Feminist and Queer Arts Activism

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Abstract

This chapter adopts an historiographic approach to the field of feminist and queer arts activisms, which privileges ideas of affinity and resonance between artists of different generations rather than canonical notions of chronology, precedence and sequence. Each of the terms – 'feminist', 'queer' and 'activist' – is hotly contested and the field is characterised by a necessary refusal to settle on established ways of thinking, acting and making work. With this in mind, the chapter focusses on close readings of artworks by Tanja Ostojić, Hannah Wilke, Adrian Howells, Gillian Wearing, and Louise Bourgeois, which are made using a range of media forms including performance, photography, film, and sculpture. As modes of communication, and in line with other forms of communication research, these artworks operate at the intersection of meaning, pleasure, power and knowledge. The chapter argues that these artworks challenge now orthodox notions of de-familiarisation and critical distance with new models of feminist and/or queer agitation, specifically *provocation, critical mimicry,* and *emotional ambiguity*. The artists use these tactics to challenge attitudes about nationhood, immigration, intimacy, ownership of the body, and maternal ambivalence. Ultimately, the chapter argues that the artworks invoke a critically-productive emotional fragility through which the viewer/participant can imagine their desires, hopes and fears, and the emotional lives of others, differently.

In the summer of 2016, the Guerrilla Girls, a group of anonymous feminist activists who formed in 1985, wrote to the directors of 383 museums and galleries across Europe to ask them to respond to 14 questions about diversity in their collections and exhibition programmes. The questions concerned the number of artists included in recent exhibitions who are women, gender non-conforming or from Africa, Asia, South Asia, and South America.[1] The responses formed the basis of a campaign exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery in London entitled, 'Is it Even Worse in Europe?' The Guerrilla Girls are well known for their use of humour and bold information graphics and this campaign featured a banner on the outside of the gallery declaring that only one quarter of the museum directors responded. It invited people to come into the gallery to find out more, including the names of the

institutions that did not respond. The ongoing work of the Guerrilla Girls makes clear the need not only to challenge the exclusion of particular groups from the power brokers of the artworld, but also to find structurally inclusive alternatives to the canon, which celebrates the importance of some artists and shamelessly ignores the contributions of others.

The story told of feminist thought and its relation to art is often linear and chronological, a succession of practices that leads us to an enlightened present. This chimes with what Clare Hemmings describes as a persistent narrative of progress or loss in accounts of Western second wave feminist theory.[2] Indeed, in the early stages of drafting this chapter I was tempted to present queer approaches to artmaking as the end point in a narrative of progress from Brechtian-inspired feminist strategies of the 1970s and 80s, such as distanciation and defamiliarization, to conceptually sophisticated queer strategies of the 1990s and beyond, characterised by an understanding of identities as multiple, fluid and provisional. However, this would have been problematic for a number of reasons. It would suggest a knowable topology of types of art making, which imposes order on the rich messiness of feminist and queer art practices at any one moment in time. It would also risk de-contextualising strategies of art making that seem problematic, or even naïve, when read through contemporary concerns, but that were crucial at the time. These include references to a shared female biology, such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's celebration of 'central core' imagery in the 1970s. This was art about female subjectivity in which motifs of orifices were used to articulate an essence shared by women.[3] This form of artmaking was heavily critiqued for its apparent essentialism and polarisation of sexual difference long before queer theory challenged binaries such as female/male and the alignment of these terms with feminine/masculine characteristics.[4] Furthermore, it would anchor artworks in their historical moment of production, which limits potential interpretations and strategic uses.

Instead I argue for a historiographic approach to thinking about feminist and queer arts activism. This is less concerned with masculinist notions of precedent, origin, and influence and more to do with overlapping temporalities and provisional affiliations. I do not, therefore, offer a chronology of feminist and queer arts/activist practices, preferring instead to signal affinities between works produced in different contexts and historical moments. This includes the possibility that feminist strategies employed in earlier works can be reimagined through the lens of contemporary works in an approach akin to what Miele Bal calls 'preposterous history.'[5] Indeed, to embrace the entanglement of past-present practices and a non-linear

approach is to queer historical notions of sequence and precedent, where 'to queer' is understood as a verb rather than a noun.[6] This matters because the naturalisation of linear history as 'common sense' has resulted in a canon that has routinely excluded work by women and LGBTQI artists amongst others.

The role of feminist and queer artists is crucial to disrupting the canon. Indeed, the 'movement' associated with feminist art during the 1970s and 80s grew out of an urgent need to challenge the male-dominated art historical canon and its associated critical discourses. My working definition of 'feminist art' includes those practices that challenge the production of woman as commodity, patriarchal expectations of gendered behaviour and affective repertoire, but does not prescribe what this looks like in the making of art. In detaching this identification from specific artists, as if an artist is either feminist or not, and allowing it to stick to practices, a more diverse range of arts activity can be understood as feminist in sensibility, if not obviously in subject matter. The very categorisation needed to make sense of the field is itself called into question by some of the artworks associated with it. Similarly, to 'define' queer art may seem antithetical to a set of practices that purposely embrace ambiguity as a radical force. Nevertheless, this is work that disrupts the naturalisation of heteronormative categories, rituals, and assumptions. It is work that values alterity, protects otherness, and uses the threat that this poses to shift the social fabric of everyday life. In this sense, queer is understood as a *position* rather than an identity and is not only aligned with artists who identify as queer.

