Distinction*. The study is modelled after Pierre Bourdieu's study of French culture in the 1960s, *Distinction*. The information is based on surveys and focus group interviews. Of the participants in this study 55% never go to museums or galleries, and 13% do so several times a year. The biggest factors in consuming visual arts are education and occupation, not economical capital. Though there are cultural fields where participation in different classes is similar, such as watching television, the participation outside of the home varies between classes. This difference is bigger when it comes to established culture, such as museums and art galleries. According to Bennett et al. museum audience is mainly educated middle and upper class and the intensity of participation in visual arts is highly relevant for social position. In this group understanding is left for professionals, and there more weight is set on participation than knowing or liking. The group interviewed for this study responded that financing and engaging in visual arts is mainly for creating social status. The study found out, that though museums and galleries can be seen as legitimate culture, it is hard to make an exact list of legitimate culture in contemporary Britain. According to the study this reflects the fact that the differentiating factor is not the types of cultural products, but cultural consumption itself.¹⁰²

As I have mentioned earlier the critique of the Turner Prize is varied, covering the nomination process, the quality of the work exhibited, and the assumed controversies. Much of the controversy seems to be of the journalists' own making. Generally the writers' reactions to the popularity of the show seem to be positive, but most of the writers also appear surprised by it. Street suggests that the Turner Prize, in the same way as other art awards, is used as a tool to legitimise conceptual art, already accepted by the art world, for a wider public.¹⁰³ Based on the articles I will discuss here it would appear the public attending the show did not require this type of education.

¹⁰² Bennett, Tony, Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Warde, Modesto Gayo-Cal and Daniel Wright. *Culture, class, distinction* (London : Routledge, 2009), 50-51, 56, 113-114, 122-123, 128, 251-254.

¹⁰³ Street. (2005): 836.

“I don't believe there can have been a moment in the entire history of art when new work was as familiar to the wider population as it is now;”¹⁰⁴ says David Lee in *The Independent* as he comments on the popularity of contemporary art in Britain. This statement might be partially true, but at the same time contemporary art, and visiting art galleries, is still very much a pastime for a small portion of the population. And this seems to affect many of the writers' notions about the larger than usual audience at the Tate Gallery. Most of them seem to be surprised by the popularity of the show, as well as the reactions of the public. Tom Lubbock in *The Independent* reminds us of the tradition of scepticism towards contemporary art in Britain by comparing the reaction to *My Bed* to the reaction caused by Tate's purchase of Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII*, or “Those Bricks” as it came to be called 25 years ago.

Both works were vandalised. But notice: they were vandalised in a significantly different spirit. The man who inked Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* was striking at a scandal. The guys who trashed Tracey Emin's *My Bed* were jumping on a bandwagon.

This was the first year that the Turner Prize had a clear popular favourite. Emin drew by far the largest and most lingering crowds; it was more than curiosity - it was engagement. If the bricks represented an extreme point in public incomprehension, the bed could well be a turning point the other way.¹⁰⁵

The times had changed the public's reaction, which seemed to be a surprise for Lubbock. In his review of the Turner Prize 1999 exhibition in October, Lubbock found Emin to be the least boring part of the exhibition. This seems to have faded by now. His eagerness to point out his sudden dislike of the work is in the text about the popularity of Emin's work makes me wonder if this is an example of Bourdieu's idea that the popular can never represent good taste.

In October *The Times* made predictions about the public's reaction to the exhibition before it opened.

Many of the visitors who trail through the Turner show in the next few weeks will probably be far from appreciative of what they see. Many may be baffled by Tracey Emin's unmade bed standing rumpled and grubby in the middle of the room [...] But the very confusion that these pieces create is intended to create controversy. And clearly both the public and the Turner Prize thrive wonderfully on that.¹⁰⁶

But the expectation that the visitors would react negatively turned out to be inaccurate. Stuart Wavell's article about the visitors was published just four days later. He describe the visitors

¹⁰⁴ Lee, David. “The Turner Prize has scraped the bottom of its gimmicky barrel,” *The Independent*, 1 December 1999.

¹⁰⁵ Lubbock, Tom. “Visual Arts: When an unmade bed filled a gallery,” *The Independent*, 31 December 1999.

¹⁰⁶ *The Times*. “Turntable of taste; Art we love to hate keeps art alive,” 20 October 1999.

at Tracey Emin's exhibition, "Curiosity had drawn a steady stream of schoolgirls, businessmen, students, men in tweed hats and sensible women from the shires to the tabernacle of modern art [...] However arresting their exhibits, the most pointed comments were provoked by Emin's *My Bed* and her scatological sketches."¹⁰⁷ And these viewers, Wavell describes them patronisingly as "naughty schoolgirls" in the caption, seemed to be no ordinary visitors, "They approached the unmade bed of Tracey Emin with the reverence of pilgrims. Here at last was the artist's shroud, imprinted with her bodily fluids, that the high priests of the Tate Gallery had likened to the masterpieces of Goya and Picasso."¹⁰⁸ Wavell attempts to paint a mystical picture of the allure of Emin's work, as though it could not be rationally understood. It is difficult to guess what he was expecting but his surprise seems unwarranted. The viewers Wavell describes in his article are behaving just as one would expect an audience to behave at an art museum.

The Times continued to write about the public. A month later Richard Cork describes his experience visiting the exhibition. Just as Lubbock also Cork seems surprised about the engagement of the audience.

I was impressed, on my most recent visit to the Turner show, by the quality of public response. Plenty of people queueing for a glimpse of Emin's torn and furrowed linen may have come to the Tate on a voyeuristic impulse. But nobody inside the show was fulminating about her unwashed knickers, or doubling up in satirical mirth at the revelations about her unbridled teenage libido and its disastrous consequences. Rather they were attending, quietly and seriously, to a young woman's frankness about the calamity and mess of her life so far. [...] No one guffawed, bellowed or threw missiles at the screen. Everybody watched and listened with a sense of steady, sustained fascination. Some of their interest was doubtless prurient. But Emin is a product of our surging, end-of-the-century appetite for the most intimate insights into the life of the individual.¹⁰⁹

Here Cork writes with an assumption that the audience cannot have come to the exhibition to actually see the works, but to see what was causing the headlines. A rather strange assumption if one thinks of the audiences of art galleries in general, though one might imagine the Turner Prize exhibition to have a slightly wider audience than a standard commercial gallery. There seems to be a consensus that what appeals to the masses, and I use that term here loosely, cannot be appreciated. Although this is surely not the main reason for the critical reviews.

Cork does not seem to see the public's interest as completely negative. "It is easy to censure the shenanigans surrounding the Turner, and view the annual furore as little more

¹⁰⁷ Wavell, Stuart. "In bed with Tracey: at least the naughty schoolgirls liked it," *The Sunday Times*, 24 October 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Cork, Richard. "Art mavericks win over the sceptics," *The Times*, 29 November 1999.

than a farce. But if this event manages to widen the audience for adventurous young artists, the hysteria it excites is a price well worth paying.”¹¹⁰ he attests. It is unclear who Cork is referring to by “adventurous young artists” and what makes him think that this attention could not be attained without the “hysteria”. Though Emin’s working class background and experiences are mentioned in these articles about her popular appeal as well, it is not clear whether the critics see her background as a reason for the public’s interest or not. It is also not clear whether the public’s interest is based on recognition, or curiosity.

2.8 And the Winner is

When the winner for Turner Prize 1999 was announced November 31st it was of course news, and 1.1 million viewers watched it on Channel 4. Some of the reviewers took a second look at the exhibition and some new commentators took part as well. The newspapers seemed to write more about Emin than the winner Steve McQueen. In his article about art awards, John Street asserts that just as there is wrong and right kind of publicity an award can create, there are also the right and wrong winners. These winners either suit the image of the prize or not, thus effecting positively or negatively to the image a prize tries to create. McQueen seems to have been the right winner according to the newspapers. Street writes: “Such judgments may be more revealing of the prejudices of journalists, but these views are important in defining the “success” of the prize.”¹¹¹

Fiachra Gibbons at The Guardian took up the financial side of the publicity in her article about McQueen’s win, dedicating most of the space to Emin.

Emin, who made no secret of her desire to win, can console herself with the fact that the surreal circus her work sparked - including two Chinese artists bouncing half naked on her bed while shouting slogans in Mandarin - gained her publicity which the £21,000 prize money would never buy.

