To Be Honest, Tracey…

A (re)Search for Love in Art Theory

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Contents

I

BEGINNINGS

"So long as I have questions to which there are no answers, I shall go on writing. How does one start at the beginning, if things happen before they actually happen?"

— Clarice Lispector*, 'The Hour of The Star'*

I began by listening…

I began this project by listening to recordings of the artist, Tracey Emin, speaking about her life, her art, and the music that has influenced her. I listened to these interviews, stored on the '*BBC Sounds'*[1] website, over and over again. Sometimes very slowly; absorbed in the process of transcription. Sometimes missing minutes of dialogue by letting myself think about something different.

The project centres around Emin's 2004 feature on '*Desert Island Discs*,'[2] and also her 2021 guest appearance on '*This Cultural Life*.'[3] Although I only include short excerpts from these interviews in my research, I originally transcribed both programmes in full.

I could truthfully say that I didn't know which fragments I would use, and so wanted my material to be complete and accurate. But, more honestly, I spent as much time on the transcripts as possible because I enjoyed it.

The longer I spent studying Emin's speech patterns, and hearing her tell the same stories, the more I felt like I was listening to a friend. Rather than becoming desensitised through exposure, unexpectedly, I felt even more connected to what she was saying. To treat speech in this abstract, sound-focused way was like making a drawing; the form of the dialogue became as familiar as its content. Peaceful, intimate, and intuitive, I discovered a love of listening for its own sake.

Listening to Emin's reminiscences often meant traversing my own memories, especially those marked by an encounter with her art. When the transcripts were complete, I began to sit without the artist's voice in the background and consider these experiences in more depth. I tried to start at the beginning. *What was the first artwork by Tracey Emin that I ever encountered? What could I remember about the experience?* I tried to be honest but it was difficult. I discovered that I could write each story a hundred different ways, while including almost nothing verifiably true.

Honesty, as truthfulness, seemed to require a level of detachment. While attempting to recall past thoughts and feelings, I found myself wrestling with ulterior, incidental, but distorting senses of the present. I was shocked at how often my first draft of a memory — that I would initially consider a balanced account — might appear to me the next day as self-critical, guarded , or simply a lie. This made me think of Joan Didion.

Although I haven't read any of her fiction, I have almost all of Didion's collected essays and memoir on my shelf. I fell in love with her writing as a teenager for its detached quality; her ability to look at herself 'as if through glass' (this is written in one of my notebooks). It is the separation that gives her work its cool, clear, lucidity.

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1 'BBC Sounds.' *BBC Sounds Website*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds .

2 Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. 'Tracey Emin,' 28th November 2004. *Desert Island Discs*. BBC Sounds. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009368q

3 Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. 'Tracey Emin,' 30th October 2021. *This Cultural Life*. BBC Sounds. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0011467 .

A 'New Journalist,'[4] in the 60's and 70's, the act of saying 'I' was integral to Didion's reportage. In her essay, *'On Keeping a Notebook,'*[5] she suggests that, although it may make us feel guilty to indulge our perspective, we can never escape it.

> *"The common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable "I"."*[6]

The paradox is that to recognise the 'I feel/I felt,' the writer must get far enough away from these sensations to focus them accurately. Didion's capacity as a camera-like recorder of her own experience strikes me as an almost superhuman, spiritual, achievement — like astral projection. In *'Why I write,'*[7] she describes images literally 'shimmering,' for her, as they would for a medieval mystic.[8] To make my own writing resemble Didion's discerning, ascetic 'I,' was much harder than I had imagined.

In the beginning, paragraphs presented themselves easily, as if pre-written; flowing in one unbroken stream, almost like an incantation. At first, the direction of my memories and their details seemed obvious and singular. It was only when I stopped writing and began reading that I could sense distortion. *Could that really be something I thought fifteen years ago? How can I access that kind of information from so far away?* Sometimes I would use emails accounts and newspaper archives to fact-check myself, and discover that I had testified to something historically impossible: *I could not have seen that artwork at that age in that museum because there is no record of it ever being there for me to look at*. These instances were unnerving. As soon as my story was confirmed false, I would feel the memory fray, only to immediately re-configure itself around these new facts. *So, where did I have that experience? And when? If it wasn't — then maybe it could have been? Yes…* Once re-constructed, the new narrative would seem as solid and real as the previous version had appeared. Only I could know that this was not the original.

In her treatment of memory, Didion dismisses any honest search for the why-when-where. To produce an accurate account is not, or cannot be, the motivation for recording fragments of her own life.

> *"I have abandoned altogether that kind of pointless entry; instead I tell what some would call lies"*[9]

> *"not only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters"*[10]

"Remember what it was to be me*: that is always the point*."[11]

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[4] Grimes, William. (2021). 'Joan Didion, 'New Journalist' Who Explored Culture and Chaos, Dies at 87.' The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/23/books/joan-didion-dead.html

[5] Didion, Joan. (1966). 'On Keeping a Notebook'. In *Slouching towards Bethlehem : Essays*. New York: Picador Modern Classics. 2017.

[6] Didion, Joan. (1966) 'On Keeping a Notebook'. 136

[7] Didion, Joan. (1976). 'Why I Write'. In *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*. HarperCollins UK, 2021.

[8] Didion, Joan. (1976) 'Why I Write'. 50

[9] Didion, Joan (1966). 'On Keeping a Notebook'.134

[10] Didion, Joan. (1966) 'On Keeping a Notebook'. 134

[11] Didion, Joan. (1966) 'On Keeping a Notebook'. 136

I began by reading…

The title at the top of the document saved as, '*MRes Reading Diary,*' is Susan Sontag's, '*Against Interpretation*.'[12] I first read this essay in October, weeks before I listened to the Tracey Emin interviews.

> *"The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical; art was an instrument of ritual. …The earliest theory of art […] proposed that art was mimesis, imitation of reality…the mimetic theory, by its very terms, challenges art to justify itself."*[13]

Usually when I'm enjoying a book, I like to skim sentences — alternating between easy focus and distraction. Some texts lend themselves to this kind of reading by welcoming, and leaving space for, different ideas or explorations. Others are more cramped, and designed to be navigated only one way; towards a specific end.

'Against Interpretation' is powerfully worded, its rhetoric reminds me of political speeches and manifestos. In staging a defence that begins with Plato, Sontag recalls philosophy in its Socratic sense — as the art of winning arguments.

In her essay, 'Why I Write,' Joan Didion theorises that writing is always an act of aggression.

> *"In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying* listen to me, see it my way, change your mind."[14]

Sontag sets out here what Didion would describe as an *undisguised* imposition:[15] a set of statements rather than allusions. Nothing is tentative, everything is 'clearly' or 'obviously' so.[16] The essay is divided into 10 sections. I read every line at least twice and made detailed notes to make sure I fully understood her reasoning. As her reader, I find myself located in the tension: *to be for, or against, interpretation?* I do also enjoy this kind of reading, but sometimes it can be tiring.

> In 'Against Interpretation,' Susan Sontag criticises the separation of 'form' from 'content' when discussing art. She is especially concerned with the overvaluation of content (and therefore the underestimation of form). She traces this obsession with content, or, '*what X is saying*,' back to Plato's original questioning of art's value as something mimetic (an imitation, designed to deceive).[17] Sontag declares that, '*from now to the end of consciousness we are stuck with the task of defending art,*'[18] and that the project of interpretation is exactly this; a defence. Art can't stand

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[12] Sontag, Susan. (1964). 'Against Interpretation'. In *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. 3-14. London: Penguin Classics, 2009

[13] Sontag, Susan. (1964) 'Against Interpretation'. 3

[14] Didion, Joan. (1976) 'Why I Write'. 45

[15] Didion, Joan. (1976) 'Why I Write'. 45-46

[16] Sontag, Susan. (1964) 'Against Interpretation' 6, 9

[17] Sontag, Susan. (1964) 'Against Interpretation' 3-4

[18] Sontag, Susan. (1964) 'Against Interpretation' 5

> on its own so we need to support it with meaning. The issue is specifically with interpreters who claim to know the 'real,' or 'true,' meaning behind the work.[19] Sontag theorises that this claim is an act of vandalism; an excavation that leaves art hollow. [20]

I liked the adjectives in 'Against Interpretation,' I made lists of them in my notes — Marx and Freud are AGGRESSIVE and IMPIOUS. To support interpretation is OBTUSE, ONEROUS, INSENSITIVE, REACTIONARY, IMPERTINENT, COWARDLY, and STIFLING — these incisively chosen words correspond to Sontag's conclusion, where she calls for *vocabulary* as a means to engage with art. Good criticism, instead of providing interpretation, is ACCURATE, SENSITIVE and LOVING.[21] The essay ends by prescribing society a return to the senses, as a radical move against the over-sensory, and so desensitising, nature of the modern world.

Overall, I liked the essay, and I sensed that Sontag was mostly right. I was fascinated by her solution of love and vocabulary. Still trying to find a direction for my research, I began to consider different kinds of vocabularies; vocabularies of images for example, or of names. The idea of pursuing a linguistic thesis was daunting — there are so many philosophers of language, how could I know where to start reading? How could I know when to stop? — *Maybe I should think about love instead?* — It seemed like I should be able to do something with 'Against Interpretation,' but there was no obvious course of action. Although I resonated with her ideas, I wasn't sure that it was Sontag who had convinced me of them, it just seemed to so happen that we agreed.

Before reading, I read…

At the beginning of this project, I wrote an email to my tutors titled '*IRP Proposal*.'

> *'I believe 'Against Interpretation' offers a direct challenge to theories of art that postulate capability as a function of knowledge, and interaction with art as primarily an exercise of de-coding.'*

Although I don't make this clear in the email, I said, '*I believe,*' because I had not actually read Sontag's essay yet. Although I began my (re)search by reading, before beginning, I chose what I wanted to read. Therefore, before reading, I must have had some idea of what I wanted to find.

The theory of art I am referring to, the one I believed Sontag would challenge, is that of Pierre Bourdieu. I had read 'The Love of Art *(L'Amour de L'Art)*'[22] for my last essay and saw his text as a point of departure — even if I didn't know exactly what I thought to be true about engagement with art, studying Bourdieu's work had raised some interesting problems.

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[19] Sontag, Susan. (1964) 'Against Interpretation' 6

[20] Sontag, Susan. (1964) 'Against Interpretation' 7-10

[21] Sontag, Susan. (1964) 'Against Interpretation' 12-14

[22] Bourdieu, Pierre. Alain Darbel. (1969). *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public*. Translated by Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

> Throughout the 1960's, sociologist and statistician Pierre Bourdieu sought to compare 'aesthetic competence' to levels of schooling. To support this project, Bourdieu and his team collected an impressive quantity of data from across Europe, mainly in the form of survey responses. To some extent, the results expressed a strong positive correlation between education and engagement with art — i.e. the more education a person has received, the more likely they are to visit galleries. However, in his ironically titled work, Bourdieu speculates that education is the *only* determinant of aesthetic experience.[23] He declares that to engage with an artwork is always to decode, or to interpret,[24] and therefore must depend entirely on a person's grasp of the corresponding academic languages — there is no such thing as the art *loving*, only the art *educated*.[25]

Before reading Bourdieu, I had come across his statistics in John Berger's, '*Ways of Seeing*.'[26] I read this for the first time when I was 16, nearly half a century after its publication. Despite our relative ages, I remember thinking of the book as something new. In my own education, I had never come across an essay written in pictures — to leave out words completely felt powerfully subversive.

