

# For real: Tracey Emin and the problem of authenticity

Rachel Robson

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*This snapshot examines the visual and textual art of Tracey Emin and the response it generates. It asks why, in a climate of celebrity worship and reality television, her self-revelatory work still provokes such heated debate and demands for authenticity. Creative work which is apparently 'confessional' has long been the site of controversy, and this snapshot draws on feminist thinking about confessional poetry to discuss some of the difficulties in reading Emin's work as directly autobiographical and further, to interrogate why her subject matter seems to create such discomfort amongst her audience.*

*Keywords: Confession, Art, Feminism, Tracey Emin, Autobiography*

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In this research snapshot I examine the work of British artist Tracey Emin and aim to consider why, through an examination of theories of confessional literature and feminist notions of the body, readings of her work as directly authentic and autobiographical are problematic and require interrogation. I suggest that rather than directly produced from life, Emin's art works with real life feelings and experiences in a creative process of examining the self. Further, I seek to examine why Emin's production of 'the real' provokes such apparent discomfort in her audience through a consideration of notions of autobiography and the abject.

In 2011, The Hayward Gallery in London showed Emin's major retrospective *Love is What You Want*, and her new exhibition *She Lay Down Deep Beneath the Sea* opened in 2012, housed in the new Turner Contemporary Gallery in Emin's home town of Margate. These recent shows provoke a new response which makes academic consideration of Emin's *oeuvre* as relevant as ever. Tracey Emin's art work frequently deals with challenging issues of female experience: sex and excess, abortion, rape and abuse, much of which is drawn from her own lived experience. Her work is consistently described by the press and art critics as both 'con-

fessional' and 'controversial' and Emin herself says that her work is always 'based on some real event, something that happened' (Brown 1998, 33) and has stated that her creative career 'started on the day she was born' (Lauson 2011, 16). Art critic Daniel Barnes describes *Love is What You Want* as 'a seemingly relentless barrage of desperation, loneliness and outright anguish' (Barnes 2011). Emin's use of personal and found objects in her work and of the ephemera of everyday life, including letters and diary entries which reference her experiments in self-chronicling further lend her work a direct 'realness' that simultaneously attracts and repels her audience. Commentators are fascinated by Emin's intimate subject matter and her frank display of embodied experience, whilst others criticise her for cynically employing her own misery in order to make money. Phillipe Lejeune famously suggests that there exists in life-writing an unspoken 'autobiographical pact' that allows the audience to safely assume that what they are reading references the author's true lived experience (Lejeune 1989). Similarly, Michel Foucault describes confession as the production of truth (Foucault 1978). I would suggest that the formal mode of confession normally located in and associated with a courtroom, church or medical establishment implies an admission of guilt, misdemeanour or at the very least an error of judgement

which lends a negative tone to perceptions of confessional art work. Whilst Emin consistently identifies her own work as confessional or autobiographical, such a direct reading of her work is undeniably problematic. Theorists of confessional poetry such as Elizabeth Gregory suggest that there is a tendency amongst readers to look down upon confessional work by women as an unmediated outpouring of emotion, disparaged as 'too feminine... trivial and self-indulgent' (Gregory 2005, 33).

Emin's bold, hurried strokes, frequent misspellings and letter reversal caused by her mono-printing technique lend her work a sense of immediacy and unbridled emotion which emphasises its apparent authenticity. However, this is contradicted when the same statements are transformed into neon or painstakingly embroidered onto fabric in a time-consuming and meditative process. Gregory notes that the 'shock value' of confessional work can obscure the artistry inherent in it (Gregory 2005, 34). Emin's work draws attention to this tension by transforming quickly rendered sketches into meticulous tapestries of the same words and image, or into neons which accurately reproduce her style of handwriting, without first editing or sanitising them. Here, I would suggest, Emin produces a facsimile of the original piece which illuminates how her works are themselves reproductions of

her experiences. The neon *She Lay Down Deep Beneath The Sea* is inspired by her father's death. She says; 'I just wrote the words, "She lay down deep beneath the sea", and it's about having weight and immensity of everything on top of you, pressing down' (Emin 2012). Recreated in neon, the work can be seen as a meditation on this experience and on the temporal and evolving experience of grief, rather than the original outpouring of emotion which inspired it.

