

Yantra Scott - Personal Study:

“An investigation into gender roles in contemporary art”

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This chapter is the conclusion to the study as a whole; it examines the learning outcomes and is a general end to the personal study.

## Chapter 1

### Equality and Electrical Goods

(An introduction to Feminism)

What the fuck is Feminism I ponder over a sink full of dirty dishes, my hands getting pruned with all the bubbles. Is Feminism the rise of dishwashing machines and other 'woman saving devices'? And is equality in life and art just a lesbian pipe dream while the rest of us sit subservient? It seems I am not the first, nor will I be the last to ask such questions. I vowed to investigate further, so here goes.

The English dictionary defines feminine as 'womanly, effeminate, denoting the gender of words which signifies female'. I therefore assume that feminism is an objection to the stereotypical 'female' and a rejection of the roles that come with such a stereotype. For example women = caregiver, housekeeper, wife and mother, whilst male = professional, provider, artist.

In the 1950's the idea of a 'women's role' was personified after the men heroically returned home after the Second World War. Women were no longer needed in the workforce and they dutifully returned 'home'. The lives of women at this time in history were restricted, predictable and a reflection of the great American Dream, of a mortgage, 2.4 children and a clinically depressed wife high as the hills on Valium.

This painful mass oppression of women could not be sustained. Let the bra burning begin! The 1960's and 1970's were very exciting times for the women's and other social justice movements. Things came to a head in the 1980's when the rather frightening Maggie Thatcher, impeccably quaffed and wielding her favourite handbag was in full swing, screwing the unions and paving the way for other frightening women to claw their way to the top, or somewhere near it. Today however, women seem to have abandoned many of these ideals perhaps because they believe the need for struggle has passed and they have opted instead not to burn their bras but to accessorise them!

A wonderful legacy of feminist literature was left by pioneering women who examined, explored and critiqued many issues, which impacted on women. They deal with notions of equality and in some cases complete domination, hmm, steady on!

Pat Robertson the famous American bible-belt basher said, "feminism is a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians". I thought this quote was incredibly funny but it is also scary as Robertson exerts a powerful influence over the 'born again fundamentalist christians' who have made abortion a highly politicised issue once again. It illustrates that people truly believe in the 'dangers of feminism' viewing it as a cult that threatens patriarchal society. There are fears that this lifestyle choice also threatens to unravel the very moral threads of our society. Keep the bitches down!

Another humorous quote on feminism comes from Rebecca West who says, "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiates me from a doormat".

On a more serious note, society has changed rapidly in terms of being aware of women's rights to equality of opportunity and slowly laws are being changed to reflect this. One example is work becoming more 'mother friendly' and allowing women to work from home. However, I am doubtful whether opinions so deeply ingrained in the psyche can change as rapidly when the desire to right the wrong is not present and when so many men like things just the way they are. I see women 'dumbing themselves down' in the presence of men because some men like it that way. Some women fear they might join the ranks of the ever present 'unloved'. Of course this is a sweeping generalisation and not all relationships are like this. There are many men who are at ease with the notion of women as equals. I don't think that reform is happening quite as fast as it should be.

In conclusion, equal pay (not yet), equal rights, equal job opportunities and an end to the oppression and the tea-toweled enslaved masses, Nah, what a big fuss just to get men to wash the dishes every so often! (Thank the Goddess for irony).

## Chapter 2

### Inequalities in the art world

Society is changing but is the art world out of breath trying to keep up, or has it resigned itself to the fact that life's a bitch? In an ideal world women and men alike would have taken a hammer to the glass ceiling and the two genders would be equal pegging, but this has not happened. In this chapter I am going to ask why hasn't Feminist art progressed with the times?

The sad fact is sex discrimination still occurs in the art world. Women artists make only one third as much as their male counterparts. One study conducted in 1990 proved that while women constituted 53% of Arts Degree holders, 68% of art income was awarded to men. Men are the producers of 94% of museum acquisitions (Strawler, 1991). The discrimination does not stop here. Few women teach on the art faculties of art schools even though the clear majority of art students are female. The few women who are employed are employed in temporary, non-contracted positions as opposed to their male counterparts sitting pretty with secure jobs. It is common practice for exhibitions to be filled completely with white male work, leaving women of any other ethnic background doubly disadvantaged. Art museums exhibit few women artists. They average out a poor 15%. So what are the reasons for this?