> In the first chapter of *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger shows how the church of art and its virtues — beauty, truth, genius, civilisation, form, status, and taste — are a mythology deliberately designed to exclude.[27] If the majority believe an original artwork to hold mysterious and irreproducible power, then its market value is assured, and the wealthy continue to control any surrounding narratives. Manipulation of history, according to Berger, is the ultimate pursuit of the ruling classes when it comes to art.[28] In our age of photography, 'bogus religiosity' is an oligarchy's final defence in delaying a democracy of image.[29]

In this chapter, Berger highlights Bourdieu's work via a table of responses to the question: '*Of the places listed below, which does a museum remind you of the most?*' 'Church' is by far the most popular answer, especially from those in jobs requiring fewer academic qualifications.[30] I remember finding this shocking, essentially because I loved to visit art museums and didn't like going to church — if I felt in a gallery the same way I felt in church, I wouldn't go to galleries; I wouldn't like art at all. Before reading Berger, I had assumed that my own love of art was something intrinsic; 'Ways of Seeing' showed me that the bounds of my perspective, the way I feel, is always dependent on the society that I live in, and my experiences within it.

Looking for an essay topic, I revisited *Ways of Seeing* and found '*L'Amour de L'Art'*[31] in Berger's footnotes. I remembered how impressed I was by this section the first time I read it, and wondered if statistical analysis might be the best methodology for my own research. As a key reference in Berger's

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[23] Bourdieu, Pierre. (1969) *The Love of Art*. 42

[24] Bourdieu, Pierre. (1979). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Nice, R. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966 *2*

[25] Bourdieu, Pierre. (1969) *The Love of Art*. 113

[26] Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.

[27] Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. 11

[28] Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. 24, 29

[29] Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. 21

[30] Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. 24

[31] Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. 24

text, I had expected Bourdieu's sociology to read as its precursor. Published within just a decade of each-other, I was surprised to find fundamental differences in their theories.

> Unlike Berger, Bourdieu treats specific academic knowledge as having real and natural value. If there really *is* a hierarchy of ideas, some more valuable for engaging with art and some essentially worthless,[32] he concludes that *love* is in fact the exclusive mythology[33] — we can only love what we understand, and only in the ways we have been taught to do so.
>
> The aim of sociological projects such as *L'Amour de L'Art* was to explain the dominance of the upper classes in gallery spaces, and to challenge the notion that 'good taste' is some kind of divine gift.[34] Beyond institutional schooling, Bourdieu theorises that the '*instruments of appropriation*' necessary to engage with culture are not found in the classroom — education begins with family life.[35] Bourdieu suggests that a child gains access to these tools through early and direct contact with art, for example: valuable artefacts in the home; a positive introduction to galleries and museums at a young age; 'well' educated parents, etc. It is in this way that 'cultural capital' is always necessarily reproduced with class.[36]

To present art as a purely mystical, uniquely transcendent, phenomenon, does not capture its relationship to social structures of oppression. However, to situate art as *entirely* bound by class and academic experience, means that it can only ever reinforce inequality. Through reading *The Love of Art*, I became concerned by the universalism of statistical approaches — particularly the way in which a language of trends and distributions obscures individual narratives. In my essay, I called attention to the life and work of Clarice Lispector, as a real-life story that Bourdieu's sociology does not account for:

> *Forced to leave Ukraine in the 1920's in order to escape persecution, Lispector's family emigrated to Brazil, where, for much of her childhood, they struggled to remain out of poverty.[37] This difficult and traumatic beginning does not resemble the conditions that Bourdieu declares essential to aesthetic engagement. Despite this, Clarice Lispector went on to become one of the most celebrated writers in South America.[38]*

I couldn't say how Lispector had defied Bourdieu's trends, but the very fact of her biography was enough to prove something was missing here. I discovered an impulse to retain art as a hopeful and subversive entity — with potential for, at-least partial, transcendence. Bourdieu's results suggested that I would need to look outside of specific academic knowledge, and consider other ways to engage with art.

I tried not to think too much…

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[32] Bourdieu, Pierre. (1969) *The Love of Art. 45- 46, Distinction, 2*

[33] Bourdieu, Pierre. (1969) *The Love of Art. 108*

[34] Bourdieu, Pierre. (1969) *The Love of Art. 4*

[35] Bourdieu, Pierre. (1973). 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction.' In *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change* 71-84. London: Tavistock Publications. 57

[36] Bourdieu, Pierre. (1973). 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction.' 57

[37] Moser, Benjamin. (2015). 'Glamour and Grammar.' In Clarice Lispector, *Collected Stories*. London: Penguin Classics, 2015. xvii-xviii

[38] Moser, benjamin. (2015) 'Glamour and Grammer.' ix

In the bookshop, 'Against Interpretation,' caught my attention. Its title echoed my own feelings about academic frameworks like psychoanalysis, compositional theory, and certain versions of art history. If this book provided proof of their obsolescence, then maybe I could begin to uncover some alternatives. Additionally, Susan Sontag was a writer that I was not only familiar with, but whose writing I loved.

Similarly to *Ways of Seeing*, her works, '*Regarding the Pain of Others,*'[39] and '*On Photography*,'[40] were some of the first pieces of art theory that I really enjoyed. I admired the intelligent, authoritative, but ultimately readable, way in which she expressed her ideas. Writing several decades later than 'Against Interpretation,' the style of these pieces is less classical. Hesitant to commit to one viewpoint, and instead cycling through a varied and sensitively considered series of references, reading these essays felt like a conversation with someone both interested and interesting. Sontag provided a welcome antidote to seminars spent on much older, more cryptic, texts; and reminded me that philosophy could come in many forms.

Love letter aside, in choosing this material I was aware that Sontag's name carries academic weight — especially in art theory. Although less of an imposing character than Plato or Kant, Susan Sontag is a widely acclaimed Intellectual Figure with a heavy portfolio of published work. Her thinking continues to wield significant authority within the present day art world, and I knew that her name in my bibliography would read to many as appropriate and persuasive — more than an unknown author of only one or two papers; or something unreferenceable, like the unpublished thoughts of a friend. The reason I read Sontag in the first place was because she appeared on the reading list of my undergraduate degree.

I tried not to think too much about the irony of reading academia to discover its downfall, and bought the book.

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[39] Sontag, Susan. (2003). *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 2003.

[40] Sontag, Susan. (1978) *On Photography*. London: Allen Lane, 1978.

I began by accident…

After 'Against Interpretation,' I got stuck, I stopped reading. I was looking for a job and thought that I might find some answers through my work — if I got involved in a community art project, maybe I could speak to some people about my research, and learn about art education that way. I applied to a few places and no-one got back to me, so I started at a cocktail bar instead.

The interviews were an accident. I had recently moved to Hackney, and one of my new flatmates had a radio, so I started listening to radio programmes again.

When I first heard John Wilson interview Tracey Emin, I hadn't read anything for my dissertation in almost a month. Instead, I was spending most of my time learning to etch in the print workshop at university.

As far as I can remember, I have always loved to make things — especially to paint and draw. My relationship with art has been a consistent presence in my life, closely tied to my sense of self. In many ways, my love of art is something I rely on. This is, in part, is why I didn't choose to study Fine Art beyond school-level.

At 17, I decided there was too much to risk by pursuing art as a career. I didn't know anyone who had gone to art school — no one from my family had ever considered it — and it was hard to imagine myself there. Ultimately, I worried that to take the thing I most enjoyed so seriously might ruin it; that I might get bored or disillusioned or burnt out. I went to study Physics and Philosophy instead but, as much as I loved the course, I always wondered what would have happened if I'd chosen differently.

One reason I came to CSM for postgraduate study was to satisfy this curiosity. What would it be like to go to an art school? Would it put my relationship with art under stress as I had imagined? Or would it strengthen it? I hoped that the course — MRes Art: Theory and Philosophy — could act as a bridge between my present self, and the teenager who spent all of her free time in the art classroom. This kind of 'keeping in touch' is what Didion cites as her ultimate reason for keeping a notebook. She warns that, if neglected, our forgotten selves may:

> *"turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them."*[41]

In my second year, I was excited to be asked to produce a print as part of an MA fundraising scheme. I was enjoying my theory-based study, but I knew that to actually *make* art at university would be a different experience. Etching had long been something I'd wanted to try, and I immediately fell in love with the print workshop. There was a strong sense of community; lots of people to talk to and art to look at. I hadn't done anything so technical in a while and I found it therapeutic.

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[41] Didion, Joan. (1966) 'On Keeping a Notebook'. 139

Although I tried to watch the induction videos, I discovered that the best way to learn here was through actually producing a print. Despite using the same basic tools — chemicals, hot plate, water baths, printing presses — the different ways of processing an image seemed endless. Gradually, my own practice became specific to me, while remaining interspersed within, and connected to, everyone else's. It was a nice break from the library. I took the etching plate back to my flat so I could continue it there, and decided to find a radio programme to listen to while I worked.

In the back of my mind, I had been considering the Royal Academy as a route to my thesis. A historically intimidating — literally academic — institution, now run by the YBA's (Young British Artists) in their 60's who, prior to the landmark RA 'Sensation' exhibition in 1997, were perceived as a group of anti-academy rebels.[42] I thought that maybe if I studied this apparent metamorphosis I could learn something about theoretical shifts and academia itself. This was partly why I chose to listen to, '*This Cultural Life*: '*Artist Tracey Emin talks openly and honestly to John Wilson…*'[43] Tracey Emin satisfied the criteria for study; both as an especially rebellious member of the YBA generation, and a Royal Academician.

More honestly, I chose to listen to something thesis-related, not because I thought it would bring me closer to a dissertation, but because it made me feel less guilty. Although I was enjoying learning to etch, there was a part of me that felt I was wasting time —*If I'm here to write, I should be reading, not printing*. By listening to a Tracey Emin interview while I scratched at my plate, I wasn't just messing around at the print workshop, I could claim to be doing *research*.

Besides guilt, kitchen radios, and printing presses, I chose this recording to listen to because I am haunted by Tracey Emin. Since I first discovered her work, Emin's name has appeared and reappeared. Fragments of her writing, things she says in her films, or immortalises in her neon signs, often arrive in my thoughts unannounced:

'I Felt You and I Knew You Loved Me'[44]

'Like The Moon You Rolled Across My Back'[45]

"Everybody wants something small to look after. Everybody in the whole world. Because everybody wants to be more powerful than they are."[46]

This kind of symbolic haunting: images that present themselves with eerie regularity and timing, is what I understand Didion to mean by '*the shimmer*.'[47] Something that shimmers seeks you out equally as much as you seek it. The shine I experience is that of a signpost or an arrow, something inanimate that speaks to you unexpectedly — something you might trust to lead you, or that you suspect contains an echo of what is ahead. A private theme or pattern, Tracey Emin's name shimmers for me. As does that of Joan Didion, Susan Sontag, Clarice Lispector, *Francesca Woodman, Audre Lorde, Frederico Garcia Lorca, Diane Arbus…*

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[42] Brooks, Adams. et al. (1997) *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*. London : Thames & Hudson in association with the Royal Academy of Arts, 1997.

[43] 'Tracey Emin.' *This Cultural Life*. BBC Sounds: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0011467 .