Some of her crude pencil sketches about teenage sex are said to be worth twice what they were before the show opened. Her video installations, in which she talked about her botched abortion and early promiscuity, have made her a celebrity far beyond the momentary notoriety she gained when she staggered drunk from a TV post-Turner prize discussion two years ago saying: "I'm gonna phone my mum."¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Street, John. ““Showbusiness of a serious kind””, (2005): 833.

¹¹² Gibbons, Fiachra. “Deadpan McQueen takes the Turner,” *The Guardian*, 1 December 1999.

This was not the first time the financial aspect was taken up in the newspapers during the autumn 1999. Many smaller news articles about sold works and about Emin's publishing deal were printed during this time. All of these emphasised the significance of the publicity created by the exhibition and the financial gain it would result in. The same day *The Guardian* published an article about different art and book awards, and the publicity they generate for the artists and writers nominated. They interviewed Turner Prize critic David Lee.

"Money is not the factor," says David Lee, editor of the magazine *Art Review*. "The NatWest Prize is worth £10,000 more than the Turner, but nobody talks about it much. What is applauded is notoriety rather than quality and the Turner Prize is only worth as much as the controversy it produces. [...] But the public relations machine working to make the Turner Prize visible is so powerful, believes David Lee, that the shortlist naturally favours artists such as Chris Ofili, last year's winner, whose elephant dung painting of the Virgin Mary attracted the wrath of New York's mayor, Rudolph Giuliani. Those most likely to generate media coverage and, therefore, to do well in the aftermath. "The result of this," says Lee, "is that the judging panel is increasingly scraping the bottom of the barrel, and this year has fallen straight through."¹¹³

In his article about the win, David Lister at *The Independent* addresses the controversy caused by the cultural secretary's statement earlier about the quality of art presented at the Turner Prize short lists.

Rather more seriously, Chris Smith, the Secretary of State for Culture, attacked the shortlist as "controversy for controversy's sake" and echoed the thoughts of many by adding that it too often failed to reflect painting and concentrated too much on videos and shock installations. Sir Nicholas, who is also chairman of the Turner judges, has not yet responded to this. Mr. Smith was not at last night's prize-giving dinner.¹¹⁴

As the exhibition showed mainly photography and video works and what Lister describes as "unmade bed complete with emotional and physical debris"¹¹⁵ it did not fall to the taste of the secretary. Lister is the only writer to write about Smith's reaction in the newspapers in my selection.

¹¹³ *The Guardian*. "Prize fighters," 1 December 1999.

¹¹⁴ Lister, David. "Steve McQueen beats that bed to win Turner," *The Independent*, 1 December 1999.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Money was in the focus when Dalya Alberge wrote about McQueen's win in *The Times*.

In the art world's answer to the Nobel Prize, a man who rolled a metal barrel filled with three cameras through the streets of Manhattan beat off competition from a woman who decided that a bed soiled with bodily fluids was art. Steve McQueen took the Pounds 21,000 Turner Prize, confounding predictions that it would go to Tracey Emin's bed. [...] Emin shrugged off her defeat: "I knew I wouldn't win ... art is not my strong point, life is. It's good that they gave it to an artist. I'm a brilliant loser." There was, however, a consolation prize: in the past six weeks she had made enough money from the Turner Prize to buy a house and retire.¹¹⁶

As pointed out earlier the prize money is not very large in the case of the Turner Prize, so discussing here seems more like an excuse to continue to write about the increased prices of Emin's work. Alberge's commentary seems to ignore any other aspects of winning the award.

This was also a time for further critiques of the nominations and the exhibitions. And though many seemed relieved by the fact that Emin did not win, the other artists also got their share of the criticism. As *The Times* talked to some of those critical of the work shown "Others lamented the win as a reflection of just how low contemporary art had sunk. [...] The leading dealer Bernard Jacobson said that the shortlisted works had "as much depth as tissue paper"."¹¹⁷ This is the only article where the interview objects were critical of the exhibition, with the exception of the interview with David Lister before the exhibition even opened.

Adrian Searle at *The Guardian* took a second look at the exhibition and his disinterest towards it had shifted slightly, but his distaste for Emin's work remained. Another interpretation could be that he is being polite when he writes about the winner.

The fact that Emin has not won the prize might appear more significant than the fact that McQueen has. This is important, in that this year's event has almost entirely focused on that damned bed. After the relentless coverage of Emin and how much she panders to her public, it is the deceptively quiet, enigmatic and comparatively difficult work of this young, black British artist, now residing in Amsterdam, that has carried the day.¹¹⁸

But Searle also writes mostly about Emin, and not about McQueen. He compares the two by opposing McQueen's more quiet video work that is according to him more demanding for the audience than Emin's work. "It is an easy matter to understand Emin's outpourings of sentiment, her personal revelations and intimacies."¹¹⁹ Searle appears to suggest that the accessibility makes it less valuable. He sums it up by saying "He deserves to win, especially when the Turner prize could so easily have turned into a circus. Compared with him, the rest

¹¹⁶ Alberge, Dalya. "No Turner, but Tracey's already cleaned up," *The Times*, 1 December 1999.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Searle, Adrian. "Artist finds poetry in motion," *The Guardian*, 1 December 1999.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

is entertainment.”¹²⁰ This is a change in view from Searle’s previous review, in which he besides being enraged at Emin showed little interest towards any of the work displayed.

2.9 Discussion

How does the material presented here relate to the questions I posed in the beginning of this chapter? Emin’s celebrity status, use of mass media and gender all show up in various ways in these articles. Her celebrity status is perhaps the least discussed of the three. Her celebrity status was not yet as strong as it grew to be following this year. In this context it would probably be more correct to talk about publicity. As many of the writers note, Emin has had her share of bad publicity in terms of her television performance two years earlier, and a great deal of media coverage of her previous exhibitions. It is not possible to say with the material I am working with what consequences this publicity been in terms of the popularity of the show. But it appears as if many of the writers credit the popularity of the show to the publicity generated by Emin’s work at this show, more specifically *My Bed*.

As we can see from many of the articles Emin has often been willing to comment on the reporting regarding the exhibition and regarding herself. There is one mention about her refusing a comment. There are no comments from the other nominees, or mention of them ever being asked to comment on the reporting. Since we do not know whether there has been interest in their comments it is difficult to say how Emin’s approach is similar or different compared to theirs. But we can see that there is an interest in publishing her comments. Emin’s willingness to comment shows her as an active participant in her own publicity.

Emin’s gender and its meaning for her work are seldom discussed explicitly. Only one of the articles in my selection does this. In Walter’s article her gender is treated more like a hindrance, and Emin’s works’ reference points in earlier works of women artists have a negative connotation. In the articles where Emin’s gender can be read to be present it seems as though it is used as an opportunity to write about her in a patronising tone, or to focus on her character. One could argue that it is also present in the views on her works’ autobiographical quality.

The Turner Prize itself and its audience were not subjects I had originally planned to write about. But as those seemed to be reoccurring themes in many of the texts, I decided to include small sections covering them. The number of visitors at the Turner Prize exhibition

¹²⁰ Ibid.

had been steadily rising through the whole of the 1990s, and though the attendance was higher 1999 than previous years, the difference was only 20 000. The rise from 1997 to 1998 was nearly 50%. So a sudden rise in attendance does not in itself explain the media interest. The interest in the Turner Prize as an institution is easier to understand. The cultural significance of the prize had been growing as well, and by the end of the 1990s it might have reached a tipping point; it no longer seemed to have anything surprising to offer. As we can see from the articles that controversy was now expected. It is a matter of interpretation if the press created the controversy that followed or whether it was a natural consequence of showing “shocking” works at the Turner Prize 1999 exhibition. As this controversy was then discussed in the media the text, at least in the sample I have worked with here, the reaction seemed slightly bored. Perhaps the routine of reacting to supposedly controversial work every autumn had lost its charm by now.

One of the other more discussed aspects that came up in the articles was the autobiographical nature of Emin’s work and what it means for its readings. As we saw in the reviews most of the writers did not question the autobiographical story presented in Emin’s work, and tended to read the work as psychobiographical. In the next chapter I will be taking a closer look at how these readings of the autobiographical can be understood in the light of the theories I presented in the introduction, and my analysis of the work *My Bed* as a self-portrait and a representation of corporal experience.

