

Art and Media Cultures. Assessment Semester 2.

Challenges to traditional depictions of gender in art and media are becoming increasingly common. Many contemporary artists/authors/performers are using their practice to question gender norms, challenging traditionally feminine and masculine ideals to blur boundaries. Critically discuss the work of one or two creative practitioners in relation to gender theory

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Louise Bourgeois by Robert Mapplethorpe 1982 (Nairne, 1983)

In 1996 I attend an exhibition of the artist Robert Mapplethorpe. I bought a postcard; it was the photo taken by Mapplethorpe of a fellow artist, Louise Bourgeois holding a rather large latex phallus which she named 'Filette' created in 1968 (Nairne, 1983). It is an iconic image (Cooke, 2010). At the time I recognised the bravery of both artists as they had different creative drives, yet both were so bold, so mischievous and full of life. At the time I did not consider these artists in the context of gender identity and theory in the art world, nor the context behind the image and the significance it holds. I have since learnt that both artists challenged gender norms, particularly binary models of masculinity and femininity. This piece of art, provides the context and subtext to an exploration and evolution of gender theory, identity and history in art. Other work by Mapplethorpe and commentary on Bourgeois, will also be considered. Both artists were exceptionally talented in their own right, not as a man and

a woman but as artists pushing boundaries and challenging norms both before and after their deaths.

What is gender identity and why is it important? Gender identity refers to a person's, deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned to them at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including clothing, speech and mannerisms (Gorill, 2022). Gender identity terms range from Cisgender, Agender, Gender Queer, Bi-gender, Transgender, Intersex, Gender Variant, Gender, Third Gender and Gender Fluid (Unknown, 2022) - and all, none or a combination of these.

Over the millennia art has always challenged societal norms, It often packages itself as a rebellion and subversion. Pophale states, 'The dichotomy of gender has been argued and criticised since historic times, one of the earliest of which was Hermanphrodotos, a sculpture by the Greeks, that depicts an intersex person.' It was the onset of the feminist movement in the 1970's that created dialogue, intervention and a catalyst for change, about gender roles and the performance of gender identity on a much wider level (Pophale, 2021). 'Cisgender women's feminism starts with the general principle that patriarchy is a system that benefits men to the detriment of women, and empowers men specifically by disempowering women' (Faye, 2021).

Influential figures in the art world emerged from feminist gender theory revision through the study of art history and the treatment of gender identity in the context of artists' work. There are two that I will focus on. The first is Griselda Pollock who believed that the work of women artists must be judged differently and separately to the work of men. That the qualities of men and women's work

is very different and therefore they cannot be inserted into the same historical cannon (Jakubowicz, 2017). The second is Linda Nochlin who wrote an essay called, 'Why have there been no great women artists?' (Nochlin, 2021). Nochlin argues that there are no differences between the qualities of masculine and feminine work and that there are no such common qualities of femininity linking women's work.

So how are these definitions and the views of how they play out in the art world relevant to this Mapplethorpe portrait? The piece was commissioned by Robert Miller, his gallery represented both artists and it was to be used in the catalogue for Bourgeois' first retrospective work in 1982 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Cooke, 2010). Understandably Bourgeois felt nervous about the photo shoot, as she said, "I thought it was going to be a complete catastrophe I did take a piece of my art. It was a good collaboration....he is famous not for his flowers but for his objectionable sex world representations" (Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures, 2016).

John Berger states that, 'a woman has to survey everything she is and everything she does because of how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life' (Berger, 1972). Which is in this context a fair point as it was an image taken at a career defining point and therefore important. However, it was not created for the male gaze, it was made for everyone's gaze. There is no hint this piece of art is confined to a binary representation as it does not fit stereotypical duality. Or did it?

As Cooke went on to say, 'The image chosen for the publication, revealing the artist as confident, provocative, and alluring in equal parts, betrayed a dazzling performance—not least because it came at a moment when

so much was at stake for her professionally: Bourgeois was seventy-two years old at the time of her first exposure before a wide public, and this debut was to take place within the portals of the most esteemed of museums of modern and contemporary art, an institution that had only once before accorded a living female artist a retrospective' (Cooke, 2010).