[44] Emin, Tracey. 'For You.' (Liverpool Cathedral, 2008 — .)

[45] Emin Tracey. 'Like the Moon You Rolled Across My Back.' In *A Journey to Death*. (Carl Freedman Gallery, April — June 2022)

[46] Emin Tracey. 'How It Feels (1996).' In *A Fortnight of Tears*. (White Cube, Bermondsey, February — April 2019)

[47] Didion, Joan. (1976) 'Why I Write'. 50

“You can’t think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. You stay quiet. You don’t talk to many people and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate the cat in the shimmer, the grammar in the picture.”[48]

[48] Didion, Joan. (1976) ’Why I Write’. 50

‘I’ *began…*

So far, I have explored several narratives, or biographies, of my project: ‘*Tracey & I: Portrait of the Artist by a Millennium Baby.*’ This is another text that, in some ways, tries to start at the beginning; to trace the origin of a dialogue between Tracey Emin and myself.

Within the first 100 words of her final novel, ‘*The Hour of the Star*,’[49] Clarice Lispector asks,

> *“How do you start at the beginning, if things happen before they happen? If before the pre-prehistory there were already the apocalyptic monsters?”*[50]

I was born just before the beginning that was New Year’s Eve 1999. The 21st Century has never been short of apocalyptic monsters, and so far, my own 20’s have been characterised by an increasing sense of doom. Beginning literally with the COVID-19 pandemic, but sustained by a multitude of other anxieties: *the climate crisis, unregulated technologies, political unrest, social polarisation…* If I were to ask how any of these things began, I would not expect just one answer.

I have said many times in ‘Beginnings’ that ‘I’ began this project. We tend to think of the ‘I’ as something singular — one person (*one story, one origin*). At least, when we write something down about our ‘I,’ when we express ourselves, this is what is implied: that we are offering a single narrative ‘I *x…*’ , verifiably true or false. If we are telling the truth, then we are being honest; anything else is a lie.

In ‘Tracey & I,’ I tell a series of stories about my experiences with Emin’s art. I always intended this piece to be part of my dissertation and, once it was complete, I began to think about what else needed to be said — or what else I wanted to say.

In a significant sense, I hoped my ‘portrait’ could speak for itself; communicating, discursively, many of the problems and solutions I have explored during my time on the MRes. However, there was still something about the writing that made me uncomfortable. It seemed to have come out of nowhere, and I was struggling to justify it as research in the usual sense. ‘Beginnings’ began as an attempt to retrace my steps, and to express something about my writing similar to Sontag’s ‘*how it is what it is*.’[51]

In a document titled, ‘*Writing exercises,*’ I have 22,157 words. Most of these are first drafts of narratives about myself and Tracey Emin. Unlike the slow, methodical construction of the transcripts, these stories had accumulated quickly.

The initial catharsis of turning memory into text would become discomfort as I worried about what I had written: W*as it true? Was it necessary? Why was I writing it? Did I even want it to be read?* Certain passages and phrases would snag on my conscience, and resurface at times when I wasn’t

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[49] Lispector, Clarice. (1977). *The Hour of the Star (A hora da estrela)*. Translated by Benjamin Moser, (2011) London: Penguin Classics, 2014.

[50] Lispector, Clarice. (1977) *The Hour of the Star.* 3

[51] Sontag, Susan. (1964) ’Against Interpretation.’ 14

working. On a train, or at a concert, I would find myself dreading looking over *that paragraph* again. The instant relief of remembering that I didn't have to; that I could just take it out — delete it, change it — was followed by the guilty sense of deliberately concealing something. I tried to keep the fragments as simple as possible; a string of facts. But even in this cautious form, when layered next to Emin's apparently candid, un-edited, speech, they appeared to me as posed and polished — false.

Trying to reconstruct the steps that had lead me to 'Tracey & I,' I started to write:

> '*I began by listening…*'

However, as soon as I'd finished one account, another would appear: '*I began by reading…*' , '*I began by accident…*' their constellation reminded me of all of the stories I hadn't told in, '*Tracey & I,*' and I decided, this time, to include as many narratives as possible.

In recent years, theory has needed to find new ways to accommodate parallel, interconnected narratives like these. The popularities of words like '*palimpsest,*' and '*rhizomatic,*' have grown near-exponentially since the 80's.[52]

> A palimpsest is a manuscript that has visibly undergone some process of attempted erasure, with new material written over the old.[53] We can identify a palimpsest by the traces of earlier writing that remain on the page after effacement.
>
> A rhizome is a type of root system. When something is rhizomatic, it has many, perhaps infinite, beginnings, which simultaneous function as points of conclusion.[54] Any search for *the* beginning of a rhizomatic structure will ultimately fail.

These terms express complex histories and futures; texts belonging to people who write and erase. There is a mortality to these structures; a healthy sense of transience, irreverence, and human error. 'Beginnings' is in some ways an attempt to expose the writings beneath 'Tracey and I,' because I wanted my work to embrace this growing sense of entanglement, and simultaneity.

For me, 'Against Interpretation' means to be against existing hierarchies of ideas about art, and especially those that claim to be the *true* story, or the *true* meaning. When we view narratives as ultimately singular, and binary true or false, this enables artwork to be used as a tool to reinforce inequality. By accepting narratives as multiple, and speaking about art, not in terms of *the* truth, but via personal truths — honesty — we disperse this potential for control, and begin new conversations.

> "A*ll the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born."*[55]

I began by listening, and I began by reading, and I began by accident, and I began…

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[52] 'Palimpsest, Rhizomatic.' "Google Books Ngram Viewer." (2023.) *Books.google.com*. June 11, 2023. https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Palimpsest%2Crhizomatic&year_start=1963&year_end=2019&case_insensitive=on&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=4.

[53] 'Palimpsest.' *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 27, 2019. https://www.britannica.com/topic/palimpsest-manuscript. (Accessed June 2023)

[54] Colebrook, Claire. (2021) 'Rhizome.' *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. 22. Oxford University Press. January 2021

[55] Lispector, Clarice. (1977) *The Hour of the Star.* 3

Finally, 'I' am — my beginnings are— only one centre of this project. A dialogue, by definition, can't grow from a single point. An interview requires at least two 'I's. Tracey Emin was born in 1963,[56] the same year as my mum. Emin's art is categorically — candidly, frankly — concerned with her own origins and experiences.

In 1993, at the age of 31, Emin's first solo exhibition, titled 'My Major Retrospective,' was installed at the White Cube.[57] Some have suggested that at this point there was, perhaps, '*not a lot to be retrospective about*.'[58] Retrospective exhibitions are usually held towards the end of an artistic career, or even after the artists's death. To *begin* with a retrospective is unusual, even unheard of.

By 1989, Emin had obtained a first class degree in printmaking at Maidstone College of Art, and a MA in painting from the RCA.[59] Paradoxically, the artworks Emin produced during this period of formal study (roughly 1983-89) featured in 'My Major Retrospective' only via a selection of tiny photographs.[60] Just a few years before her first solo show, Emin had destroyed the majority of her previous work with a sledgehammer, in the wake of two difficult and distressing abortions.

> *"I smashed it all up and I threw it in rubbish bins and I got rid of it all I said 'right that's it art's over…' Because after being pregnant I understood the true essence of creativity for myself, so then I couldn't justify the art that I was making. It was just more objects filling up the world, more rubbish, more stuff, and I couldn't justify it*."[61]

Displayed in the White Cube, alongside this 'photographic graveyard',[62] was a collection of over 100 objects — accumulated ephemera from Emin's life so far. Teenage diaries, letters, childhood keepsakes, and newspaper clippings; all acting as material evidence to bear witness to personal experience and trauma. These are the events, the artist declares, that demand our retrospective evaluation.

Placing actual, recorded conversations had by Emin about her life and her work, alongside my own encounters, demonstrates how multiple stories — that may stem from significantly different perspectives — can congregate around the same pieces of art and music. My ultimate hope for 'Tracey & I:Portrait of the Artist by a Millennium Baby' is that it accommodates the ghost of a third conversation, connecting the two parallel accounts, the nature of which is very much dependent on, and begins with, the reader.

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[56] Lauson, Cliff. (2011). 'Love is What You Want.' In *Tracey Emin: Love is What You Want*. Tracey Emin, Curated by Ralph Rugoff. London : Hayward Publishing, 2011.

[57] 'My Major Retrospective 1963-1993.' *White Cube*. https://www.whitecube.com/gallery-exhibitions/my-major-retrospective-1963-1993 . (Accessed June 2023).

[58] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004) 'Tracey Emin,' *Desert Island Discs*. BBC Sounds. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009368q . [24:27 24.:35]

[59] Emin, Tracey. (2005). *Strangeland*. Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 2005.

[60] 'My Major Retrospective 1963-1993.' *White Cube*.

[61] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004) *Desert Island Discs*. [21:40 - 21:59]

[62] 'My Major Retrospective 1963-1993.' *White Cube*.

II

TRACEY & I:

Portrait of the Artist by a Millennium Baby

'*I Never Stopped Loving You*,' Tracey Emin

Introducing…

20% of RA Academicians[63] were born in the 1960's, with less than 8% born in subsequent decades.[64] Almost 1/3 of this Academy award-winning generation appeared in the notorious 'Sensation' exhibition, held at the RA in 1997.[65] Whilst researching this phenomenon, in an attempt to understand the current forces behind this institution, I came across a recent episode of the BBC podcast, *This Cultural Life*.

In this episode, John Wilson interviews Tracey Emin RA — a key contributor to 'Sensation' — about the art and music that have influenced her work. The format of the programme is very similar to the BBC's celebrated, *Desert Island Discs*, but the recent broadcast contrasts starkly with Emin's 2004 interview with Sue Lawley.

Over 20 years have passed since '*My Bed*' was not awarded the1999 Turner Prize and the 21st century arrived. Attitudes towards the YBA's (Young British Artists) — all now approaching their 60's — and particularly towards Emin, have changed drastically. Coincidentally, this period of time also represents my own childhood and adolescence.

Throughout the enormous shifts in public opinion that have allowed these artists to become establishment, a new generation has been forming their identities. What follows is a reflection on the influence that Tracey Emin has had on me, and the dialogues her work has produced within myself. By combining fragments from my transcriptions of these interviews with my memories of encounters with her artworks, I am attempting to give a layered impression of how engagement with art can constitute formative experience, rather than merely an interpretive exercise.

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[63] November 2022

[64] 20.33% and < 7.63% respectively. Statistics produced using information provided by the Royal Academy on their website: https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/royal-academicians

[65] 29.16%. Statistics produced using information provided by the Royal Academy: https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/royal-academicians and list of featured artists in Brooks, Adams. Et al. (1997). *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*. 49

BBC 'Desert Island Discs: Tracey Emin', (2004)[66]

S: Sue Lawley (1946), age 58
T: Tracey Emin (1963), age 41

BBC 'This Cultural Life: Tracey Emin', (2021)[67]

J: John Wilson (1965), age 56
T: Tracey Emin (1963), age 58

(Opening theme: '*By the Sleepy Lagoon: Valse Serenade*,' by Eric Coates plays)

On weekends and in the school holidays, my parents would sometimes take us to Liverpool Cathedral. A huge, gothic, building made of enormous blocks of red sandstone, it made a powerful impression. From the top of the bell tower, the city was laid out like a map and I loved that you could see our house from up there — ant-sized and several miles away.