Chapter 3

What is in a Bed? Interpretations of My Bed

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will look more closely at the installation *My Bed*. I will be presenting others' interpretations of this installation. In addition I will discuss the autobiographical side central to the reception presented in the previous chapter. After this I will be looking at *My Bed* in relation to feminist art and discuss whether it can be read as a parafeminist work of art.

There are few articles that exclusively concentrate on *My Bed*, and the work is usually discussed along with Emin's other work. There are however some articles that focus particularly on this installation. Mandy Merck writes about it as abject art, Deborah Cherry writes about the development of the piece, which I presented in chapter 1, and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write about it in relation to written autobiographical art. I will first take up Merck's and Cherry's views and later on Smith and Watson's approach as I will be discussing *My Bed*'s relationship to self-representation in art. This is of course not a full representation of how Emin's work has been interpreted. I will first look at aspects of text and confessionality in her work and how it relates to *My Bed* and its position in Emin's oeuvre. I will also discuss two interpretations of the meaning and implications of the name of the work and how the concept of abject art is used to understand Emin's work. I will be discussing the autobiographical reading later in this chapter.

My Bed is an installation and a self-portrait made of appropriated objects.¹²¹ Some of Emin's other installations can be said to resemble *My Bed* in formal terms, such as *The last thing I said to you is don't leave me here* (1999), a wooden shack from the beaches of Margate. Emin has also made other installations, which are centred around a bed, such as *To Meet My Past* (2002), a four poster bed with a mattress and appliqué blankets. Many of the latter installations include appliqué elements, and they often lack the feeling of immediacy. *My Bed* bears the instantaneity often associated with Emin's work, such as her monoprints and the homespun feel of her appliqué works and mixed media pieces made of appropriated objects. But *My Bed* lacks what often is the most striking in her work: written text.

¹²¹ For a description of the work see chapter 1.

Emin's installations bear the legacy of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, but they also always include a performative aspect. This is true of *My Bed* as well. The objects included in the work are all regular consumer goods, but they have been consumed and used by the artist. The sheets are used and smeared with bodily fluids. Thematically *My Bed* can be seen in a continuum with *Everyone I ever slept with*. In this piece Emin shares with the viewers her memories of intimate moments she has shared with other people during her lifetime. Now she is sharing her bed with the viewer, but the tone is very different. No longer the shelter of a tent or dream, but sheets left open, ripped packages; a bed dumped in the middle of a room. The work appears open, aggressive and confrontational.

When it was a part of Emin's Turner Prize 1999 exhibition the work was difficult to avoid as it was placed in the middle of the first room, which every visitor walked through. This bed is not associated with illness, sleep or calm in my opinion. The sheets are tangled; it is a scene of action of one or another kind. Appropriately the bed is also placed in the middle of the room as if it is a stage. The placement of the installation is dramatic. Simultaneously *My Bed* seems to be lacking a *punctum*, a detail that breaks the illusion of reality and realism. But it is possible to interpret the placement of the piece as the *punctum* as it places the viewer into an undetermined and uncomfortable space between private and public. Thus the placement can be seen as the aspect that makes the viewer conscious of their relationship with the installation. But if the bed is a scene, what is it a scene for?

3.2 The Work, and Some Interpretations

My Bed may be a scene for self-expression and self-affirmation. Both Outi Remes and Christine Fanthome have looked at Emin's confessional approach both as a method for publicity and as symptom of the late 20th century celebrity culture that has its roots in the position of confessionality in contemporary culture. Both writers refer to Michel Foucault's idea about confession as the prevalent means for producing truth in the western societies since the Middle Ages. Since the late 19th century as the theories of Sigmund Freud were popularised this has increasingly meant confessing one's sexuality. Fanthome argues that the emphasis on confessionality has also had a significant influence on cultural texts such as visual arts, letters and autobiographical texts.¹²²

¹²² Fanthome, Christine. "Articulating authenticity through artifice: the contemporary relevance of Tracey Emin's confessional art," *Social Semiotics* vol. 18, no. 2 (2008): 223-225.

Outi Remes points out in her article “Replaying the old stereotypes into an artistic role: the case of Tracey Emin” that the amount of gossip in the British newspapers and magazines has risen from 10 % to 40% in the last two decades.¹²³ She looks at this gossip as a form of confession in contemporary culture. With gossip there is an expectation that somehow the piece of information will reveal the truth about a celebrity or another public figure. As I wrote in chapter 1 Remes compares Emin’s public role to that of Andy Warhol. Like with Warhol there has been much interest in finding out the “truth” about Tracey Emin, as we can see in some of the articles in the previous chapter. The Times published an exposé about Emin’s past as figurative painter.

Her work displays sordid details of her private life but Tracey Emin, the star of British shock art and the favourite to win the Turner prize on Tuesday, has concealed one secret that even she finds deeply embarrassing. Evidence of her hidden past as an accomplished painter has emerged days before judges of the country’s most prestigious modern art prize consider the merits of her latest work: a soiled, unmade bed.¹²⁴

Though this is not exactly a confession from Emin’s side, it can be seen as an example of the expectation of a full confession, something Emin has not delivered.

According to Remes Emin’s public performance borrows from Warhol’s strategy of multiple constructed personas that are not fixed.¹²⁵ Remes sees Emin’s personal confessions and gossip as performative acts. She approaches this with the linguist L. J. Austin’s theory about performative and constative acts. Remes argues that Emin’s success depends on the response of the audience, and being an artist is the performative act.¹²⁶ Tom Lubbock seems to be the only critic who shares this view. He poignantly describes Emin’s act in his review, “Emin’s Emin appears in art galleries as essentially an artist *manqué*. That being her act, I mean: the casualty/nutter/narcissist/artist *manqué*, with a desperate rage for self-expression – and exposure.”¹²⁷ There is a variety of responses to Emin’s openness. It has been described for example as fragility, exotic, self-promotional, lying and sentimentality. This in my opinion testifies to the complexity of her public persona.

Fanthome argues that confession serves also another purpose. Opposed to Remes who sees the confessional as a strategy Fanthome reads Emin’s participation in interviews and the confessional work also as a means of catharsis for Emin self. This could be true to a certain

¹²³ Remes. (2009): 565.

¹²⁴ Brooks, Richard, Hellen Nicholas. “Tracey Emin’s sordid secret: she can paint,” *The Sunday Times*, 28 November 1999.

¹²⁵ Remes. (2009): 565-566.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 567.

¹²⁷ Lubbock, Tom. “All mouth and no trousers,” *The Independent*, 26 October 1999.

extent, and Emin has occasionally referred to interviews as free therapy. At the same time it is difficult to know what she puts into her statement. In the same article “Articulating authenticity through artifice: the contemporary relevance of Tracey Emin’s confessional art.” Fanthome argues that the contemporary use of confession can be seen as a means of communicating wider truths, benefiting both the artist and the spectator, leading to a greater understanding of social meaning.¹²⁸ Interest in the confessional has only increased in the last decades, and according to Fanthome one can see this as grounds for the interest in Emin’s work. She writes that to publicly confess has become a requirement for celebrities and other public persona, and the expectation has spread to so-called ordinary people as well. Fanthome sees Emin’s position somewhere between the ordinary and the celebrity, and that Emin’s fame is due to her willingness to confess. She argues that Emin’s works mediated artefacts for expressing a confession. Fanthome sees the multi-media approach as a means to use the same base material reworked to open new disclosures and perspectives.¹²⁹ But as it comes forward in the newspaper articles Emin’s celebrity is not a straightforward matter, also Mandy Merck points out Emin’s ambivalent position in the art world. Emin has often portrayed herself as an outsider, at the same time as she has risen to an A-list celebrity, and gets compared to Posh Spice for her performance of herself in the media.¹³⁰ This stands in stark contrast to the reliving of her trauma, and the exposing of gory details, which are at the same time fascinating and off-putting. Here Merck falls more in line with what Remes seems to be saying in that in the contemporary culture it is possible and even preferable to build a celebrity figure of oneself.