The idea of agitating for change is central, but the field is characterised by a necessary refusal to settle on established ways of thinking, acting and making work. Indeed, the premises upon which feminist-identified and queer-identified arts activism are based are not always aligned. There is a tension between a feminist art making that takes its cues from the notion of identity through, for example, denaturalising the construction of woman in visual images and the need to address the myriad ways in which women are excluded from art historical discourses, and a queer politics premised on the disruption of singular and stable forms of identity. From a queer perspective of gender fluidity and what Amelia Jones calls 'radical undecidability,' there is a danger that feminism reinstates essentialism, despite a raft of art practices of the 1970s and 1980s that aimed to expose the social and cultural production of women, because it necessarily relies on *identifying as a woman*.[7] Here I do not intend to smooth over such

tensions. Indeed, the complexity of the context in which feminist and queer art is both produced and consumed needs to be acknowledged.

In what follows, I adopt an inter-generational approach to the work of Tanja Ostojić and Hannah Wilke, and then to works by Adrian Howells, Gillian Wearing and Louise Bourgeois. The method I employ is intended to signal the queering of canonical linear histories and to keep alive the rich array of activist tactics used in arts practice. Critical arts practice shares with communications research a desire to interrogate institutions that shape our cultural consciousness. It aims to intervene to expose the social, political and economic mechanisms that reproduce unethical power relations. Indeed, communication research is part of an interdisciplinary debate about the construction and politics of knowledge, which overlaps with the subversive impulse of critical arts practice, in particular an imperative to work towards cultural change. The specific strategies I argue for are *provocation, critical mimicry* and *emotional ambiguity*. Using these strategies the artworks and performances discussed in this chapter aim to transform attitudes, behaviours, politics and imagination on a number of issues including nationhood, immigration, intimacy, domesticity and maternal ambivalence. My choice of artworks reflects what I consider to be some of the most pressing issues for feminist and queer art making at this point in time. In the context of widespread right-wing populism in Europe and the US, for example, Ostojić's refusal to accept the entrenching of nationalistic and paternalistic imperatives in the artworld matters a great deal. The need to embrace uncertainty and ambiguity in a time of dangerous absolutism in international politics motivates my choice of Howell's performance work and Wearing's film. In both cases the stability of a fixed emotional state is challenged along with the assumption that stability is even desirable. The equation of political strength with an unchanging vision has been satirised by British artist Jeremy Deller. In 2017 typographic posters designed by Deller appeared across London reading 'Strong and stable my arse,' which refers to a phrase used repeatedly by former Conservative party leader and Prime Minister Theresa May. Wearing and Howells' work pre-dates May's government, but the tyranny of certainty ridiculed by Deller is a reminder of the importance of artworks that refuse to equate political strength with absolute certainty. The choice to pair Ostojić's work with Wilke's, and Wearing's with Bourgeois', is designed to rebuke the tendency to deny contemporary female artists their historiographic affinities with earlier women artists. In the context of #MeToo and #Time'sUp, it is essential that women feel connected, not by shared biology or by

assumptions about how they live their lives, but via an expanded historical awareness of feminist struggle including resonances between women artists of different generations.

The artworks I focus on differ in many ways. Some are designed to be seen by many, others are intended for an audience of one. They are made using different media (performance, photography, film, sculpture) and do not all take place within a gallery setting. The means of communication is not incidental or supplementary, but central to the artworks' capacity (or not) to challenge the reproduction of social realities. The artworks were produced at different moments in time and do not all share the same kind of identification with feminist and/or queer politics. What they do share, however, is a commitment to change and a desire to realise a transformative politics of visuality. I have deliberately chosen artworks that do not espouse a direct message, as if there is an artist who can see the light and a viewer who needs to be enlightened. In this respect, I am arguing for the significance of artworks that do not wear their critical credentials as a badge on their sleeve. Amelia Jones has argued that feminist art criticism was for a long time dominated by Brechtian avant-gardist strategies designed to increase the agency of the viewer by creating critical distance; a critique of realism in which the spectator's political faculties are heightened by a refusal to seduce the viewer.[8] Such tactics can be empowering, but are problematic in that they assume that some people have the political awareness to see beyond the illusions of representation and others are in need of critical help. It is a hierarchical form of feminism, which ultimately does little to change the structure of power relations. The works discussed here are far less didactic in their approach, preferring to create an atmosphere in which change can take place by engaging the viewer/participant as an embodied agent. This strategy is exemplified by the work of Tanja Ostojić, which is discussed in the next section. As an approach it packs its political punch by seducing, rather than distancing, the viewer, only to then subvert their expectations of the field of vision.