> S: My castaway this week is an artist, her work is sensational. Indeed one of her most famous works, a tent called, '*Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*', was a centrepiece of the famous Royal Academy exhibition, '*Sensation*,' in 1997. Two years later she was shortlisted for the Turner Prize for work which included '*My Bed*,' an evocation of a period of breakdown, including stained knickers and used condoms. She attracts critical approval and vitriol, not always in equal measure, and takes, not unreasonably, some delight in the controversy that her art engenders. Much of it is based on her own complicated life; she was raped as an adolescent, became promiscuous, and has attempted suicide. Like it, or loathe it, the impact of her work is impossible to ignore. Queues form wherever it's shown around the world and she has a room dedicated to it in Tate Britain. '*My struggle*,' she says, '*has been with my art and my own personal survival, and it's all linked*.' She is Tracey Emin. [68]

The Anglican is one of two cathedrals in Liverpool that sit at either end of a single street. The other one, the Metropolitan, I thought looked a bit like a spaceship, and in my opinion had better windows. I liked how colourful the stained-glass at the Anglican was, but the frames were so big and far away that I couldn't see any of their pictures. Just below them, looking fragile when set against so many tonnes of stone, was a 20ft long, pink, neon sign that read, '*I Felt You and I Knew You Loved Me*.' This is the first artwork by Tracey Emin that I remember seeing.

In 2008, Liverpool was awarded the European Capital of Culture and I was eight years old. Emin made the neon, titled, '*For You,*' as part of the Liverpool Biennial that year. I didn't know this. I didn't even really think of the sign as something that had been made by someone, or as an artwork (in the way that I would have recognised paintings in galleries as artworks). The material stood out to me, I

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[66] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004) 'Tracey Emin,' 28th November 2004. *Desert Island Discs*. BBC Sounds. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009368q . Transcript by Helena Beese.

[67] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021) 'Tracey Emin,' 30th October 2021. *This Cultural Life*. BBC Sounds. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0011467 . Transcript by Helena Beese. ([podcast interview]

[68] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004). '*Desert Island Discs: Tracey Emin'* [00:00 – 01:15]

hadn’t seen neon strip used in a church before and I thought it looked cool. I considered the message to be a simple one, I don’t remember spending time thinking about it. For my eight-year-old self, it was just there — a piece of my city and our cathedral. I accepted it happily. The thing I liked most in the Anglican was the whispering arch, where you could speak quietly to a stone wall and your friend would hear what you’d said from the other side of the room.

> J: This is Margate, where you grew up, did you was was there any access to, museums, galleries, culture?…
>
> T: N-…
>
> J: When you were growing up...
>
> T: Erm no no see, I didn't even know art museums really existed. In my mind, an art museum was where, the Mona Lisa lived or something, it wasn't somewhere where you could go. But saying that, we used to sp-spend time in Turkey I went to Topkapi museum and, to, loo-oh-ahh Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque in, in Istanbul so, I had this sort of idea of, this other kind of culture. But it was part of my culture because I was half Turkish. And I remember always being *completely totally,* spellbound by John the Baptist’s hand. So, my upbringing and my art, wasn't like you know I didn't come from a sort of upper middle-class background.[69]

I think I also saw one in the Walker Art Gallery, maybe around the time of the John Moores Prize that Emin judged in 2012. I don’t remember what it said but I remember the purplish glow on the white wall it was displayed on. By this time I knew the name — ‘*Tracey Emin*.’ I was beginning to collect artists names. It made me feel proud and grown up to point at things in the gallery and say, ‘*that’s a Picasso*,’ or, ‘*that’s a Lucien Freud*.’ I didn’t know Tracey Emin made art like this and I found the literal signpost nature of the neon relaxing; it gave me confidence. And ‘*Tracey*’ was an easy enough name to remember. My parents had a friend called Tracey, and I liked watching Tracy Beaker on TV. If I ever saw a piece like this again, I knew I would be able to point at it and say, ‘*that’s a Tracey Emin*.’

> J: How aware of that, were you…
>
> T: (small laugh)
>
> J: As a, whatever you were what 9, 10 years old I guess...
>
> T: I-I was, I was a little bit younger. Being a spoilt child to having absolutely nothing? *Oh my God* was I aware of it. My friend Carl Freedman always says that I'm very Princess and the Pea, and people go, ‘*God Tracey’s so sort of like such a Prima Donna, was she like this when she didn't have anything?*’ And Carl always says, ‘*no, she was a lot worse!*’
>
> J: (laughs)
>
> T: But, I was always creative. And I think I sort of immersed myself into making things.
>
> J: Did you *imagine* at any age that you know you could be an artist? That you could...
>
> T: No, erm…
>
> J: Make a living as an artist.

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[69] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021) ‘*This Cultural Life: Tracey Emin*.’ [02:43-3:33]

> T: I never thought about making a living at anything, as a child I was always very unhappy and quite – there was a dark-darkness hanging over me. There was a part of me that was very introverted. And I think that part of me was the artist side in me. Because being an artist, is *really lonely*. You cannot be an artist, you know hanging out at the giant party, it's never going to work well there's a part of you that has to go deep inside like I sort of say inside The Cave? And if you don't go inside The Cave, you're never going to make any art. You *need* to be able to *stand,* and see yourself, to be able to make the art. [70]

I was 16 when '*My Bed*' arrived in Liverpool, the first time the piece had been on display since the 1999 Turner Prize. I was born mid-way through its debut exhibition, on Thursday, December 30th, 1999; exactly a month after Steve McQueen's victory was announced. I had been visiting the Tate Liverpool, where the artwork was being shown, with school or family since I was very young. I continued to go regularly — by myself or with friends — to look at the collections, see exhibitions, take photographs, and sit in the cafe.

At 16, I knew about Emin's bed, but I'd mostly heard it ridiculed — an example of the crude and nonsensical nature of modern art, made by a woman who was famous for being drunk on television. An article published in the Liverpool Echo at the time is titled, '*5 mucky things to look out for on Tracey Emin's My Bed…*' and concludes: '*Here are five dirty things for you to spot on the bed when you see it at Tate Liverpool:'*

1. Empty booze bottles

2. Cigarette butts

3. Stained sheets

4. Worn knickers

5. Condoms

I remember Emin's bed as being very close to the door of the gallery, in the centre of the room. I remember liking it. I imagined her waking up in the morning, stretching, looking around, and proclaiming, '*This Is Art!*' For a teenager, I was very tidy. Cleaning and curating my room made me feel I had agency and control. I would clean my room just to sit in it. I would definitely clean my room before doing my art homework. The idea that art could be conjured without setting up the paints, before someone had even made their bed, made me extremely happy. I did not associate the piece with breakdown; I thought the bed and its detritus looked like the product of an exciting life. At this age, sex and alcohol were objects I aspired to, and my idea of depression looked more like the Edward Hopper painting, '*Morning Sun, 1952*,' in all its sterile loneliness. I was fascinated by the transformative power of the artist, or the artist as a magician, and these ideas filled me with hope and desire. I don't think that liking 'My Bed' was an act of rebellion, I didn't choose to like it, but it definitely made me feel I was rebellious and I loved that feeling

> T: Okay, so this is good.
>
> T & J: (both laugh)

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[70] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021). '*This Cultural Life: Tracey Emin*.' [05:41-06:54]

T: I left school, when I was 15 as soon as I was legally able to leave school I moved to London, with a holdall with two David Bowie albums and some clothes, an-…

J: At 15?

T: Yeah. And then when I worked at Kensington market I started to get in with some really cool people? And they all went to Saint Martin's… and Royal College of Art, and then I I-stayed in a squat on Warren Street and they were all - they all went to art school and everything and I wanted to go to art school. I went back to Margate and w-I was homeless, completely homeless, my mum wasn't there anymore, we didn't have a house. And I had to live in DHS Bed and Breakfast I was like, 17? And that was probably one of the lowest points of my life being completely homeless and having food vouchers. (Deep breath) So what I did was I applied to foundation course at Medway College of Design, and *lied* on the form — I said I had O levels. And I got an interview, and I got in. And then, as I was going out the door they said, '*leave your certificates with the… office*.' And I said, '*what certificates?*' I'd not - I couldn't lie...

J: (Chuckles)...

T: I could lie on the paper, but I couldn't lie to their faces I said '*I haven't got any*.'

J: You had no qualifications?

T: None. No.[71]

I was living in student halls in Camberwell, South East London, when I first went to a Tracey Emin exhibition. I was 19 and travelled alone on the 42 bus to see 'A Fortnight of Tears.'It was a cold day with a white sky. Bermondsey looked very grey and the White Cube was as white and brutal as its name suggested. The colourlessness filled me with dread.

The first room was covered in photographs that Emin had taken of herself in bed, as a series titled '*Insomnia*.' I noticed a boy around my age, facing away from the artwork, reading a poetry book with the cover held up. This made me feel nervous and I left the room quickly. I was in a phase of questioning why I went to galleries, and wondering how to tell if I *really* liked art, or if I had just picked up the habit somewhere; maybe because I liked what it meant to like art. I suspected that I might be performing myself and this unsettled me. Emin's self-portraits definitely seemed performative; many of them posed to show her cheekbones, and with Schiele-esque pouts.

(Excerpt from '*Aladdin Sane*,' by David Bowie plays)...

T: I had this boyfriend and, he said to me, '*you know, Bowie's really influenced by Egon Schiele?*' So I said, '*what's… Egon Sheila?*' He said, '*oh es-this er, Austrian artist...*' blah blah blah... '*and all the Bowie album covers are taken from his paintings*,' like Lodger or... Heroes or whatever — this was like later. So, off I went to the local bookshop, and, found a book on German expressionism, and looked up Egon Schiele, and then went, '*wow! This is my kind of art*.' Because, previously to that it-all I knew of was like Andy Warhol or…Picasso. Suddenly there was this ne-whole new — something I could really relate to. And it all came about through, David Bowie. But meanwhile, David Bowie's lyrics and David B-his whole ethos - meant that you could be, different, and you could be outside. But you you didn't have to be a victim to that.

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[71] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021). '*This Cultural Life: Tracey Emin*.' [06:57- 08:13]

You could use all of that and you could be, creative with it. It was about being OK about being outside.

J: And about art.

T: And about art, definitely. It wasn't just about *pop*, it wasn't about money, it was about creativity of the soul of living with it and David Bowie seemed to be living - and like his thing is different, personas... and all that kind of thing I loved it. [72]

I rushed through her watercolour sketches, overwhelmed by the number of them displayed. Looking back, I think it was their intensely personal nature that I found hard to swallow. As many people do, I had been keeping sketchbooks and journals since my early teen years and, at this time, I considered the personal to be equal to the private. If I were to even think about showing any of my drawings or writings, I was afraid they would lose their realness — lose their quality as self-expression and become an unconscious attempt at impression on others. I imagined that my journals were really me because I could not be trying to impress myself. *But could I?* Were Emin's diary-like sketches always intended to be displayed at the White Cube? If so, with a stage and audience in mind, how could they not be a kind of performance?

S: But this this one's a a wrist slashing... you, what did you do you jumped off a harbour wall huh?

T: (deadpan) Yeah but it's easy to jump off a harbour wall I'm a really good swimmer.

S: (small laugh) So you knew you weren't really attempting suicide...