But whereas Merck might see this as way of adjusting to contemporary expectations, and Remes sees this as part of Emin’s artistic project, Vivienne Jabri argues in her article “The Self in Woman as Subject of Art and Politics. Reflections on Tracey Emin” that in her mixing of private and public, Emin’s work should be read as a critical voice representing empowerment through visibility. She considers Emin’s work to present the multiple sides of a contemporary individual, and stating a subjectivity that defies the limits of discourse and power. Jabri sees Emin as aware of the dominant matrices of social life and her place in them. She sees Emin’s self-expression as a way of making the public space into a free space.¹³¹ In addition to this, some of the critics in the newspapers were concerned with the blurring of

¹²⁸ Fanthome. (2008): 226, 233.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 223-225, 233, 227.

¹³⁰ Merck. (2002), 133.

¹³¹ Jabri, Vivienne. “The Self in Woman as Subject of Art and Politics. Reflections on Tracey Emin” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 4, no. 1 (London: Routledge, 2002): 122-123, 125-126.

lines between private and public. In her article about Emin's connection to earlier women writers, which I discussed in Chapter 2, Natasha Walter discloses the fascination and unpleasant closeness she feels when confronted with Emin's work.

[...] Tracey Emin puts out herself. That produces an emotional effect that's unexpected in a contemporary art gallery. [...] It [the stories of personal trauma] pretty much forces a sympathetic response. Even at the moment when you feel sincerity turning into exhibitionism you are held by its power.¹³²

The unpleasantness and discomfort *My Bed* creates in the viewer can be described as the abject. In her article "Bedtime" Mandy Merck argues that Emin's work is a good example of abject art as understood by Hal Foster in his book *The Return of the Real* (1996). Merck discusses this in contrast with the beauty and attractiveness present in many of Emin's pieces and Emin's performances as a model for brands, such as Vivienne Westwood and Bombay Sapphire. Merck also takes up the solitude and isolation of one's bed, a reoccurring theme in Emin's work. Merck argues that in Emin's work sex is not coupled with violence but equated with it. Merck sees the bed as a battlefield.¹³³ Merck finds that Emin's work describes well what Foster considers the paradox of truth and abject art. He finds that truth is not compatible with art where the subject is a "witness, testifier, survivor", because "In trauma discourse the subject is both evacuated and elevated at the same time."¹³⁴ Merck argues that influence from 20th century art is clear in Emin's work. She claims that the use of bodily fluids as an attempt to connect the artist's body to the artwork in *My Bed* is a reference to the works by Robert Rauschenberg, and his *Black Paintings* (1951-53) and *Bed* (1955), with its soiled linen.¹³⁵

Where as Merck read the bed as bearing a resemblance to earlier excremental works, Deborah Cherry points to other works where a bed has been the main focus made in the 1990s. But none of these beds are reminders of a home, stable place, instead they often deal with sickness and death. Cherry sees the travelling life of this installation as being in a kind of diaspora. She sees it bearing markers of sexual difference, references to life and death in the form of illness and homelessness. Cherry claims that the work also bears a meaning of movement and crossing borders. This reading is based on the form it was shown in Tokyo presented with suitcases bound together, and in New York as a part of an installation called *Leaving Home* (1999). In London Cherry sees it as a middle ground between the Union Jack on the appliquéd quilt *No Chance* (1999) hung next to it and the references to Emin's Cypriot

¹³² Walter, Natasha. "It's time for Emin to make her bed and to move on," *The Independent*, October 25 1999.

¹³³ Merck. (2002), 123, 128.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 125.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 125.

father in her other work.¹³⁶ As mentioned in Chapter 1, Grant Pooke argues that there is an inherent feeling of displacement in the installations of the 1990s. According to Cherry in Emin's work the displacement is manifested in its a shifting placement.

Also Mark Durden interprets Emin's work as abject art. He describes Emin's work as a crude depiction of herself by the use of language, both written and spoken. In his article "Authority of authenticity: Tracey Emin" Durden claims, "*My Bed* provided both the art world and media with a spectacle of degradation and decadence." But at the same time as the messiness and vodka bottles can be read as a kind of decadence, I would argue that those are common, everyday objects, and the most unexpected aspect might be breaking the boundary between private and public.

The use of language is often seen as one of the more interesting aspects in Emin's work, and she herself seems to share this view. The lack of text makes *My Bed* seems mute and screaming at the same time. As I presented in the previous chapter, Emin's work is usually read as direct depiction of her history and this is often aided by the use of text in her work.¹³⁷ Many of the critics in Chapter 2 go so far as to suggest Emin should switch entirely to writing. "Write the novel, get a slot on Woman's Hour, change the medium, change the message [...]"¹³⁸ encourages Adrian Searle in *The Guardian*.

The only text attached to this work is its name: *My bed*. Both Merck and Deborah Cherry discuss the name of the work *My Bed*, and the indication of the use of the "shifter" "My". It raises the question about the clearly indicated subject, what is it about *her* bed that we are viewing. Merck writes that despite the public's interest and the universality ascribed to Emin's work by other critics, "it remains *My Bed*, not *Our Bed*".¹³⁹ In some ways the work is clearly very personal, but I do not see that as the polar opposite to saying something universal. Merck questions what the viewer gets from this piece that follows the tradition of confessional art of private suffering.

Cherry sees the name of the work *My Bed* as a signature as understood by Jacques Derrida. Signature is an element that simultaneously suggests stability and ambiguity, presence and absence, but it can also be seen as assign of ownership. She argues that the name of this piece functions as a signature that connects the work and the artist, and this is according to Cherry emphasised by the critical response as well as the artist's statement "It's

¹³⁶ Cherry. (2002), 149-153.

¹³⁷ Durden, Mark. "Authority of authenticity: Tracey Emin" *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine*, vol 5, no. 1-3 (2002): 20-37.

¹³⁸ Searle, Adrian. "Tracey's pants but McQueen's the real pyjamas," *The Guardian*, 20 October 1999.

¹³⁹ Merck. (2002), 127-128.

a self-portrait, but not one that people would like to see.”¹⁴⁰ At the same time there is no conclusive proof of whose bed it is. Emin’s, the other people who used the bed or the performance artists that jumped on it. Cherry quotes Emin saying “I’m not putting my bed on display. Charles [Saatchi] is. It’s his bed now. The bed’s not mine.”¹⁴¹ As this quote seems to point out, instability is an integral part of this work.

3.3 “It’s all about Tracey.” Self-representation

If we take Emin’s word for it, then *My Bed* is “a self-portrait, but not one anyone wants to see.”¹⁴² That seems like a firm statement about a work with so many fluctuating meanings. Traditionally self-portraiture was expected to render accurate likeness, it was to be an “objective imitation”, but by the end of the 19th century this changed. Meskimmon argues that self-portraiture is about how the artist sees herself, rather than about how she appears. In her book *The Art of Reflection* Meskimmon argues that women artists are seeing and exploring the “self” within male social and discursive structures. Thus self-portraiture is a critical intervention for women artists.¹⁴³ The concept of self-representation has broadened and groups formerly excluded are now represented. According to Meskimmon during the 20th century women’s self-representational art, both in literature and visual arts, has been determined by their lack of fixed subject position and subversion of traditional narrative structures. Women artists have challenged simple psychobiography by revealing how their “selves” were the product of shifting social constructs and definitions of “woman”.¹⁴⁴ Since the 1970s the presence of the artist’s body has blurred the line between conceptual art and self-portraiture and the artists have increasingly been physically present in their work. Visual self-representation has grown beyond visual likeness and it now includes visual, textual, voiced and material imprints of subjectivity.¹⁴⁵

Women’s art production in the 20th century has been especially engaged in self-representation. Self-portraiture is not an exclusively male genre, and it has never been, but the attitudes towards women’s self-portraiture and autobiographical literature have been different

¹⁴⁰ Cherry. (2002), 146.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 145-147.

¹⁴² Ibid., (2002), 146.

¹⁴³ Meskimmon. (1996), xv, 1, 9, 11, 14.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 72-73.

¹⁴⁵ Borzello. (1998), 167, 170.

according to for instance Marsha Meskimmon¹⁴⁶, and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson¹⁴⁷. Traditionally it has been seen as merely personal and narcissistic. Women have traditionally been the object in art, and being simultaneously an object and a subject “is to stage a crucial intervention”¹⁴⁸ according to Meskimmon. In the 20th century many women artists have produced self-portraits that comment on the discourse that defines the “woman”. The issues that have been prominent are the sexual and gendered body, maternal body, politics of domesticity, sexuality, body image, aging, sexual violence, class and ethnicity. By taking control of the representation of these themes Meskimmon claims that the artists are challenging the traditional representations.