Provocation and the Politics of Exclusion

In December 2005, a poster artwork called *Untitled/After Courbet* by Yugoslavian-born feminist artist and activist Tanja Ostojić was displayed on rotating billboards in Vienna as part of an exhibition called EuroPart. The artwork, originally made in 2004, had been chosen by curators for the public exhibition, which was timed to coincide with the Austrian Prime Minister taking over the presidency of the EU. However, the poster was removed by the

exhibition curators two days later in response to a media scandal about the work, along with another artwork by Spanish artist Carlos Aires. Once the artworks had been removed from several billboards in Vienna, a larger poster was erected on the facade of the ForumStadtPark in Graz in defiance of censorship and in solidarity with the artist. The poster measures 3.5 x 4 metres and is a photograph of a reclining women's torso posed and cropped to reference Gustav Courbet's *L'origine du Monde* (The Origin of the World, 1866). Where Courbet's nude leads the viewer's gaze to the model's pubic area, in Ostojić's poster the woman is wearing blue underwear depicting the twelve stars of the European Union flag. The particular shade of blue is unmistakably that of the EU flag and the stars are positioned at the centre of the viewer's line of sight. The work is a critical commentary on the EU's immigration policies, which often require women from south-eastern Europe to marry an EU citizen to gain entry. The poster is also a disturbing reminder of the sexual economy of trafficking women from Eastern Europe and elsewhere who are forced to enter Austria and other EU countries illegally to work in Western Europe as sex workers, domestic servants and slaves. Far from celebrating Austria's EU presidency the poster critically examines immigration policies, border regimes and European biopolitics from a radical feminist position grounded in the desire to subvert structural power relations.

Figure one: Tanja Ostojić, *Untitled/After Courbet (L'origine du monde,* 46 x 55cm) (2004)
Colour photo, 46 x 55cm
Photo: David Rych
Copyright: Ostojić/ Rych

Ostojić has a history of challenging what she understands as the arrogance of EU policies with respect to south-eastern European women. In 2000 to 2005, she developed a complex five-year long project involving an online performance called *Looking for a Husband with an EU Passport.* Again employing the language of advertising, she posted an image of herself online, naked and shaven, bringing to mind troubling images of prison camp inmates, and asked for potential suitors to contact her. This action resulted in a legal marriage to fellow artist Klemens Golf, from whom she later divorced, and a marriage visa that enabled her to reside in Germany. It was explicitly a marriage of convenience designed to circumvent difficulties in obtaining a visa to live in Western Europe, where her work was increasingly gaining recognition. Working in a range of media forms, Ostojić operates from the point of view of the migrant woman to critique hierarchies of power within the Western artworld and the position of women within contemporary power structures.

Untitled/After Courbet was met with public outrage and accusations that it offended Austrian public morality. However, if the Austrian authorities thought that removing the poster would deny it visibility they were sorely mistaken. The media furore surrounding the work's censorship resulted in over 100 articles being written and more than 1,000 reader comments on the situation.[9] Without needing any text to anchor the image, Ostojić exposed the hypocrisy of an aesthetic economy in which this poster is denounced as pornographic and media images that reveal far more of a woman's body pass without comment.[10] It is not the woman's body on its own that causes offence so much as the visualisation of a libidinal economics of nationhood and trafficking. Bojana Videkanić argues that *After Courbet's* formal characteristics, such as its size, cropping of the body and art historical reference, are highly affective.[11] Drawing on Brian Massumi's work on affect, Videkanić argues that these elements "create zones of intensity that, in turn, function in our own in-between spaces, spaces where our cognitive side has not yet understood what the body has already absorbed".[12]

This affective intensity is due, in part, not just to the size of the work but to its scale. Billboard posters are designed to be seen from the car, their mode of consumption linked to notions of mobility and the movement of people and goods. However, Ostojić's poster is connected to movement that is illegal, enforced and disempowering. The artist presents her

own body as a commodity, inviting access to her fragmented part-body, only to thwart the transaction both visually and politically through her use of the underwear. Ostojić controls access to her body in a critical revisioning of the biopolitics that renders many Eastern European women subservient to the demands of traffickers. As a visual image, she refuses the breaching of her bodily border and evokes the politics of exclusion within EU immigration policies and those of the international artworld.

In the context of her wider body of work, Ostojić's practice relates the exclusion of women from positions of power within the artworld to the transnational issues of maltreatment and subjugation examined in *After Courbet.* Using the internationalisation of the artworld, in the form of art fairs and biennials, as a landscape for intervention, Ostojić refuses to let the artworld establishment absolve itself of its responsibility for an aesthetic economy in which women are routinely denied privilege. In a previous work entitled *I'll Be Your Angel* (2001-2002), Ostojić accompanied the curator Harold Szeemann during the opening days of the 49th Venice Biennale, effectively escorting him to cocktail parties, dinners and press conferences. The Biennale is an international art fair attended by artists, curators, tourists and financiers and by performing as his younger female artist/muse Ostojić shone a light on Szeemann's elevated position within the global artworld. The primary form of communication used here is behavioural. Without asserting a message or trying to persuade anyone of her position, Ostojić's acquiescence offered Szeemann up as a powerful figure and, consequently, highlighted gendered inequities in the process. Hers is an art of provocation and irony, integrated into the processes of everyday life.