One opinion for the obvious lack of female representation in art is said to be due to an inbuilt filter, which disqualifies female art on the grounds that it's being examined with male objectives. This is referred to as 'gender blindness'. Art critics also have a standard image of what constitutes 'Genius' and this image does not tend to favour or indeed place value on work that seeks to represent women's issues and a history of oppression.

As a whole, women artists also tend to use different media as opposed to the traditional method of oil painting.

"It was generally believed that females were incapable of genius on moral grounds" (NMWA, 1998)

Another popular view put forward is that feminist art has not progressed so much as it has stagnated. This view states that the word 'feminist' has become almost dirty and undesirable. The blame in its entirety for this is levelled at the radical feminists. One example of this extreme view comes in the form of a quote by Andrea Dworkin (1975), who said "I renounce those who hate women, who have contempt for women, who ridicule and demean women and when I do I renounce most of their art, the masculinist art." By saying things that most middle of the road feminists cannot relate to, even with the best intentions, Dworkin has alienated the female artists who are best equipped to fight inequality. In this sense feminists are taking the knife to feminism in a display of masochistic self-harm.

Another criticism of feminist art campaigners is that they demand equal opportunities at any cost, in some cases compromising quality and fairness. Feminist artists should be striving to be taken seriously and judged by the same standards as male artists. They should not be given opportunities just because of the new wave of positive discrimination, which seeks style over substance in the desire to quickly redress the balance. Whitney Chadwick (1990), expresses concern over this issue by saying 'feminist critics remain sensitive to the dangers of confusing tokenism with equal representation'.

However, there is hope that things can, will, and are changing. It seems that feminists sent out the message rather like dolphins and other women responded. Women artists are organising themselves and together with the women's movement they have been busy campaigning and lobbying.

Artists in the Y.B.A generation have shown that living through the 1980's in a 'politically dysfunctional society' has at least rubbed off on them. Artists such as Sarah Lucas and Grayson Perry are beginning to question convention within their work.

Politically aware art is beginning to pop up. An example of this is a group of artists who call themselves the "Guerrilla Girls". They have dubbed themselves 'the conscience of the art world'. They make posters, public appearances, and they use their art to demonstrate the unfairness of the current system.

They also have a successful website. 'with this website we wanted to make women artists angry as hell and not willing to take it anymore' (1985).

Like the flu, I think this sentiment is catching; it's good to see women getting angry again, perhaps they'll eventually get even.

I will be looking at Sarah Lucas and Grayson Perry in terms of their contribution to contemporary art. Sarah Lucas and Grayson Perry's work are bound together with a common and unmistakable thread. Both artists question convention and most importantly they both look at gender roles in their art.

## Chapter 3

### Sarah Lucas: Crude Crap, or Genuine Genius?

I first encountered Sarah Lucas whilst briskly strolling through the crowded rooms of the Tate. Amongst oils and finely crafted sculpture my eyes were transfixed in a two-way glare with a slightly butch, totally intense woman, with eggs for tits. Ever since then I've been hooked.

Sarah Lucas, born in 1962, was educated in the art of print making. Unsatisfied with this 'environment that breeds status quo', she soon found her feet in the notorious Goldsmiths College, South London. Goldsmiths is notorious for being the prime hangout of Charles Saatchi (art pimp extraordinaire), and famous for the sheer quantity of Y.B.A offshoots, 'the new wave of conceptual art'.

Lucas was slow to find fame, and initially this was hard for her to bear. She flat-shared with the now unstoppable Damien Hurst. Lucas's work definitely became angry and her resentment 'stung like poison' as she felt that it was her sex, rather than her art that was letting her down. 'One of the reasons I was interested in the feminine was because I wasn't successful'. Perhaps her sex could be to blame, as we all know the art world is "malestream" or it could just be that her work isn't very good? Sarah Lucas's work is very much about gender roles. Her art opposes and challenges the prudish model of women and Lucas 'lets rip with innuendo, and sexually explicit themes'. Women can be rude!

Some of Lucas's work could be interpreted as statements about the way in which women are treated. She examines the moral issues and the different representations and gender differences and roles in art. She highlights her audience's sometimes crude beliefs about gender. Her toilet theme may be a statement about how women are 'dumped on'. Lucas has translated this into a literal form.