It launched Bourgeois' career and was a triumph. Unfortunately, Mapplethorpe's photograph fared less well as it was cropped into a head shot in the catalogue. This very act resulted in an uncharacteristic and ultimately misleading image of the artist. It is this version that could meet the criteria for the male gaze! 'In its truncated form, Bourgeois' demeanour reads, paradoxically, as quite conventional: She seems to conform to the stereotype of the female subject who, when being photographed, automatically adopts a seductive smile' (Cooke, 2010).

After the photo edits we are left with an 'essentialist' view of Bourgeois, meaning she was displaying qualities relating to womanhood and femininity which was far from the purpose of the piece of art. This very act plays right into a tenet of gender theory. Had the Gallery learnt nothing from the Feminist Movement of the 1970's? But as Roland Barthes has argued, as soon as a piece of art leaves the studio the meaning is handed over to the viewer, 'the birth of the reader must be at the death of the author,' (Seymour, 2017) and in this case authors. Ann Sutherland points to the institutional parameters for notoriety and success in terms of recognition by institutions (Deepwell, 1996). It is clear that there are strong links between museums, curation/collection policies and the dealer system in the way that gender identity, theory and bias is applied. Choices are made and the power sits with the establishment not the artists themselves. The part of the art critics, institutions and gallery owners to influence what and how an artist presents a body of work is by no means

straightforward (Maho, 2018). To quote Jelinek it is, “not as simple as feminist and non-feminist - art that exists in a culture, which is part of a hierarchy, consumed by power and money” (Jelinek, 2013).

I would argue that the original aim of the collaboration was ‘anti-essentialist’, where women play a traditionally associated male role - because regardless of what Bourgeois calls her work nor taking in to account any Freudian interpretation, she holds a penis which is not dissimilar to what Mapplethorpe does in some of his work. The holding of a penis/phallus, no matter what the size, at that time was a male act! I also want to say something in the context of this work in relation to Pollock’s view. The artist is a man but the sitter is a woman who is profiling her work, so under Pollock’s definition where would this piece go and who would be the audience and the critic? Surely the piece is an example of what Linda Lochlin advocates, that both of these artists, who collaborated with each other came to the table as equals? As the philosopher Robin Dembroff explains, “The global dominance of men over women can never be dismantled while simultaneously maintaining, preserving and re-enforcing the binary model of sex and gender (Faye, 2021).

Bourgeois often resisted attempts to be pigeon-holed as a feminist. Prior to her exhibition in 1982 despite reviews, honorary degrees, articles and participating in 18 women only shows, which clearly helped to establish a positive reaction amongst women, she was not widely recognised (Deepwell, 1996). It was only when she was given the opportunity to appear as an equal peer to her male counter parts that her star ascended, ‘though she rejected the polemical premise of an exclusively feminist aesthetic, Bourgeois nevertheless found herself part of a genuine avant-garde, and though the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists had in their seasons swept her up similarly,

she was this time unquestionably a dominant member' (Storr, 2010).

Prominent women artists like Bourgeois do want to be 'representatives' of their sex, they want people to look at their work and judge them as individual artists (Deepwell, 2010). I think there was a time and a place for the approach of Pollock in proposing a thesis to redress the balance in the art of men versus women but as with all things, change is inevitable and it's not possible to accept the status quo (Deepwell, 1996) of the past.

But what of Mapplethorpe's role in challenging traditional gender norms? Mapplethorpe was described as 'dashing, dark and dangerous' (Jones, 2016) and the following two self-portraits sum that up.



Self-Portrait, 1980
© Robert Mapplethorpe
Foundation.