Figure two: Tanja Ostojić, *I'll Be Your Angel* (2001-2002)

Four-day performance with Harald Szeemann, *Plato of Humankind*, 49th Venice Biennale. Photo: Borut Krajnc. Courtesy: Tanja Ostojić

Ostojić's strategy includes an ongoing dynamic between hiding and exposing. Szeemann refused to allow the publication of Ostojić's diary of the event, censoring part of her text inside the official Venice Biennale catalogue in 2001. The artist did, however, publish this subsequently in her books *Venice Diary* (2002) and *Strategies of Success/ Curator Series* (2004) in addition to her video/video installations *I'll Be Your Angel* and *Strategies of Success.* Szeemann could not, however, disallow her commentary on his decision. *I'll Be Your Angel* included the artist's own decision to hide a conceptual artwork called *Black Square on White* (2001), in which her pubic hair was trimmed into a square. It was a reference to the work of Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich and remained hidden from sight for all except Szeemann. The Austrian authority's attempt to hide *After Courbet* from public view resonates with the treatment of the Courbet painting on which it is based. It is thought that *L'origine du Monde* was commissioned by Turkish-Egyptian diplomat Khalil-

Bey, but it is not known what happened to the painting before its acquisition by the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, in 1995 at which point it was owned by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.[13] It was an audacious representation of a female nude, but despite its notoriety was rarely seen. Like Ostojić's recasting of it in relation to European border politics, its lack of visibility had the effect of amplifying its impact.

This section has focussed on a reading of Ostojić's work, which emphasises the disarming and provocative ways in which her practice interrogates a transnational politics of visibility. Ultimately, Ostojić asks who is allowed to officially exist, what they must do to gain recognition and the price of their visibility. Her work chimes with the imperative of communications research to reveal the conditions of existence within which some voices are empowered, others are silenced and some are rendered unimaginable. In the next section I position the tactics employed by Ostojić in relation to an earlier feminist artist, Hannah Wilke. My intention is to historicise Ostojić's practice, not by establishing a sequential line of precedence, but by tracing a thread of criticality shared across generations.

Critical Mimicry and Performance

Ostojić uses her *performance* of being pleasant, anodyne and pleasing to strategic effect, mimicking the mannerisms of the flirtatious muse who never leaves the side of her older, more powerful master. The photographs of this performance show her in a low-cut dress gazing adorably at Szeemann, taking his arm or looking up at him while he speaks. The irony of the work is that by presenting herself so deliberately in this light – objectified, fetishized and as an adjunct to his power – she turns Szeemann into the object of our gaze. There is a distinct difference in body language between the two with her ease and appearance of pliability emphasising his discomfort. In this section I situate Ostojić's approach in relation to works of the mid-1970s by American artist Hannah Wilke, specifically focusing on the cross-generational use of anti-essentialist strategies such as performance and mimicry, which have gained critical visibility since the 1990s through queer theory.

The satirical performance of femininity in *I'll Be Your Angel* chimes with earlier feminist artworks such as Hannah Wilke's performances and performance photographs of the mid-1970s. In a number of works including *Starification Object Series* (1974-75), *Hello Boys*

(1975) and *Hannah Wilke Through the Large Glass* (1976), Wilke uses the poses and gestures of compliant sexuality to expose deeply entrenched inequalities. Like Ostojić, in *Through the Large Glass* Wilke critiqued both the commodification of woman as objectified muse/model and the art institution that perpetuates this power structure. In the video of this performance Wilke appears dressed in a white suit and fedora and enacts a striptease standing behind Marcel Duchamp's cracked sculpture *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass).* The performance took place at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1976 and *Through the Large Glass* documents this act.

In the mid-1970s Wilke made a number of works that she called performalist self-portraits. *Starification Object Series* (1974-75) includes a set of black and white photographs featuring Wilke posing in various states of undress to mimic the representation of a range of feminine types. In some of the photographs she uses props such as hair rollers, a cowboy hat, and a men's tie, and in each there are small chewing gum sculptures carefully placed on her body. Multiple forms of semiotic communication are at play including the signifying potential of gestures, poses and props. However, this is combined with an embodied approach in which viewers are implicated in different forms of exchange both visually and literally. The work was originally a performance in which Wilke asked audience members to chew the gum, which she then moulded into small one-fold sculptures and attached to her body. As 'scars' that interrupt the surface of her body, the gum sculptures punctuate each photograph and thwart the scopophilic transaction that the images appear to promise. Where Ostojić comments on the breaching of both bodily and national borders in *After Courbet,* Wilke uses gum to deny the viewer unbridled access to her body. The photographs are the well-known element of this multi-dimensional work, which has existed as a performance and installation including vitrines containing the gum sculptures. As 'performalist' self-portraits, they are works in and of themselves (individually and as a group), as opposed to stills from a filmed performance.