Historically self-portraits are linked to the concept of the “artist”, and how it is understood in different times. During the late 19th and 20th century the artist was commonly perceived as The Romantic Genius. According to Meskimmon this was affected by the spreading popularity of psychoanalysis. The artist was seen as a bohemian and a misunderstood genius. The expectation that the artists put something of themselves into their work rose during this period. Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault were among the post-structuralist theorists who questioned the existence of an author, and the relationship between the author and the work. Meskimmon refers to Foucault who claims that the artist verifies her work by her social status as an “author”. In his essay “The Death of the Author” (1968) Foucault places the meaning of the work into the viewer’s or reader’s interpretation of the work, rather than into the intention of the artist or her biographical background. After the introduction of this theory the idea of the tormented artist has largely disappeared and it is often considered uncritical. According to Meskimmon the “death of the author” was both liberating and problematic for women artists. It liberated them from some of the most rigid interpretations of self-representation. At the same time some feminist theorists have criticised this denying of the author, as it happened as the concept of author was opened more to include women and other groups.¹⁴⁹ Meskimmon claims that women’s “otherness” to the hegemonic man, Eurocentric, white, able bodied, is linked to all other “otherness”. Meskimmon is critical to the post-structuralist critique of the subject as it emerges from a place of security, from an empowered subject position. Meskimmon argues for a stronger artist subject than presented by Foucault, but wants the subject, not to be the “I” of the same, but function as

¹⁴⁶ Meskimmon. (1996), 65, 74.

¹⁴⁷ Smith, Watson. (2005), 4-15.

¹⁴⁸ Meskimmon. (1996), 14.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 70-71.

intersubjective modes of articulating difference.¹⁵⁰ But the idea of the artist genius still lives in popular culture, and Meskimmon argues that despite the change artists still find currency in being the outsider.¹⁵¹ I would argue that to a certain extent Emin is playing with these concepts. Her work often depicts the experiences of an outsider, and people in vulnerable positions; children, women, fetuses. At the same time Emin has employed some of the characteristics of a genius artist with a big ego she eagerly flaunts on occasions.

Traditionally there has been an assumption that the recollections presented in self-representations, especially when it comes to literature, are accurate and represent the truth. But Smith and Watson argue that it is not a transparent practice, but an enacted life narrative and a performative act.¹⁵² One of the traditional ways to read autobiographical work is the *psychobiographical* reading, in which the work is interpreted only to present certain, often traumatic, experiences of the artist life. This has been the case in many of the readings of Frida Kahlo's painting, and it can be said to be the case with the reception of Tracey Emin's work. According to Meskimmon this approach usually cuts the work from its cultural, stylistic and social context, assuming a strong link between women and the personal sphere, as well as not recognising the artist as a conscious subject taking part in the act of telling and producing the narrative.¹⁵³

Self-portraits are often interpreted through models of biography and autobiography. Meskimmon finds this inadequate. She sees the self-portrait as a "mediation of the "self" in social signification".¹⁵⁴ Traditionally criticism of autobiography has confined itself to fact checking. This approach to self-representation resembles the testing for truth and accuracy in the story Remes and Fanthome refer to in their articles about confession. In the more analytical reading, strongly influenced by psychoanalysis, the individual's life and experiences are expected to explain their achievements. This reading requires an immediate relationship between the artist and their work. In this model the work, either a self-portrait or autobiography, is considered to reveal the narrative of the creative personality.¹⁵⁵ We can see both of these approaches in the reading of Emin's work. Especially the fact checking has been popular in the tabloids. But also the broadsheets participate in this, as the example from The Times I presented earlier shows. Brooks and Hellen's description of Emin's work is as

¹⁵⁰ Meskimmon. *Women making art: history, subjectivity, aesthetics*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 7-8.

¹⁵¹ Meskimmon. (1996), 15, 18-22.

¹⁵² Smith, Watson. (2005), 8-11.

¹⁵³ Meskimmon. (1996), 66-69, 79.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 66-68.

follows, “Her work displays sordid details of her private life [...]”¹⁵⁶. But the psychobiographical reading is a more wide spread phenomenon and can be found in many of the reviews. Richard Cork at *The Times* describes the themes in Emin’s work as “Memories of her gruelling girlhood in Margate continue to feed the appliqué blankets and spidery drawings she produces today. Such a confessional approach could easily be mawkish or self-pitying.”¹⁵⁷ Adrian Searle at *The Guardian* agrees on the source of the inspiration and says “Tracey, you just go on and on, in an endlessly solipsistic, self-regarding homage to yourself. [...]There's nothing to see in your work but you, your mood swings, your sentimentality and your nostalgia.”¹⁵⁸ These opinions can be seen as examples of how the same psychobiographical approach leads to different reactions. There are also exceptions to this, such as Tom Lubbock at *The Independent* who sees that Emin’s work “[...] is about the personal in general, though focused on her particular person. And even when it’s not that, it can come over as not a bad character-act, [...]”¹⁵⁹

In their article “The rumpled bed of autobiography: extravagant lives, extravagant questions.” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson look at Tracey Emin’s work, especially *My Bed*, and the book *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers. They discuss these as examples of self-representation, or life writing as they call it, in a time when breaking the rules is the rule. The key issues in their reading of these works are avant-garde practice, gender, the ethics of narration, and the blurring of the lines between these.¹⁶⁰ According to Smith and Watson Emin’s *My Bed* both uses and questions the traditions of both visual and verbal autobiographical art as it diffuses the boundaries between life and art. They argue that a bed can be seen as a metaphor for contemporary autobiographical experiments. It is a stage for public presentation of the personal and intimate.¹⁶¹

One of the questions Smith and Watson address is whether Emin is citing from her past experiences or if she is performing them. In their article they read *My Bed* as “a memory museum to a specific time and place in Emin’s past.” This and her monographs with their misspellings and childlike images read as immediacy and “authenticity”. Smith and Watson claim that the intensity of Emin’s work and insistence of her self-chronicling makes this into

¹⁵⁶ Brooks, Richard, Hellen Nicholas. “Tracey Emin's sordid secret: she can paint,” *The Sunday Times*, 28 November 1999.

¹⁵⁷ Cork, Richard. “Celluloid heroes and video villains,” *The Times*, 20 October 1999.

¹⁵⁸ Searle, Adrian. “Tracey's pants but McQueen's the real pyjamas,” *The Guardian*, 20 October 1999.

¹⁵⁹ Lubbock, Tom. “All mouth and no trousers,” *The Independent*, 26 October 1999.

¹⁶⁰ Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson. “The rumpled bed of autobiography: Extravagant lives, extravagant questions”, *Biography*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2001): 1-2, 13.

¹⁶¹ Smith, Watson. (2001), 1-2.

an avant-garde gesture. The monovocal, solipsistic and at the same time inventive work is according to them “a convergence of anti-art and extreme artistic self-reference.”¹⁶²

By blurring the line between life and art she also questions the “real”. She presents her memorabilia without a present-tense critical narrative.¹⁶³ Another issue in this article is the pact between the “writer” and the audience. This is a question of trust as there is an expectation that the writer guarantees that what is told to be the truth. By not having an “objective” distance from her work Emin betrays this trust. Smith and Watson see this as one of the reasons for the aggressive resentment towards her. At the same time they claim that it is behind her popularity as well. She offers something different from those who work with self-representation in a more discreet manner.¹⁶⁴ This idea of subjective “truth” being attractive for viewers recalls the attraction of gossip I discussed earlier. As well as gossip being a form for confession.