She has a talent for de-sexing the sex organs and highlights these forms as, crude, simplistic and presents them in a derogatory way. For example in the piece "au naturel" Sarah Lucas uses a mattress, fruit and a bucket to represent a naked couple. The bucket is symbolic of women's genitalia and is actually quite sad. It is devoid of emotion and reflects a state where love has gone and all that is left is a gaping hole. This sort of art makes you wonder about the kind of experiences that would form such cynical beliefs about love, sex and the body. There has been speculation about Sarah Lucas private life and her friendship with Tracey Emin. People assume that Lucas is gay and her sexual orientation, I think in some cases is just taken as a given. I think however to be gay would be far too easy, and this butch, tough exterior is all part of an act, do you have to be gay to be butch? And do you have to be butch to be gay?

Sarah Lucas's style has been linked with great artists such as Marcel Du Champ and Picasso, who like Lucas used everyday objects thrown together to make a meaning or new object. Someone once said of Lucas, that she turns quantity into quality. Sarah Lucas plays with the concept of women as objects of desire and turns this statement back on its head. Her piece 'bunny gets snookered', is clever in that all the components work well together. The snooker club setting in this situation symbolises masculinity with a typical working class mans' pastime of drinking and competing. Bunnies are a representation of woman, or what women should be for these men, soft, fluffy, long legs in stockings, sexy like the playboy bunny's for male gratification and pleasure. In this case however, Sarah Lucas has made the bunnies into lifeless forms, slumping on the seat, and sloppy with legs open, no longer sexy or useful.

However it makes you wonder whether the audience is supposed to deduct these things from Lucas installations. After further investigation I found this was not the intended use or meaning of these tights. 'When I had the shop in 1993, I made an octopus out of tights stuffed with newspaper and really liked it. I started making a hare and tortoise out of tights but it never worked out.'

At this point I also wonder whether I have wandered onto a path of utter narcissistic pretentiousness and whether I have become like the people in the art world I so despise, people who 'talk shit', and conceptualize everything.

These doubts aside, I keep looking for the point of Lucas work, (Does art have to have a point?), the overriding factors, which makes her work thoughtful, proof of her feminist beliefs, or at least something worthwhile. I am looking for the same thing I found in the 'guerrilla art', produced by other substantial feminist artists.

If there is any meaning in Sarah Lucas work I don't think it was born out of a need to test gender roles as I initially interpreted. I think it's more of an unconscious reflection of class, and the gender aspect is an offshoot of working class life.

Sarah Lucas lives and grew up in deprived inner city London, and I think many aspects of her work are a reflection of the class struggle. E.g. Page three girl pasted on the walls Great dates' (1990) is a product of the working class trash tabloids, such as 'The Star', 'Daily Sport' and 'The Sun' newspapers, where news would be a novelty. More evidence of a cigarette smoking, larger drinking culture.

Since studying Sarah Lucas's work and reading Grayson Perry's "cycle of violence", I have seriously gone off contemporary art, and retreated into the colour, beauty and style of Xenia Hausner's work. Work to be appreciated without the need of a thesaurus! However one piece of Sarah Lucas's work I can say without hesitation is my favorite, is the photo hanging from a wall in the Saatchi gallery. An image of a dirty, dark, dank, toilet with the question, 'Is suicide genetic painted inside the bowl?' This work makes me feel sad and despairing for people who live in poverty, the supposed 'underclass'. I interpreted the question, is suicide genetic? as a statement about poverty being passed on through the generations. Are people who live in these environments more likely to commit suicide than those who come from a privileged background? I don't know whether it was Sarah Lucas's intention to present this work as being about class or society and to be honest I don't really care.

I think one massively important point to be made about Sarah Lucas's work is that it can be lighthearted and funny, and to be honest this is one of few things going for it. In the days when Lucas and Emin shared a shop together, her work reflected how they enjoyed each others company. It was reported that they both used to consume criminal amounts of alcohol, (nothing like a bottle of vodka to get the creative juices flowing!) At this time Lucas made t-shirts with slogans such as "love comes" and "sperm counts"! When the shop closed down Tracey Emin burned the remaining stock and exhibited the ashes in her show at the 'White Cube'. In return Lucas made a concrete headstone entitled "headstone for Tracey" with the phrase 'fuck me while I'm sleeping' inscribed on the front. Lucas may have had fun whilst making her work, but it's quality is debatable.