Figure three: Hannah Wilke, *Starification Object Series* (1974-75)

Critical commentary on *S.O.S.* has often focussed on Wilke's beauty. The critic Lucy Lippard famously derided Wilke for the "confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist."[14] Since Wilke's death from lymphoma in 1993, her performalist self-portraits have been re-evaluated in the light of her late works, such as the *Intra-Venus Project,* in which she continued to focus on her body as it gradually succumbed to disease. In the mid-1970s critics could not read Wilke's use of her own body as strategic and she was considered too flirtatious to be feminist. The idea that the job of feminism was to *transform* femininity rendered artworks that operated within the parameters of normative sexualised femininity too pleasurable to be political. However, in more recent readings, which are often influenced by queer theory's focus on anti-essentialist performance, the transformative potential of the pose takes centre stage.[15] Read through Ostojić's tactical use of compliant femininity in *I'll Be Your Angel,* Wilke's flirtations with the camera can clearly be identified as performances. The two works share an emphasis on the *practicing* of gestures and poses that constitute the feminine. By drawing attention to the work involved in practicing this body language they expose the myth of 'natural' femininity. Furthermore, by reiterating and rehearsing hetero-

sexualised femininity, only to expose its existence as performance, they enact an Irigarayan critical mimicry in which subordination is turned into activism. The Belgian-born French feminist, philosopher, linguist and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray argued, "One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it."[16] It is a disarming strategy because it so closely resembles the normative femininity that it ultimately distorts.[17]

In considering *I'll Be Your Angel* and *S.O.S.* alongside one another – as affinity rather than precedent – I cannot help but wonder how Ostojić managed to sustain her performance of adoration for Szeemann when encountering people in the unstructured spaces of the Venice Biennale. The mutual consideration of the works throws into sharp relief the labour involved in performing in unpredictable environments. In her wider body of work Wilke employed a number of queer strategies, which are recast by Ostojić in relation to EU border politics and artworld power relationships, such as the tactical significance of performing rather than being, a fluid approach to identification (flirt, feminist, artist, American, Jew, daughter) and the radical potential of seduction and desire.

Both Wilke and Ostojić developed practices that are queer in position, if not in identification. Further, the tactics used by Ostojić have a history within women's art practice. Looking back at Wilke's work, through the lens of Ostojić's provocative performance, enables a historical relation of affinity rather than succession. The relationship is not one of canon formation, but cross-generational resonance, which lends each historical significance without the masculinist burdens of influence and precedence.

In the next section, I discuss a different kind of performance work, which picks up on queer theory's critique of dichotomous logic in order to create affective vulnerability, thus refusing the certainty of artworks that declare themselves as resistant. Where Ostojić's work creates an emotional connection in which to draw a viewer/participant, only to thwart their expectations using a strategy of critical mimesis, the works discussed in the final section use a different strategy to shift relations of power, namely the construction of emotional ambiguity.

Emotional Ambiguity and the Difficulty of Intimacy

Here I read works by Adrian Howells, Gillian Wearing and Louise Bourgeois in terms of emotional fragility and argue that their political power lies not in delivering a message, but in producing feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity, which cannot easily be ignored. The works are made using different media (performance, film and sculpture respectively), but share a concern with fragile intimacy. As such their primary mode of communication is affective, often provoking uncomfortable feelings without necessarily resolving any resulting tension. Viewers and participants are implicated in ways that risk their own unease and feelings of discomfort.

In her brilliant book on difficulty and emotion in contemporary art, Jennifer Doyle discusses a number of artworks that can make people feel uncomfortable in ways that are deeply personal and potentially intimate.[18] In the opening pages she confronts her own feelings about missing an appointment to experience a performance-for-one with the British performance artist Adrian Howells. As a proponent of 'intimate theatre' and one-on-one performance encounters, Howells' work dealt with deeply personal, confessional and sometimes autobiographical experiences. This is a form of performance art in which there is no possibility of voyeuristic detachment. As Dee Heddon argues:

> In this form of performance practice – intimate, personal and interactive – the boundary between performer and spectator dissolves in the process of exchange, an exchange that asks for a very committed, and at times vulnerable, sort of spectatorship.[19]

Howells produced many works that embodied vulnerability and care until his untimely death in 2014. Participants for these performance works were invited to share in ritualised and caring encounters such as having their feet washed and massaged *(Foot Washing for the Sole,* 2010), being bathed, fed and cradled *(The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding,* 2011) and having their dirty laundry cleaned, both literally and metaphorically, by Howells' quasi-drag performance persona Adrienne *(Adrienne's Dirty Laundry Experience,* 2003). The performance that Doyle discusses is called *Held* and was staged in Glasgow, Scotland in 2006 and in London in 2007. Howells met his audience of one in an apartment and interacted with them in three scenarios. During the first encounter the artist and his guest held hands, drank tea and talked whilst sitting at a kitchen table. In the second encounter they sat on the

sofa together, held hands and watched television. Finally, they went to a bedroom, lay down on a bed and spooned in a physical demonstration of intimacy. Doyle recounts subconsciously sabotaging her opportunity to participate in *Held* by booking a hair appointment on the same day knowing that she had not left enough time to cross London and get to the venue for the encounter. Her shame is exacerbated by cancelling so late that nobody else could take her place and then travelling to the location to apologise to the artist in the hope that he would forgive her. In reflecting on this experience, Doyle articulates the relationship between intimacy and control: "I managed to extract the caretaking that Howells offered within the boundaries of *Held* but outside the boundaries of the event. I insisted on getting what the artist had promised me, but on my own terms."[20]