T: (dead serious, curt) No, I could've drowned quite easily. Don't get me wrong. If you're really drunk and it's like 12 o'clock at night and you've got all your clothes on, but I've been jumping in this harbour wall since I was 9. My feet went into the sand like (blows softly) pfft… and then I came back up, like a cork. And I was remember looking up and feeling, stupid, and really insignificant and *really tiny,* and there's all the stars. So what, could have been a tragedy actually ended up being something beautiful, and I think it's one the, first true times in my life that I understood about nature, completely.

S: Record number 2.[73]

Her paintings impressed me, I thought they bled beautifully — pink, red, and brown, against parchment toned canvases, Tipp-Ex white washes, and ballpoint pen blues and blacks. They were much bigger than the watercolours and, with my own painting restricted by my tiny student room, I longed to make beautiful, bleeding things this size.

S: (laughing) But then it all went downhill again after that didn't it 'cause you went to the Royal College of Art to study for an MA you weren't very happy and... then you had an abortion and…

T: Yeah the Royal College of Art it's I always say the best thing about the Royal College of Art, is that letter — saying that you got in, after that it goes downhill. And I also I was an *appallingly* bad painter and I got in to do painting. So I'd already it was all very difficult for me...

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[72] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021). '*This Cultural Life: Tracey Emin*.' [28:08-29:40]

[73] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004). '*Desert Island Discs: Tracey Emin*.' [09:45-10:30]

S: You were a good drawer though weren't you...?

T: Yeah I'm really good drawer...

S: You are, yeah...

T: I've got, actually quite a good painter now after as well, 18 years later, slogging away at it.

S: But it wasn't just that you weren't getting on at the RC I mean you also your personal life was going wrong everything went downhill you had a couple of abortions... [74]

I had watched '*How It Feels (1996)*' in a small dark room at the end of a corridor before entering the main gallery, and found it very disturbing. I had never heard anyone talk like this about abortion. A taboo subject at home, we'd not even been taught the basic mechanics of the procedures in school. I had a vague idea of the horror of 'backstreet abortions,' but had absorbed the sanitised view; that any malpractice in this sector was something that existed *before* our supposedly enlightened, feminist, era. In the 21st century, we didn't have to worry at all about unplanned pregnancy — contraception was readily available, as was the morning after pill, and abortions were strictly a matter of medicine with few emotions involved — practical and painless. Emin's film stood so strongly at odds with what I had been taught about the world, that I could barely process what she was telling me:

That doctors and politicians and men who might say they love you, really want control of your body. That even if you are pro-choice and understand the necessity of abortion rights, you might struggle to make the right decisions for yourself, and grieve the event. That it can be botched, extremely painful — even fatal. That you will receive little to no aftercare. That you will feel obliged not talk about it.

J: But for so many people you know y-ask somebody in the street about Tracey Emin they may — probably — still associate you with, '*My Bed…*' or the other work, the tent, which is called, '*Everyone I Ever Slept With, 1963-1995*,' do you think the painting has been overlooked?

T: No, I think... I've been overlooked. I think people didn't understand the seriousness of my work over the last 20 years. I think they just thought I was some sort of narcissistic, deranged, screaming banshee. Like my films, ok, someone said to me, '*Oh my God I saw your film, why-*'Why I Never Became a Dancer.*' I didn't realise how serious it was*', you know, about… abuse and all that kind of stuff. And I said, '*well w-where was you 20 years ago when it was being shown everywhere?*' 20 years ago, I was accused of being narcissistic, and, moaning, moaning like, about myself. When I *wasn't*, I was make - still am! - making work about rape, making work about abuse, making work about heartbreak. It's so strange![75] […]

'*How It Feels (1996)*' is a desperately bleak film and Emin expressed herself with a rawness and honesty that I had not yet encountered in anyone. To avoid accepting what this film suggested, the enormous truths I had not been told, I rationalised that she might be lying, or, at the very least, dramatising for effect. In denial, I concluded that the size of her bronze sculptures proved she wasn't really grieving — that it was all for show. '*If I was grieving a baby, I would've made something smaller. And I would've buried it in the ground rather than put it in a gallery*,' I thought, not yet having any experience with abortion or grief.

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[74] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004). '*Desert Island Discs: Tracey Emin.*' [20:19- 20:57]

[75] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021). '*This Cultural Life: Tracey Emin.*' [19:17-20:17]

I left the exhibition feeling awful. There is a sequence in '*How It Feels*' where Emin is being filmed in a park, trying to coax a squirrel down from a tree. She turns to the camera and says,

> '*Everybody wants something small to look after. Everybody in the whole world. Because everybody wants to be more powerful than they are*.'

I could not stop thinking about this for days. Evidently, I have not stopped thinking about it.

> S: Next piece of music, what is it?
>
> T: Okay it it's the Clash and er so 'Should I Stay or Should I Go,' I'm godmother to Mick Jones's daughter Stella, so, I'd like to say hello Stell! (laughs)
>
> S: You're name dropping again.
>
> T: Yes I am.
>
> T&S: (both laugh)
>
> (Record #4, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go,' by the Clash plays)[76]

The next spring, I couldn't go to any exhibitions. Locked down for the first time because of the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than leave London like my housemates, I chose to stay in Peckham and study for my second year exams. Although much of this new reality was difficult to accept, I was excited to try living alone. I had never been completely alone for more than a few days, but I imagined that for the most part I would like it.

At first it felt like a luxury. I had endless free hours to fill and a whole house to myself; an impossible dream in London. But after a few weeks the novelty faded, and the quietness of the house — something that before I had barely noticed — became an everyday thing I feared. I started listening to the radio for company, and especially the BBC recordings of their long running programme, *Desert Island Discs*. It was here I first came across Sue Lawley's interview with Emin.

Since it was first broadcast in 1942, *Desert Island Discs* has had several hosts, and a wide selection of their programmes from across the decades are available online. I was picking shows almost at random, mostly selecting either very recent or very old episodes. I liked *Desert Island Discs* for its nostalgic quality. Guests are invited to select eight recordings that they would take with them if they were to become castaways on a desert island, and the host conducts an informal kind of interview around these tracks. Given the nature of music to become woven with our identities, especially when attached to specific emotions and time periods, it is a medium for people — who are often already in the public eye — to share more personal stories while explaining their choices. I found the show made me very emotional. I would listen to it while copying out physics notes, and often had to stop halfway so that I didn't cry all over my equations.

Despite this marked intimacy, there is usually some distance maintained between interviewer and guest, and a natural sense that the most private details have been left out. This was the first of Sue

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[76] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004). '*Desert Island Discs: Tracey Emin*.' [22.02-24:18]

Lawley's '90's to '00's episodes that I had listened to, and I was shocked at how rough her approach was. Accounts of abortion, rape, child-abuse, and suicide, were all pulled to the foreground and interrogated without hesitation. But what upset me most was that Lawley seemed to be trying to push her own narratives, forcing Emin to fight for control of her portrayal. Her East-End-to-Margate accent contrasted starkly with Lawley's BBC received pronunciation, and the thought of having similar questions asked of me in such a cold, perfect, voice on national radio was nightmarish.

> S: But an underage girl gets raped, which is what happened to you, ya?
>
> T: Yeah, there must be loads of people out there that know this expression, I was raped I had sex against my will, but it was called being broken into, you were broken into, you went to school the next day you said well I was broken into last night, you didn't complain you didn't go to the police, it just carried on and on and on..
>
> S: So you sort of expected it to happen…
>
> T: That's what happens… yeah you, yeah you kinda think you know that it could happen you kind of expect it to happen because that's what happens.
>
> S: Just par for the course…
>
> T: yeah…
>
> S: Happened to all young girls…
>
> T: It happens to a lot of girls, yeah.
>
> S: Was it somebody they know?
>
> T: Yeah, I think there's quite a few no no no's involved, and please don't do that, and and a bit of pushing but, what it is is that the girls don't necessarily - like me, I didn't go I didn't go to the police I didn't complain…
>
> S: Why didn't you?[77]

I listened as Emin answered all questions put to her, despite being frequently interrupted. The aggressive interview style demanded that she remain on the defensive, but rather than closing up, Emin burst out of every box that Lawley built for her, cracking jokes and sustaining a powerful warmth. I thought she picked some great songs too. By the end of the interview, you sensed even Lawley's respect for the artist had grown far beyond her own expectations. I could not help but admire Tracey Emin.

I went to spend the rest of the lockdown with my family in Liverpool when I ran out of *Desert Island Discs* interviews to listen to.

(Record #2: 'Good Vibrations,' by The Beach Boys plays)

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[77] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004). '*Desert Island Discs: Tracey Emin.*' [8:46-9:30]

S: The Beach Boys and 'Good Vibrations' erm I gather that at the end of the film um 'Top Spot,' Margate gets bombed i-is that how you feel about it still Tracey? (starts laughing)

T: No it's not I mean… (suddenly quiet, serious) I said I would have had a tidal wave if I could have had one. But there wasn't in the budget…

S: Oh I see…

T: And the bombing of Margate it isn't me bombing Margate it's me eradicating the past and saying it's like (whistles softly) it's gone now..

S: So tell me…

T: And actually taking control of it.

S: Tell me about that early pass, 'cause in the very beginning when you live there as a very little girl you were quite happy weren't you?

T: No I don't think I've ever been happy.[78]

That winter, the country entered its second lockdown. I was in Peckham again but this time my housemates stayed too. We were all writing essays and attending university online, but we spent more time planning what we were going to have for dinner, and taking freezing walks around South East London. One of my friends and I started book swapping for something to do. Choosing from her bookshelf, I saw Emin's portrait on a dustcover and remembered the interview I had heard in Spring. The book I'd chosen was 'Strangeland,' a collection of Emin's writing organised into semi-chronological, memoir-like fragments. I was spellbound, I finished the book in less than a day.

I think what struck me most about her writing were the magical threads she uses to tie together unimaginable hurt, and to prevent her narrative from breaking apart. I imagined her as a storyteller in a minefield; collecting the pieces from each earth-shattering trauma, to build new worlds, and to make art. I was reminded of how I felt about '*My Bed*' the first time I saw it; how powerful I imagined the artist must be. I also remembered how difficult I had found it to accept the work she presented at 'A Fortnight of Tears,' when I was so afraid of her testimony. I felt confused, and a bit ashamed, by my response to that work now. It made me reflect on my own experiences, how and why I might begin to tell those stories. I felt more than ever the importance of listening to and believing people as you would hope to be listened to and believed.

J: And that's '*How It Feels*'…

T: Mm, yeah…

J: From 1996, w-were you making that… as a cathartic thing? Or was it to show people, to share that experience?…

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[78] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004). '*Desert Island Discs: Tracey Emin.*' [10:58-13:16]

T: It was to share the exp …

J: To help people?…

T: It w-it was both, it was cathartic and to share the experience, because, I was slowly getting over it as well and having a different perspective, over it….