The repetition and reproduction common in Emin's work might be further illuminated by feminist understandings of selfhood as a process rather than an experiential certainty. In her work on Sylvia Plath, Susan Van Dyne states:

We need to resist the unexamined assumption (and often in biographies of women what amounts to the misogynist practice) that a woman can only write out of or about what she has actually lived. Such a premise disallows the transformative power of a woman's art as epistemology, as an alternative, equally self-constituting form of knowing and being (Van Dyne 2006, 17).

I would suggest that the artist Tracey Emin is continually engaged in a creative exploration of what it means to be 'Tracy Emin' the subject, which draws upon, re-imagines and re-interprets her personal truth. However, Emin's particular produc-

tion of 'the real' is one that I also argue provokes a sense of unease and discomfort amongst her audience. The now infamous installation piece, *My Bed*, is made up of Emin's own real bed and the detritus which surrounded it in her bedroom, including knickers, used condoms and the stains of bodily fluids, which are meticulously transported to and recreated in the formal 'white cube' of the gallery as an installation. The work exemplifies Emin's self-conscious play with the boundary between art and life; what Gregory calls a 'reality trope' in which the viewer assumes that the subject and artist are one (Gregory 2005, 32). In bringing her own bed into the gallery Emin might be seen to be suggesting that this, genuinely, is the bed that she sleeps in. However an unsettling blurring of boundaries is at play. *My Bed* is immediately transformed by being relocated to the gallery and the domestic nature of it is troubled by its chaos. Here, as in other examples of her work, Emin juxtaposes comforting images of domesticity – beds, blankets and pillows and craft techniques which might be seen as traditionally female art forms – with objects which destabilise this familiarity and create a sense of disorder. Emin's bed is the site of pain, loss and loneliness, not one of comfort and nurture. Her work also challenges notions of feminine decorum, insisting on talking about things that women shouldn't talk about. Moreover, I suggest, Emin blurs boundar-

ies of class and decorum by invading refined bourgeois art space with noisy, messy, working-class reality. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson neatly put it: 'Nice girls, well brought up girls, simply do not rehearse their intimate lives in public, let alone display the sordid leavings of them' (Smith and Watson 2011, 11).

Rosemary Betterton notes that Emin 'frequently uses images, objects, and materials from her life to address such dangerous subjects for women as female desire, sexual acts and abortion, consciously mobilizing her life story as a set of narratives and performances' (Betterton 2006, 84). Emin's figurative art frequently employs the abject, disrupting the idea of stable bodily norms and boundaries and can be seen to embody primal fears and cultural anxieties about the female body, particularly the productive and fertile female body, and of female sexual excess. Emin presents her audience with what makes us most anxious about our corporeality; her bodies are unreliable and uncontained, blood, tears, semen and excrement spill out of them onto the surfaces of her art. Betterton argues, however, that the abjection in Emin's work can be 'more specifically situated in the loss that it repeatedly enacts' (Betterton 2006, 91). Emin is a 'failed maternal subject' (Betterton 2006, 92) and her mourning is re-enacted in her work. Emin's body is not just an abject, maternal one; it is also one in pain, and her audience

is not permitted to avoid or deny this fact. I would argue that, in addition to fears of female productivity, Emin's art also addresses, head-on, fears about maternal lack and want; of the non-productive, barren or failed maternal body which might be seen as particularly uncomfortable in a cultural climate which some critics have suggested seems determined to react against feminism and reinstate women into the role of domestic child bearer (Cochrane 2005).

Emin's particular brand of truth and her privileging of uncomfortable and particularly female subject matter may be one that is all too easy for her audience to relate to. To some extent her issues are universal ones and her destabilising of gendered norms of behaviour and decorum threaten patriarchal order. It is for this reason I argue that criticisms of Emin's work might in some ways be seen as an attempt to situate the artist and her work as abject and 'other' in a process of defining the self. Emin's audience resists her depiction of disorder in order to create a sense of order within themselves.

Emin's newer exhibitions see critics attempting to return to familiar ground in their interpretation of Emin's methods. It is notable that commentators appear to struggle to locate and therefore criticise Emin's signature unmediated confession in what is more subtle work that Emin says is about love. Emin as a character is transformed, and so is her confessional mode. In a recent in-

interview Emin said:

I still have all those subject matters that I work with and I still work with them, but maybe in a different kind of way or in a more in depth way... the screaming adolescent girl hasn't got any more energy left, now I've got to sit down and think what have I got, what can I work with (Sakur 2012).

In considering her newer work, which, as ever, is a meditation on her experiences, Emin's audience must remember that it is drawn from an older, wiser Emin who is reflecting on new experiences and considering older ones anew and with a wry humour.

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