Figure four: Adrian Howells, *Held* (2007)

Reading Doyle's account of this experience I am reminded of an event at the Arnolfini gallery in Bristol, UK, in 2007 when Doyle was in conversation with the Italian-born performance artist Franko B. During the event Franko B described at length his piece *I Miss You,* which was performed at Tate Modern, London, in 2003 as part of the Tate's 'Live

Culture' programme. The performance featured the artist walking down a catwalk covered in white fabric and illuminated by strobe lights, his naked body covered in white paint. As Franko walked blood dripped from cannulas positioned in both elbows until the fabric was splattered with his blood. During his description of *I Miss You,* I started to feel unwell, finding the mental image of spilt blood and physical endurance nauseating. Feeling trapped in the middle of a row of seats in the auditorium I stuck it out because to leave would have felt like an admission of failure that I could not stomach difficult performance art, even in description only. Doyle describes her stamina for this kind of difficulty in experiencing the queer performances of artists such as Ron Athey and Bob Flanagan as well as Franko B, which often involve violence to the body and overt sexualisation. However, the private, domestic sphere that Howells deploys in his performances turns out to be utterly disarming in ways that are, for Doyle, far more disconcerting and difficult than more visceral and explicit forms of queer performance art.

Doyle's failure to attend her appointment with Howells concerns the difficulty of intimacy, the idea that tenderness and care cannot be guaranteed. Howells worked hard to create a feeling of safety for his participants, but the risk that this may not endure in a one-to-one relationship has been explored by other artists working in different media forms. The fragility of care is the subject of Gillian Wearing's short film *Sacha and Mum* (1996). Running at 4 minutes 30 seconds, Wearing's film depicts the emotionally-charged relationship between a mother and her adult daughter. The film is shot in black and white and, unlike Howells' use of non-art spaces, is displayed as a large projection or on a monitor within a gallery space. Both parts are played by actresses who perform a psychological and physical struggle, which ebbs and flows throughout the piece. In the domestic setting of a bedroom, the mother and daughter initially smile at each other and embrace in a demonstration of intimacy, tenderness and care. There is, however, something strange about the encounter and the daughter appears peculiarly vulnerable. The power imbalance in this maternal relation is implicit from the outset because the daughter wears only her underwear. She is positioned as an adult-child in contrast to her mother's conservative attire. The feeling of unease that this creates is justified as a struggle ensues and the mother pulls the daughter's hair, moving her head back and forth in a display of maternal aggression. At points, the daughter is kneeling with her head pushed to the floor. She appears strangely complicit given that her mother's movements are less agile than her own. The viewer is left wondering why she does not break free. The feeling that things are not what they initially seem is heightened by the use of sound, which is amplified

speech and played in reverse. This is, like the imagery, difficult to comprehend and is exacerbated by slightly speeded up video and the circling motion of the camera, which further heightens the sense of entanglement and confusion.

Figure five: Gillian Wearing, *Sacha and Mum* (1996)

Wearing's film shares the connection between intimacy and control experienced by Doyle in her failure to participate in *Held.* However, the emotional repertoire of *Sacha and Mum* is more extreme. The maternal relation in this work hovers on the border of love and hate. It is a highly unusual visualisation of what Rozsika Parker calls 'maternal ambivalence' in which motherhood is experienced as both pleasure and pain.[21] Parker challenges the shame attached to such feelings by exposing the cultural invisibility of maternal ambivalence. Furthermore, she argues that the coexistence of loving and hating maternal feelings has a productive outcome because it sharpens a mother's understanding of her relationship with her child. Her argument revised psychoanalytic readings of maternal ambivalence and contributed to feminist research methodologies by studying this issue from the perspective of the mother rather than the child. Parker's use of the word 'hate,' as opposed to softer emotions, such as

frustration or even anger, is particularly emotive. In an interview with Melissa Ben, she explained that she did consider other terms, but ultimately "nothing quite seemed to capture the raw feelings that so many parents have as 'hate.'"[22] It is the possibility of maternal hatred, rather than dislike, that the viewer is asked to confront in *Sacha and Mum.* The dynamic within Wearing's film is both affectionate and cruel, loving and violent. Furthermore, the rhythm of the film is such that the transitions flow both ways not only from affection to violence, but back again in a circling of emotion and dependency.