(Excerpt from 'How It Feels (1996),' by Tracey Emin plays)

T: Some women, and they take the afternoon off work, they go to work the next day and they're cool as cucumbers. So what I'm saying is, it's different for every woman but I know one thing for sure, no woman wants to have an abortion, no woman, its Hobson's choice, that's why they do it, and, I think this is never discussed either, you know? No one gets pregnant on purpose to go and have an abortion, that's absolutely ridiculous, so I think freedom of choice, you know, all of these things I-I've been a massive advocate of, all my life, I think these things have to be discussed! And if my art, prompts that discussion then that's a really brilliant thing.[79]

Galleries reopened in May 2021, I moved to Kilburn for a change of scene at the end of the summer. Although I liked many things about NW, it felt very far from Camberwell and Peckham — my first home in London, and an area that I had explored obsessively over lockdowns. I gradually met more people North of the river, and one friend especially shared my interest in Tracey Emin. She was their favourite artist at the time, they had her books, and went to see all of her exhibitions. They had seen her exhibited alongside Edvard Munch at the RA - something I had missed - and saw this link as entirely natural, even obvious. I was fascinated, I had never known anyone who regarded Emin with more than neutrality, and I had met many people who said they disliked her. My friend and I would meet on Hampstead Heath, or at Camden Arts Centre, and we often talked about her. I felt my connection to Emin's work validated — it was as though, by taking this artist seriously, they were taking me seriously.

S: Tell me about your first record.

T: And so er as we're talking about art, my first record's John Holt and it's 'Riding For a Fall'. This one in particular I have it because it's the soundtrack from one of my films and the film was actually me riding across Margate beach, on a horse. And it was like Lady Godiva goes home, so that was…

S: You weren't naked at the time.

T: No I wasn't actually but I did have my shirt undone, (…)

(Record #1: 'Riding For a Fall,' by John Holt plays)[80]

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[79] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021). '*This Cultural Life: Tracey Emin*.' [38:12-39:42]

[80] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004). '*Desert Island Discs: Tracey Emin*.' [4:27 -4:46]

In April 2022 Emin's latest exhibition, 'A Journey To Death,' opened at the Carl Freedman Gallery in Margate and my friend suggested we should take a day trip there to see it. My dad grew up near Margate, on the Kent coast, but I hadn't been there for nearly a decade and had only a blurred impression of concrete and rollercoasters. I was excited to see the sea. After the train from St. Pancras, we got some chips and sat on the beach for a while. I hadn't been to see a Tracey Emin exhibition since 'A Fortnight of Tears,' and I remember feeling nervous. I didn't know what works would be exhibited, and I had never been to the Freedman Gallery. I imagined that there might be a film at the end of some dark corridor with the potential to shatter my worldview all over again. I knew I would watch it, but there was also the guilty thought that I might be too upset to go to the arcades afterwards, and I wanted to win something on the claw machines. I was disappointed in myself for not considering that a nice day out and 'A Journey to Death' might not be compatible things.

J: Because you knew.. or you thought you were on borrowed time you mean…

T: I thought I was on borrowed time yeah so I just thought instead of getting angry about it, I just thought I'm just gonna - because the cancer was that I had squamous cell cancer and it's a cancer that erm is so rapid and so fast that chemo can't catch up with it? So the only chance I had was the big surgery, and then there's a chance that they'd missed a bit. (whispering) But… they didn't (louder) they didn't, touching wood everyone (laughs)…

J: Touching the studio wood…

T: And, yeah, it was like, wow…

J: But…

T: You know…

J: Why and how did the love help get you through?

T: Because I think if I hadn't've felt love, I would've just floated off.[81]

At the gallery we were greeted with a list of works. I was relieved, there was no film. The first room held a series of lithographs in black and blue. They reminded me of the watercolours in 'A Fortnight of Tears,' only larger. My friend soon split off from me and I walked around the space alone. I liked the lithographs, but what I loved most were the titles: '*Even Saying Nothing Is A Lie*,' '*Like The Moon You Rolled Across My Back*.' For me, they transformed the works into timeless objects, like tarot cards, or illustrative plates in a haunted fairytale book. I had not read anything before the exhibition, and the title list, laid out like a poem, was the only text in the gallery. I did not know about her recent battle with cancer, and the major abdominal surgery she had undergone. I saw the bodies represented in her work as at once emptied and overflowing, ruinous and vulnerable. This oscillation, alongside the glowing texture of her enormous mono-prints, created a dream-like potentially. I found that I could flip the images like two sides of a coin, and tell multiple stories at once. Although 'A Journey to Death' implies a fixed end, far from deterministic, I found the work comforting in its many possibilities. I felt empowered.

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[81] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021). '*This Cultural Life: Tracey Emin*.' [25:15-25:56]

J: It’s something to live for?

T: Or, I could die, quite happily. Do you see? Because I'd accepted death, it meant I didn't have to fight death, which meant I could actually concentra-uh-or live! If you’re drowning, relax as much as possible, because you'll float to the top, if you fight against it and panic you will… swallow more water and you will drown. That's what I did, I thought I'm probably going to die so I’m just not going to panic I'm just going to just see what happens and I pop back up to the surface, that's what happened.

(music)[82]

I had enjoyed watching my friend walk around the exhibition, they did this slowly and seriously, like they were in a church. When we left, I asked what they thought and they said very sincerely that they had loved it. They bought a tote bag from the gift shop and we headed towards the arcades. The sun was setting by the time I gave up on the claw machines, and we could see the neon displayed across the beach on the pier — ‘*I Never Stopped Loving You*.’ It was pink, like the one at Liverpool Cathedral, and I realised that I might’ve also seen this piece as a child, without recognising the artist. There are lots of colourful lights on Margate seafront and the artwork looked at home there. We tried to go to the Turner Contemporary but it was closing, so we went to Sundowners instead and drank sex-on-the-beaches until it was time to get the train home. We decided to walk down to the sea before heading to the station and wrote our names in the sand, we took our shoes off so we could paddle. We had nearly reached the end of the beach when my friend saw that someone else had written something, it read:

TRACEY
+
Michelle
WOZ
‘ERE

We compared the handwriting with the signature on their new bag and decided that it had to be her. A never-before-seen, never-to be-seen-again Tracey Emin. It felt like a gift.

S: Give me the setting first of all, this is …

T: Margate.

S. This is Margate… Er, looking feeling bleak?

T: No, Margate looking absolutely beautiful, funnily enough. I tried to make Margate look like a superstar.[83]

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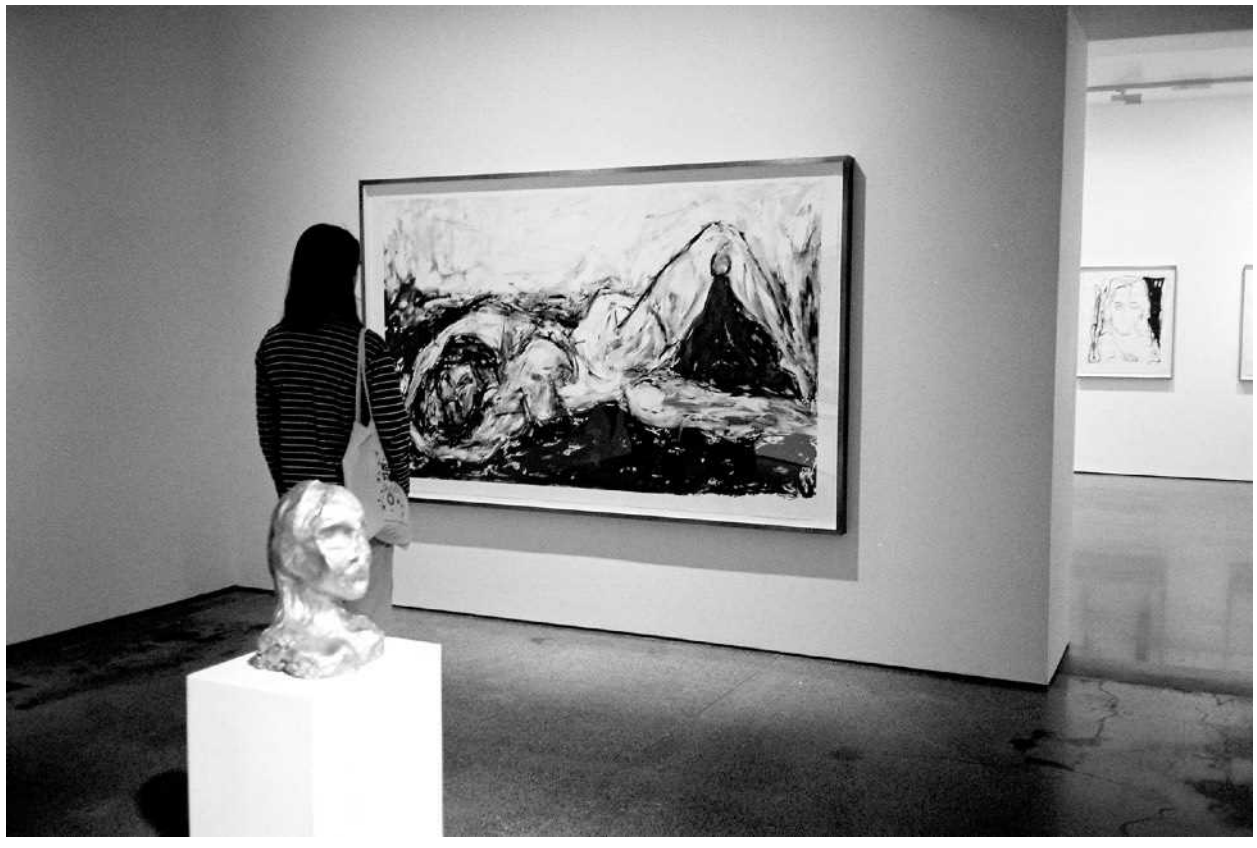
[82] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021). ‘*This Cultural Life: Tracey Emin*.’ [26:40-27:25]

[83] Lawley, Sue. Tracey Emin. (2004). ‘*Desert Island Discs: Tracey Emin*.’ [8:35-8:46]

That bit sounds made up but it isn’t. We listened to Lou Reed, ‘Perfect Day,’ all the way back to London.



‘*A Journey To Death,*’ Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate

‘*TRACEY + Michelle WOZ ‘ERE,*’ Margate Beach

III

THE WET AND THE WHY

“To think is an act. To feel is a fact. Put the two together — it is me who is writing what I am writing. God is the world. The truth is always some inner power without explanation. The more genuine part of my life is unrecognisable, extremely intimate and impossible to define.”

— Clarice Lispector*, ‘The Hour of The Star’*

The Wet

Moyra Davey's '*Index Cards*'[84] begins with a section titled 'Fifty Minutes.'[85] At the centre of this piece is an essay by Vivian Gornick containing her reflections on the post-war novels of Natalia Ginzburg. Davey is thinking about this essay while reading Ginzburg's, *Voices in the Evening*[86] on the Subway.

Writing as a New Yorker in the aftermath of 9/11, Gornick's 'Reading in the Age of Uncertainty,'[87] tries to uncover how an experience of war might have altered, or determined, Ginzburg's writing.

> *"A remarkable stillness suffuses the prose in each; a stillness beyond pain, fear or agitation. It is as though, in each case, the writer feels herself standing at the end of history—eyes dry, sentences cold and pure—staring hard, without longing or fantasy or regret, into the is-ness of what is."*[88]

Subsequently, Gornick describes her own experience of realising that her relationship to the past has been permanently altered; especially that she cannot access her memories of New York in the same way as before. It is through this experience that Gornick is able to understand what Ginzburg is missing — *nostalgia*.