Robert Mapplethorpe, 'Self-portrait',
1980 (Wiki Commons)

He could appear as, 'a male archetype, the bad boy, with black leather jacket, dark shirt, coolly appraising gaze and the carefully coiffed 1950s-style hair' (Pophale, 2021) and in the other he portrays a softer more feminine image of himself demonstrating more gender fluidity. A spectrum of identities that are not static thereby rejecting the concept that gender is binary (Pophale, 2021). By doing so he was, 'juxtaposing conventional signs for man and woman—physical, cosmetic and sartorial and questioned established notions of 'male' and 'female' and gender norms, revealing their status as socially constructed terms' (Millington, 2020).



In other work such as Man in Polyester Suit, which was considered by critic Arthur C. Danto as Mapplethorpe's masterpiece (Sotheby's, 2014).. Mapplethorpe took the male gaze to another level, it is male on male gaze (Berger, 1972) and doing so in a sexually charged fashion, thereby challenging binary historical gender norms in art.

He does so 'to direct his meticulous, perfect gaze towards aspects of the truth of sexual identity, gender and ethnicity, from a personal and spontaneous perspective' (Celant, et al., 2004). In other work he did this to shock, but he was also driven to create his art from personal experience. He was, "always interested in taking a loaded subject like sexuality and somehow bringing it to a level that it hadn't been to before."

He is also quoted as saying that his more explicit art reflected everything, he had tried in his own life (Nairne, 1983). Both Mapplethorpe and Bourgeois shared a desire to draw on their own autobiographical experiences in the pursuit of their art practice. In Mapplethorpe's case he took the sexual experience to the limits, "a documentarian of the homoerotic life in the 1970s at its most excessive" (Dunne, 1989). Mapplethorpe, 'Unabashedly offered new representations of the male body and queerness - sometimes shocking his contemporaries by conflating religious insignia with explicitly sexualised nude photography - Mapplethorpe embodies the LGBTQ+ and BDSM subcultures of his era' (Figs, 2020).

Mapplethorpe was a man, a gender-queer. In the latter part of his life, he was living with AIDS. He was also an artist who enjoyed and represented BDSM. He lived in the 1980s which was a decade characterised by the HIV and AIDS epidemic. AIDS, Katz noted, was 'an identarian disease ... to lead to an early, pathetic, lonely death, it was used to reify and reanimate all the stereotypes around homosexuality that were being fed by a Republican majority at that moment' (Douglas, 2020).

There is a concept in gender theory that is called intersectionality which expresses the view that, 'all oppression is linked' (Taylor, 2019). 'The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and

gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of disadvantage' (Taylor, 2019). One could add to this definition, sexual orientation, physical ability, disability and age. These definitions are not the preserve of women, they equally apply to Mapplethorpe and to that matter any gay man, especially those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS that had to live through this time.

The 'type' of art i.e., photography was also a factor that we could add to the mix. Philip Geffer believes that photography and homosexuality shared something in common, 'Coming out and being openly gay was a societal taboo, photography was considered not much more than a utilitarian medium, an applied art a bastard of the arts' (Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures, 2016).

Mapplethorpe experienced discrimination within discrimination, the ultimate manifestation of which was the Grand Jury indictment placed on an exhibition of his work because of the explicit nature of some of the content shortly after his death. 'Until Mapplethorpe, there had never been an obscenity prosecution against an art museum in the history of this country [USA]' (Adler, 2020).

Art itself plays a vital role in society in both its storytelling (Jelinek, 2013) and in the context of how it came into being and it has been my aim in this piece to explore not just the art but also the context in which it was created, treated and interpreted in relation to gender theory. I would like to end on a quote from Alana Jelinek, 'At times, in addition, art articulates and embodies another way of seeing, not simply restating a binary opposite (itself a cliché) but profoundly disrupting the order of things...when art enacts its potential to express collectively plurality, as distinct from the endless variation of a single or few matrices, it becomes inherently politically potent' (Jelinek, 2013). Mapplethorpe and Bourgeois achieved these aims, through

the inspiration of their life experiences. Not just a man and a woman but so much more.

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