The conflicting emotions of Wearing's film resonate with Louise Bourgeois' maternal works in particular *Maman* (1999), despite the use of an entirely different medium and scale. The story of Bourgeois' inclusion into the art historical canon is as fascinating as it is problematic. She was finally offered a retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1982 when she was 70 years old. The catalogue that accompanied this exhibition was the first monograph detailing her extensive oeuvre. In 1993, Bourgeois was selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale and by 2000 she had been selected to show at the opening of Tate Modern, London. Bourgeois produced many paintings, drawings and prints in the 1940s and appeared in group shows along with Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko and others. However, it wasn't until the early 1970s that her work found a favourable context in the women's art movement, which emerged from the rise of second wave feminism. By the late 1970s, a renewed interest in content and meaning, rather than formal properties, increased the appeal of her references to memory and family life. The emergence of revisionist histories of women's art, as well as interest in psychoanalytical readings of art in the 1980s, helped to increase the visibility of Bourgeois' practice. Deborah Wye points out that during the 50s, 60s and 70s Bourgeois was known to the New York art audience but not to a wider public.[23] Lucy Lippard put it more forcefully when she said in 1975 that:

> Despite her apparent fragility, Louise Bourgeois is an artist, and a woman artist, who has survived almost 40 years of discrimination, struggle, intermittent success and neglect, in New York's gladiatorial art arenas. The tensions which make her work unique are forged between just those poles of tenacity and vulnerability.[24]

The appalling exclusion of Bourgeois' work in art historical discourses for so many years is in stark contrast to Wearing's recognition at an earlier stage in her career as part of the Young

British Artists movement. Wearing won the Turner prize in 1997 for *Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say* (1992–3), a work in which she asked people to write what they were feeling on a card and photographed them holding this up. However, the two artists share a strategy of depicting emotional ambiguity, which crosses generations, techniques and materials. A chronological account of artists engaging with feminist issues (if not necessarily of feminist artists) would place Bourgeois before Wearing, one generation following the other. This line of descent would not, however, give us the whole story because Wearing made *Sacha and Mum* before Bourgeois produced some of her late maternal works. Bourgeois returned to the themes of pregnancy and fertility in her 80s and 90s producing *Maman* when she was 88 years old. Within Bourgeois' practice, there are multiple returns to earlier life stages and a playful attitude towards temporality. In her discussion of Bourgeois' work on the maternal subject, Rosemary Betterton argues that "Bourgeois' art is constantly informed by returns to her past in repeated and contradictory ways that refute the concept of a whole and singular self bound by a chronological narrative."[25] In this respect a chronology of artworks, rather than artists, may be more helpful.

Figure six: Louise Bourgeois, *Maman* (1999)

Maman stands at 36 feet high and is a sculpture of a spider constructed from steel and marble. The enormity of Bourgeois' sculpture means it can only be installed outside or in particularly large industrial buildings. It was part of the inaugural exhibition at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2000 and was later displayed outside the gallery as part of a major retrospective of Bourgeois' work in 2007. *Maman* translates as 'mummy' and for Bourgeois the spider is a maternal figure. The viewer can walk underneath the sculpture and look up at the egg sac, which contains 17 white and grey marble eggs. The spider's eight steel legs are simultaneously enormous and spindly. They are substantial and thick towards the top but pointy at the ends, as if the spider is walking on tip-toes. The sculpture is made of hard materials yet represents a fiercely protective form of nurturing. The spider as mother is terrifying yet caring, strong but vulnerable.

The emotional push and pull of Wearing's *Sacha and Mum* brings into focus the uncomfortable tension in *Maman* between the maternal spider as menacing, frightening, overwhelming (at this scale), overbearing and hard on the one hand and enveloping, protective, precariously balanced and fragile on the other. Elizabeth Manchester writes of the ambiguity of the maternal metaphor in this work when she says,

> Encountering *Maman* always from the perspective of the child looking up from below, the viewer may experience the sculpture as an expression of anxiety about a mother who is universal – powerful and terrifying, beautiful and, without eyes to look or a head to think, curiously indifferent.[26]

Maman was made with reference to the artist's own mother and like much of Bourgeois' practice evokes painful childhood memories of familial distress. It shares with *Sacha and Mum* the psychological childhood fear of a murderous mother; the anxiety that a mother's enveloping embrace can turn into something else. At various points in *Sacha and Mum,* the daughter's face is covered with a towel and the viewer is left unsure if this act is loving or cruel. The mother's actions hover between trying to calm a disturbed child and attempting to suffocate her. The activism of *Maman* and *Sacha and Mum* lies in their powerful depiction of emotional ambiguity and refusal to comply with binary forms of understanding: love *and* hate

rather than love *or* hate. They are a reminder that care can so quickly turn to abuse and that the incredible strength of a parental safety net is fragile and can disappear in an instant.