'Fifty Minutes' is suffused with thoughts on nostalgia. Davey offers us a selection of possible meanings for this '*lovely and piercing word,*'[89] but resists any attempt to be explicit,

> "*To do so would be to kill off the memory and all the generative power it holds in my imagination. I keep it perpetually in reserve, with the fantasy that someday I may land there, in what is by now a fictional mirage of time and place."*[90]

Nostalgia is fantasy, nostalgia is fiction. Nostalgia creates memory and nourishes imagination. Nostalgia is before fear of collapse, nostalgia is faith in continuity. Nostalgia is guilty pleasure, nostalgia is unconsummated desire. Nostalgia is is not, '*standing at the end of history — eyes dry*'; nostalgia is a return to our beginnings. Nostalgia is the Wet.

Throughout 'Index Cards,' the tensions between personal narrative and detached observation are explored in terms of Wet and dry. Like her treatment of nostalgia, neither term is explicitly defined. Davey builds up meaning gradually, via a scattered series of impressions.

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[84] Davey, Moyra. (2020). *Index Cards: Selected Essays*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020.

[85] Davey, Moyra. (2006). 'Fifty Minutes'. In *Index Cards: Selected Essays*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020.

[86] Ginzburg, Natalia. (1963) *Voices in the Evening*. Arcade Publishing, 1989.

[87] Gornick, Vivian. (2001) 'Reading in an Age of Uncertainty'. Los Angeles Times. December 30, 2001. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-dec-30-bk-gornick30-story.html

[88] Davey, Moyra. 'Fifty Minutes'. 12

[89] Davey, Moyra. 'Fifty Minutes'. 15

[90] Davey, Moyra. 'Fifty Minutes'. 16

The Wet is nostalgia:

> "*The insistent preoccupation with narrating certain aspects of the discredited past*"[91]

But it is more generally a self-involved instance; 'I feel/I felt.' The Wet is physical desire — appetite, and is evoked in correlation with tears, broken-heartedness, grief, love, sickness, and guilt. The Wet is something that 'wells-up' and leaks into a text.[92] The Wet is without pretence, the Wet is a problem.

Immediately following 'Fifty Minutes,' a section titled 'Transit of Venus'[93] begins:

> *"7/27/10*
> *Begin to doubt the Wet.*
> *Why would I want this stuff made public?*
> *An old stumble: exposing the abject.*
> *This temptation goes way back."*[94]

The *problem* of the Wet is a major theme of 'Index Cards.' Whilst weaving reference with tangled notebook entries, correspondence, and memoir, Davey constantly questions what it is that these memories and feelings are doing in her writing. The Wet, according to Davey, is not a cleverly thought through literary device, but has a life of its own. If the dry is temperate, just, and truthful; the Wet is impulsive, out of control, and honest to a point of fault.

The Wet is the extent to which you expose yourself, '*live and naked,*' to the audience.[95] Davey wonders if this kind of honesty is always exploitative — a 'cannibalism' of self. She doubts the usefulness of her experiences in raw form, and feels guilt about what (she suspects) is an attempt to 'activate' them, '*in a strategic way*.'[96] At the end of 'Fifty Minutes,' there is a kind of disclaimer, or apology:

> *"I wanted to write this without ever saying "I feel' or "I felt,' [..] but I have not succeeded. I have used those expressions, or variations of them, at least ten times."*[97]
>
> *"And here's one final thing […] Had I been really honest, I would have told about how […]. Had I been really honest […] All right, there, I've said it. And I could say more, but for now that's enough."*[98]
>
> *"Fifty Minutes is a work of autofiction."*[99]

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[91] Davey, Moyra. (2011). 'Les Goddesses'. In *Index Cards: Selected Essays*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020. 110

[92] Davey, Moyra. 'Les Goddesses'. 110

[93] Davey, Moyra. (2014). 'Transit of Venus'. In *Index Cards: Selected Essays*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020.

[94] Davey, Morya. 'Transit of Venus.' 27

[95] Davey, Moyra. 'Les Goddesses'. 111

[96] Davey, Moyra. (2014). 'Burn the Diaries'. In *Index Cards: Selected Essays*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020. 170

[97] Davey, Moyra. 'Fifty Minutes'. 25

[98] Davey, Moyra. 'Fifty Minutes'. 25

[99] Davey, Moyra. 'Fifty Minutes'. 25

Autofiction is broadly defined to mean a genre of literature that combines autobiography with fiction.[100] On the surface, the two modes appear well defined. A memoir is true — it actually happened — and a novel is fictive — invented or made-up. What both have in common is that they are forms of narrative. An autobiography is not just an aggregate of biographical information, but a story where the central character is also the author. We are informed that, in fiction, characters need not contain any of the author and can be pulled purely from imagination.

Set in spaces normally interior to a persons life (the inside of her fridge,[101] the office of her analyst[102]) Davey's 'Fifty Minutes' feels confessional; a breakdown of the public and private. For the most part, the life of the narrator is uncannily similar to Davey's (*they are based in New York, they once lived in Hoboken, they have a son, they are writing a piece called 'Fifty Minutes'*…), but in other ways they are displaced. Bracketed and italicised [*directions*] inform readers that 'Fifty Minutes,' is a video;[103] leaving us unsure as to whether Davey is actor, director, or neither. The presence of 'off-screen voices,' and 'others in the room,' further disrupts the intimacy of the piece.

We are made aware of a performance or fabrication, although we may struggle to locate it — It would be a very convenient coincidence for Davey's analyst to *really* be called 'Dr. Y',[104] but it is possible. This kind of uncertainty, where fact becomes difficult or impossible to verify, is typical of autofiction.[105] It might be assumed that, in the face of such flagrant ambiguity, a reader will become sceptical about the text as a whole. How can we trust Davey's 'I' if there is no distinction between, '*what happened and what merely might have happened'*[106]?

On the other hand, we might ask if autobiography and fiction can *ever* be separated in this way. Is it possible to be entirely original when telling a story?

When discussing writing as a process, many novelists will speak about 'stealing' parts of their books from real people, places, and events; as though there were somewhere else they could have obtained these ideas legitimately. Presumably, although powerful, imagination is fundamentally determined by what we have seen/felt. I don't know how I would begin to write something *unlike anything I have ever seen*, and I don't think this is what can be meant by fiction. Imaginative writing is always informed by our experiences, at the very least as a limiting factor, but more often as a rich source of narrative material.

Conversely, can anyone be entirely truthful when telling their own story? A complete list of facts about a person's experiences is not what is meant by autobiography. For one thing, to read/write a *complete* set of facts about even a very minor occurrence in a person's life, would take more time than any of us have to spare (*how much does everything weigh? What are the positions of all the objects relative to each other?* etc.). Additionally, '*all we see*,'[107] as something dependent on our limited perspectives, is

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[100] Warner, Brooke. (2021). 'Autofiction: What It Is and What It Isn't.' PublishersWeekly.com. January 8, 2021. https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/pw-select/article/85269-autofiction-what-it-is-and-what-it-isn-t.html

[101] Davey, Moyra. 'Fifty Minutes'. 9

[102] Davey, Moyra. 'Fifty Minutes'. 10 - 11

[103] Davey, Moyra. 'Fifty Minutes'. 9 - 10

[104] Davey, Moyra. 'Fifty Minutes'. 11

[105] BETTER AUTOFICTION ARTICLE?

[106] Didion, Joan. 'On Keeping a Notebook.' 134

[107] Didion, Joan. 'On Keeping a Notebook.' 136

never *all there is* — we will only ever have a fragment of the picture to begin with. Because we can neither know, nor tell, the whole truth, there will always be some uncertainty about what *really* happened

More obviously, although our memories are not necessarily false, they are often unreliable. Memory has the potential to be doubly incomplete and, in general, only a small selection of facts will be retained about even the most important life events.[108] In 2012, scientists suggested that the *very act of remembering* distorts our recollections;[109] each re-telling of a story taking us further away from the truth. Crucially, the stories that we share about our experiences are rarely motivated by truthfulness per se. There is always an internal curator at work, whose ultimate stake is not in the truth, but in the narrative. We — (*I*) — find ourselves —(*myself*)— selecting and discarding details, manipulating the facts so as to tell a *good* story.

If — by our current definition — all autobiography is autofiction, and all fiction is autofiction, what can '*Fifty Minutes is a work of autofiction*' really mean?

I would suggest that autofiction does not merely mix true and false, but *embraces* this hybridity. Autofiction, like palimpsest writing, is honest about uncertainty, limitedness, and absence — it makes visible and celebrates the Wet. However candid your story, you can always be *more* honest. To write with this duality as imperative, is more truthful that the author who claims to be either identical to their 'I,' or absent from their writing.

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[108] Paul, Marla. (2012). 'Your Memory Is like the Telephone Game.' Northwestern Now. September 19, 2012. https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2012/09/your-memory-is-like-the-telephone-game.

[109] Paul, Marla. 'Your Memory Is like the Telephone Game.'

The Why

Like Davey, at many points during this project, I have been unsure what my memories and feelings are doing in my dissertation. However, the auspices of research continue to demand an explanation: *why write this, and not something else? What is your reason(ing)?* Didion concludes her own response to the '*why,*'

> *'had I known the answer to any of these questions I would never have needed to write'*[110]

For me, as for Didion, these essays were written not as products of my understanding, but as a way for me to explore ideas.

When I began working, I didn't have a thesis, and when people asked me what my research was about I would usually say, '*Tracey Emin*,' to avoid saying, '*myself*.' Both of these answers are still true; a large portion of my writing has been around — *about* — Tracey Emin and her artworks; me and my research. Through writing, however, the project has developed beyond 'Tracey & I'. In this final section, I'd like to make clear some of the intentions, or potentials — ends and beginnings — that this paper proposes.

Because I feel/ I felt …

In '*I began by reading…*' I suggested that I began this project by recognising a gap in Bourdieu's sociology, and said I wanted to uncover what he had missed. But it wasn't only Clarice Lispector that 'the Love of Art' had failed to capture. Honestly, in writings like Bourdieu's, I feel/I felt the absence of my own approach — 'I' was the lacuna.

In a structure where beginnings also function as points of conclusion, it makes sense that the text that most closely describes my experience, would also be the first 'theory of art' I ever read.

In 'Ways of Seeing,' John Berger makes reference to pinboards:

> *'Adults and children sometimes have boards in their bedrooms or living-rooms on which they pin pieces of paper: letters, snapshots, reproductions of paintings, newspaper cuttings, original drawings, postcards. On each board all the images belong to the same language and all are more or less equal within it, because they have been chosen in a highly personal way to match and express the experience of the rooms inhabitant.'*[111]

The living, growing, collage-like, spaces that Berger describes are an obsession of mine. I keep several at once — *the board above my desk, the walls of my room, the back of my phone, the front of my notebooks, the door of my fridge….* Berger suggests that '*logically, these* [spaces] *should replace museums*.' However, for me, the gallery already is such a space. Although the artworks here are fixed

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[110] Didion, Joan. (1976) 'Why I Write'. 57

[111] Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. 30

and chosen by someone else, through looking, I can situate them within a kind of mental pinboard — *memories, sensations, people, places, poems, photographs, quotations, equations, music, other images* …. for me, all of this mental ephemera, '*belong*[s] *to the same language,'* and is, '*more or less equal within it*.' As in 'Tracey & I,' my dialogues are constructed not only with what I have read, but equally, what I have *seen*, *heard*, and *felt*.