Smith and Watson argue that with her frankness Emin breaks with the conventional expectations that apply to a woman. They write that the “excessive disclosure of her personal past presented through installations, diaries, videos, and so on, could be read as both exploiting and flaunting gendered norms of female decorum”¹⁶⁵ This breaks especially with the expectation to middle class womanhood, and Smith and Watson see this having an origin in Emin’s working class roots. As we can see in the newspaper material this frankness was problematic or at least note worthy for many, and was interpreted in several ways: “In her work, all English inhibitions are flung away. With a frankness she may well have inherited from her errant Cypriot father [..]”¹⁶⁶ Richard Cork at The Times blames it on Emin’s Cypriot heritage. According to Smith and Watson the bourgeois sphere of the gallery intensifies this effect.¹⁶⁷

Emin however, is staging-if indeed she is staging, not just citing-not her adult take on public uses of and response to women’s bodies in the fantasies of contemporary culture. Rather, she presents the idiosyncratic particularity of her own past, one often at odds with both decorum and parody. In including her bed, her childhood diaries, her vacation videos, family news clippings, and other artefacts of her experience as art, Emin seems to undermine the notion that autobiography selects, edits, chooses, and rearranges the stuff of life into meaningful narrative, reworked by memory’s intervention, for public scrutiny. And yet, in presenting these fragments of the past *as art*, Emin invites us to remake her

¹⁶² Smith, Watson. (2001), 3-4.

¹⁶³ I would like to point out here that it seems as though Smith and Watson might be relying on some inaccurate information. In the beginning of the article some of the work is described as “captioned drawings made during her adolescence”, which I presume refers to Emin’s monoprints and drawings produced in the 1990s. This leads to them interpreting a larger part of her work as memorabilia based that actually is.

¹⁶⁴ Smith, Watson. (2001), 3, 5-6, 11.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶⁶ Cork, Richard. “Celluloid heroes and video villains,” *The Times*, 20 October 1999.

¹⁶⁷ Smith, Watson. (2001), 10-11.

in the present, to compose interpretive narratives, to collaborate in constructing the indisputable authenticity and flagrant excess of her autobiographical acts.¹⁶⁸

Here Smith and Watson point to a significant part of conceptual art that seems to be forgotten in much of the critique. They point to the act of making the work and the decisions behind it.

3.4 Women Artists as Subjects and the Legacy of Feminist Art

The 1990s popular culture saw the rise of phenomena such as "girl power", and the term post-feminist was coined. So is there really a need to discuss women artists as a separate category and is there a need to look at different types of subjectivity? Meskimmon's argument on her reading of women's art is based on the idea that a clear sexual discrimination exists in the world, and that this affects the arts as it does all other fields of life. According to her the question of sexual difference in art should be approached with an understanding of its complexity, and we should ask what difference it makes. This question is repeatedly taken up in contemporary art by women artists and shapes the way we understand women artists as a category and art in general. According to Meskimmon the question should be how women's art comes to "articulate sexual difference in its material specificity and its particular historical locus, the potential to generate new answers, ideas and concepts is endless."¹⁶⁹ In Western European thinking the sense of self is based on an autonomous, masculine, heterosexual, white and able-bodied normative subject. This idea of a masculine subject has led to the presentations of women as objects. But according to Meskimmon women making art have neither assumed a pseudo-masculine position, nor have they set themselves up as objects. The women artists' questioning of the mind-body-dualism undermines the basic logic of women's objectification and allows for the embodiment to be a part of making, knowing and thinking.¹⁷⁰

What Meskimmon finds problematic in the response to women's art is that the specific corporeality of the subjects and works in conjunction with their historical location and material presence in the world are either dismissed as irrelevant or reified as the essential origin of their meaning.¹⁷¹ The only example where the corporal dimension of Emin's work

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶⁹ Meskimmon (2003), 3.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 71-72.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 1-3.

was mentioned in the newspaper material in Chapter 2 was in Gordon Burn's commentary. He writes: "While studiously avoiding the human body in their work, the Whiteread/Emin generation of artists has been aggressive in their referencing of it. A lot of the titillation and unease that has quickly become associated with Emin's Tate piece probably arises from this bed being read as a metaphor for the human body."¹⁷²

Meskimmon refers to Mieke Bal on her concept of art as "cultural philosophy". The work is then a materialisation of theory, and forges a critical link between the materiality of the objects and the agency of the artists and participant-observers.¹⁷³ Here the relationship between the work and the recipient becomes material. Works of art do not reside in the ritual image or the physical artefact, but in the relational play, a play engendered by an embodied, corporeal subject. The corporal is important when it comes to women making art, because of the myth of the neutral knowledge in epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. The myth leads to false truths that are decorporalised, and are no longer in contact with their material manifestation and do not recognise their effects in the world. Meskimmon is asking what new knowledge women making art can produce in terms of history, subjectivity and aesthetics.¹⁷⁴

As one alternative interpretation model Meskimmon offers the concept of situated knowledge. The personal experience is still valid, but has also a larger consequence. Meskimmon sees the focus on likeness and mimesis in self-portraits and their interpretation as a result of the privileged position of seeing as a form of knowing. Meskimmon considers the absence of likeness, in for example the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois, as a subversive strategy, which both liberates from the problem of portraying women and allows for other ways to gather information of the world than just seeing.¹⁷⁵ In Emin's case there is no complete lack of mimesis as she often depicts herself in drawings and uses herself in video pieces. But in the case of *My Bed*, in which her visual presence is hidden in small photographs mixed with the other discarded objects, she is creating a self-representation in the form of everyday objects. In addition these objects are untidy and the effect they create is more unpleasant than flattering.

According to Meskimmon the body that the artist depicts exists in confrontation with its environment. She argues that, "Embodiment refutes the division of "mind" from "body", arguing that what we call subjectivity is the effect of human, corporeal existence in the

¹⁷² Burn, Gordon. "Clever Tracey!" *The Guardian*, 26 October 1999.

¹⁷³ Meskimmon. (2003), 4.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹⁷⁵ Meskimmon. (1996), 87, 95.98.

world.”¹⁷⁶ According to Meskimmon moving away from this binary assumption has been especially beneficial to those groups formerly associated with just the body and immanence.¹⁷⁷

Though the author has been declared dead, Meskimmon thinks that for any marginalised group, coming into representation is important. In Western art the “woman”, the idea, has been well represented, but “women”, the individuals, have not been subjects. Some women artists have used their own naked bodies in their work, making themselves the subject and the object simultaneously. According to Meskimmon this is done to question the boundary between the object and the subject in the representation of women.¹⁷⁸ The body comes up in the works of women artists at the intersection cultural meaning and psychological identification. The use of one’s body in a piece is automatically bound to the negotiation between the subject and object roles in visual imagery as a woman artist cannot take for granted that she will be seen as a subject.¹⁷⁹ I think this has changed to an extent, and will come to this as I discuss Jones and para-feminism.

The conscious use of body as a point of reference and an allegory for the subject has been heavily influenced by the feminist theory and practise of the 1960s and 1970s. In her 2007 article “1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art”¹⁸⁰ Amelia Jones writes about the increased interest in feminist art and the art labelled as post-feminist art of the 1990s and 2000s in forms of large retrospective exhibitions and the loose use of labels such as post-feminist art. Jones acknowledges feminist art, theory and practice, as one of the most influential movements of the 20th century. At the same time she claims that the new rise in interest in feminist art is based on commercial interest. She sees the so-called post-feminist art as one indication of this. Jones argues that the work she categorises as post-feminist art uses the modes of earlier feminist art without the theoretical background. The so-called bad girl art has taken the female body and sexuality as subjects, but treats it in line with the overly sexualised media reality. Jones is critical of the way large exhibitions on earlier feminist art have commodified the work she deems radical and avant-garde and turned it into a part of the safe and conservative narrative of contemporary art, underscoring the radical politics present in much of the work.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Meskimmon. (2003), 76.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 75-76.

¹⁷⁸ Meskimmon. (1996), 22-25, 27-28, 32, 34.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 102-103.

¹⁸⁰ Jones, Amelia. “1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art” in *X-tra Contemporary Art Quarterly*, http://www.x-traonline.org/past_articles.php?articleID=184 (accessed 12 October 2010).

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

The feminist critique of the Western understanding of knowledge, briefly presented above, was central to feminist visual theory and practise. It questioned the authority of visual knowledge, and introduced the body as the central antidote to this thinking. The body, especially the female body and its experiences became central to the feminist art of the 1970s, and this interest is still present. Jones writes that the body became a battleground in two ways: it was used to articulate social and political agency, and at the same time its role in culture was questioned. Jones uses Carolee Schneemann and Yoko Ono as examples of artists who explored the interaction between the body as an object and as a subject with agency. Also the female body's position as a fetish was explored. Some deliberately distanced themselves from this, such as Griselda Pollock and Mary Kelly, while others, such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman some years later, used the fetishising imagery to reveal this practice. What Jones finds problematic with this form of identity politics is that it relies on a philosophical background that bases it on binary relationships. Another problem with much of the discourse is that it only takes the white body to account, and leaves out issues such as racism, classicism and the spectrum of gender and sexual identities.