By positioning Wearing in relation to Bourgeois, my intention has been to demonstrate the value of queering art historical discourse too long obsessed with patrilineal chronology and descent. Positioning women artists of different generations alongside each other, rather than in chronological sequence, matters if we are to find alternative ways to talk about which practitioners and practices are valuable and why. These artists are not often discussed alongside each other, working as they did in different geographic, political and aesthetic spaces, yet *Maman* and *Sacha and Mum* share with *Held* a preoccupation with emotional vulnerability, intensity and difficulty. Artworks communicate in a myriad of ways through which our subjectivities are constituted, sometimes fleetingly and at other times permanently. In this sense, communication is productive of who we are rather than reflective of a pre-formed subjectivity. Furthermore, by making their primary register that of emotions, and departing from the need to deliver a message, these artworks shift the debate about feminist and queer activisms from ideological resistance to productive ambiguity.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have been careful not to identify specific artists as feminist or queer, as if these identifications are secure attachments. Nor do I want to suggest that only some types of practice can be understood in these terms. I have deliberately chosen to include the work of artists who have not routinely been identified as feminist or queer, for example Gillian Wearing, as well as others who have, such as Tanja Ostojić and Adrian Howells. It would make little sense to replace a patriarchal art historical canon with another that fixes the positions of those deemed sufficiently critical to be included. Instead, my intention has been to queer art historical discourse by challenging the boundaries of inclusion, and to argue that feminist and queer can be understood as sensibilities rather than categories of practice. There is no universal story of feminist and queer arts activism. To attempt such an exercise would be to smooth the edges of a field characterised by disruption, multiplicity and instability.

An over-arching concern has been to identify and argue for the significance of *provocation, critical mimicry* and *emotional ambiguity* as embodied strategies of feminist and queer arts

activism. These approaches differ from now orthodox ideas of critical distance and defamiliarisation. They work with, rather than speaking to, their viewer/participants in their attempts to encourage behavioural and attitudinal change in the arenas of migration, bio-politics, intimacy and maternal ambivalence. This requires, and in some cases demands, of the viewer that they relinquish control and the certainty of a secure viewing position. The care offered by Howells, for example, is not guaranteed and the maternal comfort enacted in the works by Wearing and Bourgeois is at best precarious and at worst terrifying. Indeed, to engage with these works is to risk disappointment, frustration, even anger, but includes the possibility of intimacy and care. In my view, however, the emotional precarity instigated by these works is precisely where their feminist and/or queer arts activism lies. It is a form of criticality that refuses the certainty of a message, and with it the comfort of a secured place within feminist and/or queer art histories, but which connects on an affective level to our hopes and fears about intimacy, control and care.

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[1] "Guerrilla Girls: Is it Even Worse in Europe?," Whitechapel Art Gallery, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/guerrilla-girls/.
[2] Clare Hemmings, "Telling Feminist Stories," *Feminist Media Studies* vol. 6, no. 2 (2005): 115.
[3] See Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, "Female Imagery," *Womanspace Journal* (1973).
[4] The biological determinism of central core imagery was challenged by Mary Kelly and Griselda Pollock, amongst others, who drew on semiotic, Marxist and psychoanalytic theories to argue for the cultural and ideological, rather than biological, construction of woman. See, for example, Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988).
[5] Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 7-10.
[6] For a discussion of the development of this position see Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 50.
[7] Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (eds.), *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 3.
[8] Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 173.
[9] "After Courbet." Tanja Ostojić, accessed November 12, 2018, http://southasastateofmind.com/article/courbet/.
[10] Many second-wave feminist artworks addressed this hypocrisy including VALIE EXPORT's *Tap and Touch Cinema* performance (1968) in which the artist constructed a small movie theatre around her naked chest. She went out on to the street and invited people to touch her body inside this box. In so doing she challenged people to engage with a real woman's body as opposed to an image on screen. EXPORT called this approach 'expanded cinema', film without celluloid in which the artist's body activates the watching process.
[11] Bojana Videkanić. "Tanja Ostojić's Aesthetics of Affect and Postidentity". *Art Margins,* (2009). Accessed November 12, 2018. http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/featured-articles/414-tanja-ostojis-aesthetics-of-affect-and-postidentity-series-qnew-critical-approachesq.
[12] Videkanic. "Tanja Ostojić's Aesthetics of Affect and Postidentity".
[13] Musée d'Orsay. "Gustave Courbet, The Origin of the World". Accessed November 13, 2018. http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire_id/the-origin-of-the-world-3122.html.
[14] Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan (eds.), *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 214.
[15] See Amelia Jones, "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art," in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
[16] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76.

[17] For a detailed discussion of this see Clare Johnson, *Femininity, Time and Feminist Art* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 77-114.
[18] Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).
[19] Dee Heddon and Adrian Howells, "From Talking to Silence: a confessional journey," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art,* vol. 33, no. 1 (2011): 1-12.
[20] Doyle, *Hold It Against Me,* 3.
[21] Rozsika Parker, *Torn in Two: the Experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (London: Virago, 2005).
[22] Melissa Benn, "Deep Maternal Alienation," *Guardian* online (October 28, 2006), https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2006/oct/28/familyandrelationships.family2.
[23] Deborah Wye and Carol Smith, *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois* (New York: MOMA, 1994).
[24] Lucy Lippard, "From the Inside Out," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976), 249.
[25] Rosemary Betterton, *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2014), 162.
[26] Elizabeth Manchester, "Louise Bourgeois: Maman," Tate online (December 2009), https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625.

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