My initial ideas about Sarah Lucas have changed. Even though Lucas was influenced by the writings of Andrea Dworking, a radical feminist, I think her art as being feminist and profound fails on both counts. Ironically I think Lucas also fails as a conceptual artist, considering conceptual art is all about concept above aesthetics and making the viewer think about work on a deeper level. Sarah Lucas's work is all about aesthetics but instead of pretty pictures it's ugly and gruesome in parts. Any thought is short lived. Once you get the joke, it's not funny or witty, and it does not leave an imprint. Unfortunately for me, with Sarah Lucas, I found an oyster, went looking for a pearl and was disappointed to find it was a just another oyster after all, to be superficially appreciated, and unceremoniously thrown away with the Tuesday pickup. In conclusion Sarah Lucas: crude crap or genuine genius? Well it depends on who's looking.

## Chapter 4

### All That Glitters - Grayson Perry

After 'Turner Prize' success, Grayson's running as fast as his little red shoes will take him into the arena of seriousness. This guy has made it, but will I get a hold of Perry's pigtails in time to gain an insight into this complex and creative creature, or will the art world gobble him up before you can say 'bullshit'?

Well, they say Essex does strange things to people and perhaps Grayson Perry, or shall I say, Claire, is a good example of this. Grayson is a transvestite potter, and a very good one at that! He was not always dressed in pink satin, so I should trace his beginnings and ponder who or what formed such a man.

Grayson Perry grew up in sunny Chelmsford and attended a tight-knit, highbrow, all boys school, after showing considerable promise with his S.A.T scores. Grayson Perry's home-life was shaky and his mother married a verbally abusive milk man. But on a positive note, at least they had strong bones!

When looking at Grayson dressed as Claire, the immediate reaction is to not only ponder, where does he keep his wallet? But also to ask what would drive a 43 year-old man to dress as a baby girl proudly donning a pink party dress?

One explanation for this has come through the medium of therapy. According to Perry, *'while growing up certain emotions are felt to be inappropriate and are suppressed, they then become transferred, eroticised and fetishised'*. It seems Perry is yet another, 'mother blaming child of Freud'. However, the explanation for Perry's transvestitism is that, as a young boy he didn't have the emotional intelligence to acknowledge that he felt vulnerable and sensitive and he was unable to express it. More subconsciously he saw that girls could express such feelings and they could wear dresses and openly show their vulnerability. So perhaps Grayson's alter-ego Claire enables him to demonstrate and express his 'feminine side.'

If this theory boils down to complete 'freudian crap' it illuminates a sad fact that men are as restricted as women in terms of gender roles. They are not allowed to express their feelings of vulnerability and impotence.

In this case men should have the same rights as women. No one would look twice if a woman strutted her stuff down the streets of London, wearing a suit, (traditionally men's clothes). They might be taken more seriously because they resemble the appearance of men. In comparison a man dressed as a woman, would be mocked, made to feel shame, have expectations of their sexual preference and certainly not considered as a suitable father.

It is important to understand the Grayson Perry's personal life because it so overlaps with his professional life and even spills quite wholeheartedly into his work.

I think Grayson Perry represents the schizophrenic in us all. In his case, Grayson seems able to compartmentalise all aspects of himself in accord with his wardrobe choice. You would be just as likely to see the Grayson Perry dressed in jeans on his throbbing masculinity of a Harley, as you would see him touching up his lippy. Strangely, he seems a rounded, 'sorted' guy. Grayson is many things, a transvestite, a man's man, a husband, and a father. To him, being a potter is a further extension of the many things he can be all at once.

I love Grayson Perry's work for a number of reasons. Mostly because you don't get what you expect. I like this aspect of his creations. I think that as conceptual art becomes less conceptual and more formulaic. It's important to have artists who are talented and unpredictable. Another good example of this 'conceptual art' trend are Jake and Dinos Chapman. Their refusal to talk about themselves or allow a camera into their lives during the Turner Prize is a strategic move, which keeps their reputation mysterious and trendy. I suppose the problem with being in a market with such a high turn over rate, and one which places such significance on being individual, life beaten, and trendy, is that your 'individuality' eventually becomes 'normal'. Then as an artist you become undesirable and therefore unsaleable.