From the beginning of the 1990s the interest in feminism waned and discussion around it became dismissive of its relevance. At this point the term post-feminism was coined. Jones uses Sue Williams and Tracey Emin as examples of artists labelled as post-feminist artists. She writes:

[...] they took their cue from earlier feminists such as Kusama [...] and from a rising celebrity culture of sexualised yet seemingly powerful women performers such as Madonna to produce angry, explicitly self-sexualized narratives—often conflating abjection and power as equally at issue in the complexities of women's sexual identities and experiences.¹⁸²

This was followed by the rise of reality television and celebrity culture that prized “Madonna-esque femininity” not backed up by any apparent talent. According to Jones a pinnacle on this development with a younger generation of women are artists such as Anthea Behm and Liz Cohen, who loan their visual cues from the world of advertisement, reality television and the Internet. Jones writes that these artists are acclaimed for “taking apart or critiquing myth about female subjectivity.”¹⁸³ She argues that what these artists are doing is directly replicating commercial imagery by using their young able bodies in their photographic work. Though they are appropriating strategies used in the 1970s by the likes of Hannah Wilke, the context is so wildly different that these works cannot have the same effect or carry the politics

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

of earlier feminist art.¹⁸⁴ While I do not entirely disagree with Jones and her critique of what she calls post-feminist art, it sounds ironically very much like the critique Wilke received for her work in the 1970s. However, Jones sees another a future for feminist art, and as a possible evolution she proposes the concept of parafeminism.

3.5 Is This Parafeminism?

Emin claims that what she does is not feminist art, but says that it depicts general human experiences. Occasionally she contradicts this in her comments on her work, and the general attitude in the reception of her work seems to be that it deals with themes that can be understood as women specific, such as abortion, girlhood and mother daughter relationships. Emin's work has been characterised as both feminist, because of its clear reference point in earlier feminist art, and as postmodern playfulness because of Emin's fluid public persona. I agree with both statements to some extent, but find that Amelia Jones' concept of parafeminism, which she presents in her book *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*, to be useful in trying to understand the feminist aspects of Emin's work in general and installation *My Bed* in particular.

Jones explains the concept of parafeminism using the works of Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist as an example. Jones claims that Rist's work reworks the ideas that derive from feminism and offer a critical perspective on subjectivity as embodied, gendered and sexed, eventhough Rist describes her work as post-feminist. Rist, who is present in much of her work, as body, image and commodity, is also the subject. This double position is break from the traditional understanding of the subject existing only in an objective observer position, a position that provides the fantasy of transcendence. Rist's subject is one that is saturated in, and presented through, images and sounds. The installations fill the space they are displayed in and they emerge the viewers. According to Jones "These installations thus articulate a new way of thinking about meanings and value (including subjective identities) emerge from this confluence of bodies, spaces, and images in a processual and radically anti-instrumentalized way."¹⁸⁵ In Emin's work this double position is an ongoing theme. In *My Bed* the use of body as an instrument in creating the piece can be seen as an example of this. In addition the use of

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Jones. (2006), 210-211.

her photo booth portrait take an interesting stance to the object-subject dilemma. Emin poses herself as the object in these pictures, where an automated machine takes the pictures.

According to Jones para-feminism exists side by side with previous feminist theory and practice and draws from them. Just as with the earlier theories the para-feminist subject is embodied, gendered and sexed. According to Jones para-feminism makes use of and invents new forms of power tied to the historical and present forms of feminine subjectivities. It is not meant to perform positive role models, or critique the patriarchy or present infantile commodified forms of feminine misbehaviour.¹⁸⁶ The para-feminist subjectivity in Rist's work articulates multiple and relational feminine subjectivity, through conceptual and material intertwining of body, space, screen, sound and object. This identity is not based on biological anatomy or cultural experience, but a process of negotiation of identification and desire in the visual order. She concludes

The para-feminist project is not to provide coherent (and thus more or less stable) coalitional politics based on the identification of certain subjects as "women". It is, rather, to explore in an open-ended, processual manner the way in which power and value accrue to particular subjects and objects (including works of art).¹⁸⁷

Jones describes para-feminism as politics of positionality. The position is not fixed but is in constant motion. Jones sees the representation of the body as the strength of para-feminism. She writes, "as Foucault notes, the body is the field through which power is simultaneously experienced, challenged, and given new forms."¹⁸⁸ Jones argues that in para-feminist art gender is taken up as a question, not as an answer. Jones claims that para-feminist works emphasize the politics of positionality, in which "the body is both visualised and enacted but impossible to know."¹⁸⁹ According to Jones the legacy of the feminist art practice and theory of the 1970s is the awareness of social and political positioning of the body in the works of contemporary artists.

This politics continues to pivot around the body, but not as a "ground" to be either positively rendered and performed, or critically dismantled, or sheltered from a fetishizing gaze—but as lived and living manifestation of the political effects of being variously positioned (identified) in today's global economies of information and imagery.¹⁹⁰

According to Jones in a para-feminist work of art the identity ascribed to it by the spectators is intertwined with the "identity" they perceive as attached to the artist. The works do not speak

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 213-214.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 215.

¹⁸⁸ Jones. (2008).

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

in a uniform and secure voice but display confusion, disruption and even hysterical experiences. I find this descriptive also of Emin's work *My Bed*. As with other works by Emin the interpretation of *My Bed* is usually based on preconceived notions of Emin as a person. The critic Adrian Searle finds the work uninteresting, because putting ones used underwear on display is "such a Tracey thing to [do]"¹⁹¹. As the installation is a self-portrait, and I would argue best understood as part of Emin's production, it is rational to interpret it in relation to the artist and her persona, but I would argue that this should be done consciously.

There are also other ways Jones finds the viewers participation crucial to para feminist art. In Rist's work there is no "male gaze", but the participants (the viewers) encounter and engage with the bodies present in the exhibiting space as viewing/experiencing subjects. Rist explores the interrelationship between the female subject, the body and the space it inhabits. Jones writes that Rist performs the anatomically female body beyond femaleness. She argues that in para feminism a sexed subjectivity is performed without the need to identify it using apparent anatomical attributes as codes.¹⁹² In *My Bed* there are hints of sexual difference, such as men's underwear, women's pantyhose, female and male contraceptives. At the same time no concrete gendered body is present in the work. A body or bodies have been present in the making of this installation. The garments are used, there are stains made by bodily fluids on the sheets and someone smoked all of those cigarettes. There has been corporal presence but one cannot determine specifically who, what gender, or even how many have been through this scene that has been set up. There are some similar traits in Jones' positional politics and the idea of situated knowledge. The primary difference between these two is in my understanding that the para feminist subject meets the world as an individual as opposed to as a representative of a group.

The para feminist positionality is not fixed in terms of locus or ideology, but it means that we identify others and ourselves "in relation to perceived and complexly interwoven identifications."¹⁹³ When it comes to gender this means that it has no fixed meaning but it is understood in relation to other identifications, such as nationality, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity and so on. According to Jones this frees everyone to express their sexual power without having to align with the binary logic of male and female. The undetermined person(s) depicted in *My Bed* gives the viewer no stable gendered subject to identify with. It gives the viewers an array of emotions and action to pick up from the scattered objects left behind, to

¹⁹¹ Searle, Adrian. "Tracey's pants but McQueen's the real pyjamas," *The Guardian*, 20 October 1999.

¹⁹² Jones. (2006), 212-213.

¹⁹³ Jones. (2008).

come up with a narrative. The bed can be seen a scene of desire. As I mentioned earlier Merck sees the bed as a battle scene, even though there really is nothing that speaks of violence directly. There is nothing calm about the work in my view, but at the same time it is hard to tell whether the passion present in the work is despair or sexual desire. There is both fragility and aggression present in the work. Among the objects lying beside the bed there is a children's toy and cosy slippers. They seem out of place, but at the same time why would you not have your intimate possession by your bed, arguably the most intimate piece of furniture in modern culture?