In its foundations, my thesis is intuitive. That there are 'no right answers' when it comes to art, is implied by the diverse nature of artworks themselves. On the other hand, the adjacent voices endorsed by galleries — *exhibition guides, lectures, tours, introductory essays, captions, criticism* —tend to answer these works in a mysteriously homogeneous way. Although they might say different things, or draw attention to different aspects of the art and its history, their exclusively *academic* character generally goes unquestioned.

I mean academic in the sense that 'Against Interpretation' is ultimately a piece of academia. An argument about *the truth* (singular), founded exclusively in esteemed intellectual reference: *'Plato,' 'Aristotle,' 'Nietzsche,' 'Kafka,' 'Beckett,'…*

> *'Proust, Joyce, Faulkner, Rilke, Lawrence, Gide… one could go on citing author after author'*

This approach implies there *is* a correct thing to say/think/do in the gallery, and by extension, that some responses — some points of reference — are more valuable than others.

Since Berger's 'Ways of Seeing,' there have been many shifts towards acceptance of more inclusive conversations about art. In the UK, this movement is publicly championed by artists like Grayson Perry[112], Bob and Roberta Smith[113], and, notably, the most recent Turner prize winner, Veronica Ryan.

Ryan's sculptures '*Custard Apple (Annonaceae)*,' '*Breadfruit (Moraceae),*' and '*Soursop (Annonaceae),*'[114] are designed with a multi-layered conversation in mind. Displayed in Hackney Central, London, these larger-than- life works are shaped like fruits and vegetables you might find at the nearby Ridley Road Market.[115] They are meant to be played with, sat on, to be used as teaching materials, and — through designating the general public as their owners and caretakers — to empower.[116]

Although in some respects, art culture may be moving in a hopeful direction. In writings associated with galleries and scholarship, academia still seems to have the final word — and undoubtably holds the keys to many of these institutions. I wanted to align my dissertation with the values of more inclusive movements as an attempt to bridge this gap, and discover what experience can look like in theory.

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[112] Perry, Grayson. (2014.) *Playing to the Gallery*. Penguin UK, 2014

[113] Bob, and Patrick Brill. (2011) *Bob and Roberta Smith - I Should Be in Charge*. London: Black Dog Publ. 2011

[114] Ryan, Veronica. ''Custard Apple (Annonaceae),' 'Breadfruit (Moraceae),' and 'Soursop (Annonaceae),' *Turner Prize 2022*. (Hackney Central, October 2021 —)

[115] "Veronica Ryan – 'I'm Interested in Contradiction and Paradox' | Turner Prize Winner 2022 | *Tate*. *www.youtube.com*. October 8, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_dN-ECNjnw. [4:25 - 4:42]

[116] "Veronica Ryan – 'I'm Interested in Contradiction and Paradox' | Turner Prize Winner 2022 | *Tate*. *www.youtube.com*. October 8, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_dN-ECNjnw. [4:53 - 5:34]

Because I believe in testimony…

In researching engagement with art by recording my own experiences, my thesis is also my testimony — this kind of non-hierarchal… *emotional, inter-connected, dialogue-inducing, creative…* relationship with art is possible because I experience it. I haven't attempted to offer any real philosophical proof, to produce something verifiable has not been the aim. That I am being honest, and that what I have to say honestly will be in some sense true, are pre-conditions —postulates — of whatever value this text contains.

In discourse surrounding a wide range of social concerns, disagreement about what and who to believe is often at the centre of polarised opinion. In an age of fake news and manipulative algorithms… *conspiracy theories, deep-fakes, sophisticated digital scams, bot-software. artificial intelligence…* it is easy to see why our trust in what we read is rapidly declining. Unfortunately, strong collective belief is just as necessary as ever to drive much needed change; if we can't believe anything we read/hear/see then our organisational power is extremely limited.

I don't deny the value of scientific (unbiased, verifiable) information in resolving this confusion. However, I do worry that our skepticism — the constant paranoia that we are being scammed or manipulated — is extending beyond politicians and corporations to the testimony of real, everyday people.

At the risk of sounding naive, I'm convinced that, when people are talking about themselves or their communities, they should be believed. Of course it is always possible that someone is lying — that there is some ulterior motive to a person's claims about themselves — but even these rare attempts to manipulate the system are usually symptomatic of its faults. It's not a perfect rule, and probably we should continue to be skeptical of things we read online or in newspapers. But, as much as possible, I think working towards a culture of radical belief in others (rather than requesting proof of their experiences) is a powerful tool for building community, and discerning what should be our social priorities.

Tracey Emin's art frequently offers testimony, and much of the controversy surrounding her work turns on people's faith in its integrity. *Is she lying? Is she being serious? Are we being laughed at? Does she only want money/fame?* Sue Lawley's 2004 interview with Emin reflects this widespread suspicion; a reluctance to offer trust in case we should be taken for fools. John Wilson's 2021 conversation with Emin, by contrast, is founded on respect. He makes room for and validates her stories. Consequently, Emin feels she can open a meta-discourse — speaking on her experience of hostile and dismissive audiences, particularly in the early 2000's:

> *'No, I think… I've been overlooked. I think people didn't understand the seriousness of my work over the last 20 years. I think they just thought I was some sort of narcissistic, deranged, screaming banshee. (…) 20 years ago, I was accused of being narcissistic, and, moaning, moaning like, about myself. When I wasn't, I was make - still am! - making work about rape, making work about abuse, making work about heartbreak. It's so strange! […] – when, I make, say… a painting about being raped at 13. It's something for everybody to look at and go,* 'Oh my God. Let's talk about this subject, let's open this up,'[117]

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[117] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021). '*This Cultural Life: Tracey Emin*.' [20:47-21:26]

The idea that by sharing her experiences Emin is '*moaning,'* suggests a criteria for judgement that moves beyond, *is what they say honest/dishonest?* Towards the gut-wrenching, *should their voice be heard?*

The particular dangers of applying this kind of criteria to experiences like Emin's are explored in Roxane Gay's collection, '*Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*.'[118] In her introduction to this anthology, she shares that to consider her own experience, '*not that bad*,' began as a way of coping with trauma. However, '*in the long run*,' she tells us:

> *'diminishing my experience hurt me far more than it helped (…) everything was terrible but none of it was that bad (…) for years, I fostered wildly unrealistic expectations of the kinds of experiences worthy of suffering until very little was worthy of suffering. The surface of my empathy become calloused'*[119]

Calloused empathy, desensitisation, according to Sontag, is the norm in a world that tends to overwhelm with information. Like 'Against Interpretation,' Not that Bad,' calls for a recovery of the senses, but here, the point is made through the testimonies themselves; rather than academic reference.

Learning, 't*o* see *more, to* hear *more, to* feel *more,'*[120] is to learn to make more room for experience, good and bad — both within our own stories, and those of others.

Because I loved it (because I enjoyed it)…

'I Felt You and I Knew You Loved Me.'

'I Never Stopped Loving You.'

This project is littered with love. It has acted as a kind of background frequency for my research; even if I'm not sure of my direction, love lets me know I'm looking in the right places. By all accounts, love should not function well in theory. It is indefinite, no definition ever seems to do it justice. Love is a paradox. Monolithic in its power to connect us to people living — *loving* — in radically different times and circumstances. In another way, love is renewed in its every instance; holding a unique meaning that is inseparable from person, place, and time.

In Bourdieu's *L'amour de l'art*, love is a function of knowledge; we can only love what we understand, and only in the ways we have been taught to do so. In 'Against Interpretation,' Sontag offers love — sensation, desire — as a transformative and vital force.[121]

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[118] Gay, Roxane. (2018). Eliza Bassist, Nicole Boyce, Amy Jo Burns, Michelle Chen, Jill Christman, Aubrey Hirsch, et al. *Not That Bad: Dispatches From Rape Culture*. Great Britain: Allen & Unwin, 2019

[119] Gay, Roxane. (2018). 'Introduction.' In *Not That Bad: Dispatches From Rape Culture*. Great Britain: Allen & Unwin, 2019 x

[120] Sontag, Susan. (1965) 'Against Interpretation.' 14

[121] Sontag, Susan. (1965) 'Against Interpretation.' 14

In *Index Cards*, Moyra Davey tells us she loves to read and that she loves words;[122] she loves artists like Thomas Hirschorn,[123] and Kerry James Marshall.[124] She loves black and white photography.[125] She loves her friend Jennifer.[126] She is obsessed with John Genet's final book, '*Prisoner of Love*,'[127] whose wisdom she quotes like a religious text. A section called 'Les Goddesses' is revealed to have been written as a 'love letter' to her family.[128]

I think a good answer as to why I wrote 'Tracey Emin & I,' is because I loved writing 'Tracey Emin & I.' In using love as methodology, I wrote/read/acted not out of some sense of universal (or academic) importance, but as much as possible, I pursued/trusted/was faithful to/focused on — what I love; and by extension, what loves me.

Love was a parallel thesis. During this project, I consistently chose to read memoir/love theory like Bell Hooks, *'All About Love,'*[129] and Gillian Rose's, *'Love's Work.'*[130] I particularly liked C.S. Lewis's, '*The Four Loves* ,'[131] which begins with love in the sense of enjoyment:

> "*Since "the highest does not stand without the lowest" (…) we must begin with pleasure."*[132]
>
> *"We do not merely like the things; we pronounce them, in a momentarily God-like sense, "very good."*[133]

I have said that one of my main objectives in writing was to tell a good story, and I think that to say I wrote 'Tracey Emin & I,' *because I enjoyed it,* is fundamentally true.

In this text there are, however, many other ways by which I mean 'love.' That the word survives this kind of multiple usage is part of its charm for me. Love of art, as a multiplicity of ways, is ultimately what I wanted to advocate for.

> *J: Why and how did the love help get you through?*
>
> *T: Because I think if I hadn't've felt love, I would've just floated off.*
>
> *J: This is a new relationship you just started?*

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[122] Davey, Moyra. (2008) 'Notes on Photography & Accident.'In *Index Cards: Selected Essays*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020. 39, 45, 52

[123] Davey, Moyra. (2008) 'Notes on Photography & Accident.' 52

[124]Davey, Moyra. (2008) 'Notes on Photography & Accident.' 58

[125] Davey, Moyra. (2008) 'Notes on Photography & Accident.' 53

[126] Davey, Moyra (2008) 'Notes on Photography & Accident.' 52

[127] Davey, Moyra. (2014) 'Burn the Diaries' 153, 155, 165, 166, 167, 169, 170, 172,

[128] Davey, Moyra. (2016). 'Hemlock Forest'. In *Index Cards: Selected Essays*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020. 190

[129] Hooks, Bell. (2000). 'All About Love: New Visions.' New York: HarperCollins, 2018

[130] Rose, Gillian. (1995). 'Love's Work.' New York Review of Books, 2010

[131] Lewis, C. S. (1960) *The Four Loves*. HarperCollins UK, 2010

[132] Lewis, C. S. (1960) *The Four Loves*. 25

[133] Lewis, C. S. (1960) *The Four Loves*. 32

T: Of sorts yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah if y-yeah, yeah, and (…)[134]

"One molecule said yes to another molecule and the whole world began (…)"[135]

[134] Wilson, John. Tracey Emin. (2021)*This Cultural Life*. [25:48 -26:05)

[135] Lispector, Clarice. (1977) *The Hour of the Star.* 3

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