However, the thing I really like about Grayson's work is that it questions conventions and has a sort of 'fuck you, I'll do what I want' attitude about it. Grayson Perry explores a number of themes in his pots, which are usually inspired by society as a whole. Anything considered taboo that is sensationalised in the trashy tabloids, Perry exposes in his work. He explores paedophilia, in 'I've found the body of your child' and 'sexual violence'.

Grayson himself once described his pots as being stealth objects, in that from a distance they are beautiful, and acceptable. Perched on a mantelpiece in the depths of Maida Vale sit ceramics with more than just a glaze on the front.

The titles of the pots are sometimes more revealing than the imagery. The piece 'Posh Bastards House' refers to a generation of pretentious new upper middle class, who choose to spend their surplus capital, on furnishing their homes with the new, 'must have art' by the newest contemporary prodigy. People who can afford to splash around £40,000 for a pot, which is rather a lot, even if it is nice and glossy. Sadly his art like most others who become famous is beyond the reach of ordinary people.

Another contradiction in Perry is that he seems to despise the people he sells his expensive pots to. However, with a house in posh Islington and a daughter in public school the faint whiff of socialism that seeps from his pores seems rather misplaced. I wonder what his therapist wife would make of that! Class is yet another theme in Perry's work.

My favourite piece of ceramics by Grayson Perry is his big clay penis. The penis has the names of the 10 biggest and wealthiest companies scratched into the clay. It is entitled, 'Big Swinging, City Dicks' I like this because it re-affirms an existing preconception I harbour about the people who have the best jobs. The men who I sit next to on the tube, wearing Armani suits, with a scent of arrogance far stronger than any designer cologne. It is true that these jobs belong to men.

The actual act of making pots is interesting, and from making a couple myself using coils, I can understand more about what sort of man Grayson Perry actually is. Pot-making although relaxing and satisfying, requires more patience than I possess. The process is laboured and Grayson's ideas take weeks to skillfully execute.

I don't know if I have proved Grayson's artistic competence, but I am totally convinced of his ability. For something to be both beautiful and thought provoking it scores full marks with me.

## **Chapter 5 - Its all tits and arse, I tell you.**

### **'Sixth form girl causes anarchy at local school with tits and arse saga'**

*Jimmy a thirteen-year-old pupil in 7m stood gazing up at the big structure, his eyes burning with disbelief, he saw tits, and lots of them. Female members of staff rushed to the scene, outraged with what they saw, they ran screaming, 'It's obscene, its exploitation, cover my eyes" something had to be done, the very moral fibres of this prestigious school were at risk, a school which prided itself on quality and voluntary obedience, a 75% pass rate and a sports award is nothing to be sniffed at after all! Yes, something had to be done.*

*Caretakers were called for at haste, departing from their play station and coffee they came clutching numerous power-tool's and nails, they had a job to do, standards to uphold and they did the place proud.*

My aims for this personal study were to explore the ideas of feminism and gender roles in contemporary art, I don't think it is fair that women are discriminated against and I find images in the 'Daily Sport' degrading, however the truth is they are there, sitting in the newsstand everyday, for anyone to see. I find it ironic that my personal study caused such offence among female members of staff, so much so that my work had to be nailed together out of view. These women do not complain about these papers, the fact that anyone can buy them or the negative effects this has on women as a whole. I suppose I should be pleased, it is good for art to piss people off, and this is what contemporary art does, cause a stir.

It also raised the interesting issue of censorship. In nailing together my work these women were censoring me, but by demanding page three be stopped, I would be censoring them and disallowing people freedom of choice, if these men want to exercise their freedoms by gawping at scantily clad women, then who am I to say they can't or shouldn't, maybe its about respect and being realistic.

I have learned a lot from this personal study, in this art I have been enthralled, disgusted, confused and excited, but most of all it got me thinking, which, fundamentally is what art should do and as far as gender roles is concerned, Grayson Perry is a good example that anything goes, accept me or fuck off.

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### Books

'Sarah Lucas' by Matthew Collings  
'Guerrilla Tactics' by Grayson Perry  
'Cycle of Violence' by Grayson Perry

### Gallery Visits

'Saatchi Gallery' Southbank London.

### Articles

'Frock Tactics'  
Sunday September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2003