Jones writes that the boundaries between the work and "reality" are blurred, as with the separation between the image body and real body, and the differences between masculine and feminine subjects.¹⁹⁴ As I have presented above the line between reality and work, presence and absence, model and artist are central in Emin's work. In *My Bed* the everyday objects disregarded on the floor present this type of blurring, as well as Emin's position as an object (in the photographs), as the artist and as the material (the stains) of the installation.

Video as media and its technical implications are central in Jones' approach to parafeminism in her book. This is not directly related to the installation I am discussing here, but some of the elements are useful. Jones sees Rist's use of camera and projections as a way of turning the camera into an eye, as opposed to thinking of the eye as a camera; the image is organic and embracing. She states, "The camera/eye penetrates, but itself dissolves into what it observes. It s flesh, as is the image/screen it produces."¹⁹⁵ Jones claims that by meshing the making and seeing spaces Rist reflects the idea that the boundaries between the real and the representation can no longer be counted on in the world of globalised late-capitalism. In Rist's work she conveys interior thoughts on the screen. She approaches new technologies with play and pleasure, and treats the media as an extension of the body in a manner where there no longer exists a "real" body to return to. This body trapped in the images is presented as site of empathy and identification. By not being afraid of being an image, Rist articulates a parafeminist subject. Jones writes that the parafeminist subjects in Rist's work are both expressing volatile energy, a form of power, and revealing their fragility, the possibility of being shattered, penetrated and dissolved. Jones sees this openness about confusion and struggle and the spectacle made of it as a form of power.¹⁹⁶ Emin's uses her body as material for the making of the work. As an image it is only present as Polaroid snapshots and photo

¹⁹⁴ Jones. (2006), 216-217.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 218-220.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 218-220, 222-223, 227-228.

booth headshots. Those photographic images do not state her as the main object of this piece. They are the type of picture other people have as memorabilia. This confuses because one would not think Emin needed to carry around memories of herself. But then again one has to remember that most of Emin's work is either memories or memorabilia in some form or another.

3.6 Conclusion

My Bed stands without borders when it is exhibited. It makes the room a part of it, and thus interacts with the works it is exhibited with. As with all of Emin's work this installation seems to interact with her other work, and to function like a chapter in the ever-expanding book "Tracey Emin's life and story as works of art". It is hard to look at it as an individual piece, as it seems to show yet another part of the same story one is confronted with in all of Emin's work. Often seen as dwelling in her past, in *My Bed*, Emin is not present. She has been there, there is evidence of that, but at the same time she is absent. She has moved on. Often there is a concrete presence of her in her work; as a character and voice in her video work, as a model in her photography or as the object in her drawings. In *My Bed* the presence is more complex and not as easily recognisable. This time what is present is the representation of her as the subject of this work and more concretely; her bodily fluids, once a part of her, but not anymore.

In this dissertation I intended to discuss the reception of Tracey Emin's installation *My Bed* and how it was received in the British broadsheet newspapers. The questions I had for this material were about Emin's public persona, celebrity and self-representation. As expected none of my questions were completely answered. But bellow are some of reflections I am left with after discussing these issues from the several points of view I have presented in this dissertation.

One of the aspects that strikes me in the reception of *My Bed*, and Emin's work in general, is the lack of attention the implications of corporality present in the pieces receive. In the reviews in Chapter 2 the body was mentioned in one of them, when Gordon Burn points out the lack of corporal presence in Emin's work. In my opinion this statement is inaccurate, as I have argued in this chapter. The corporal experience plays a large role in both the making of the work as well as in experiencing it as a viewer and in its meaning as I have interpret it.

The work is not discussed as an installation in the reviews and its positioning in relation to the viewer is not mentioned. It is in fact usually referred to as Emin's bed, not as an installation she has produced. These texts are produced for newspaper purpose, quickly written, quickly forgotten. I could possibly have taken this more to account when reading and analysing them, but I would argue that they have revealed relevant tendencies in the interpretations of Emin's work in general that I might have not considered as obvious if I had not considered all of these critiques.

Many of the critics repeat the same biographical information and Emin's most scandalous public performance. The childhood experiences and extravagant behaviour becomes almost like a mantra, a necessary part of the work and interpretation. Has this been a conscious strategy and a part of the performance "Tracey Emin"? I am not sure. But the mantra is difficult to escape. There is a duality to the interpretation of *My Bed*; it is easy to understand as a part of Emin's story, but at the same time it can be seen as open to many interpretations. It seems as though most of the critics chose the first alternative, and this is not necessarily a wrong choice.

Emin's life story or at least her presentation of it is central also to the other readings of her work I have discussed in this chapter. The psychobiographic readings work their way to many of the texts. I am not arguing that there is no room for Emin's personal history in the reading of her - that would be absurd - but I think this aspect should be recognised when discussing her work. One of the aspects I would suggest should be laid to rest is the truth behind the story and the work. I see that accepting what she is telling to the viewer is a part of the artwork, and that should be the framework used to interpret it, not speculation about what might be the "truth". A work of art is fiction and therefore suspension of disbelief is required.

The use of Emin's story as a part of an interpretations framework should however not mean that no other framework can be, or should be used. My choice to look at *My Bed* as a para-feminist artwork is somewhat obvious in terms of the influences of earlier feminist art in Emin's work. But I find that it sheds light on the sexual subject present in this installation that is often forgotten. Emin's presence is usually interpreted as the victim position and as an implication of trauma. Both of these are valid readings for many of her works, but not necessarily the only ways to interpret the subject in this installation.

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Illustration

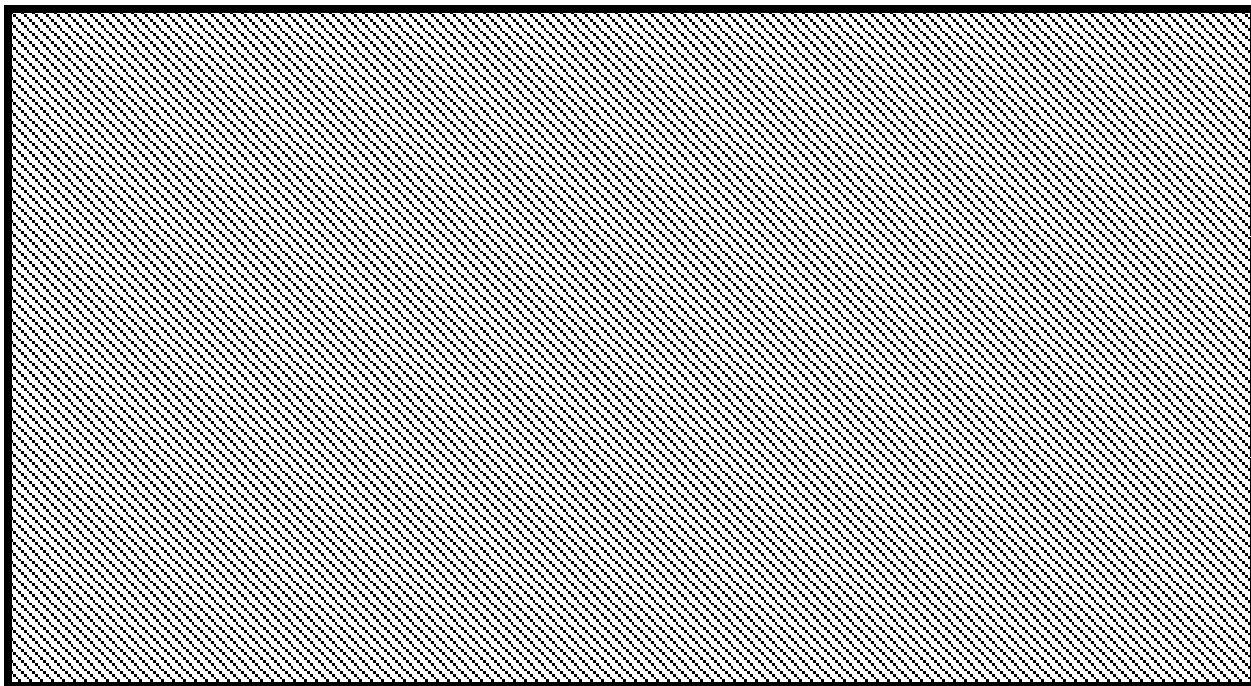


Figure 1. Tracey Emin, *My Bed* (1998). Installation view, The Turner Prize 1999, Tate Gallery, London, England. Photo: Stephen White