

#ImWithHer: An artistic exploration of online communication
and relationships

Elizabeth Wood

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Department of Art and Design

Writtle School of Design, Writtle University College

University of Essex

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Abstract

During my investigations I came across a variety of artists that used human emotion and pain in their work in many different ways. Artists like Tracey Emin and Sophie Calle let their pain from relationships they had experienced out through their work, while artists such as Jessica Todd Harper and Edward Hopper used the human form as a medium to communicate emotions such as sorrow and heartbreak.

My research into online communication and relationships produced two main outcomes;

1. I effectively distracted myself from the difficult period of my life by using my personal experiences to inspire creativity.
2. I discovered that making work born from failed relationships requires more misery in order to be reproduced.

I was faced with the conundrum; do I need to experience another break up in order to make more pieces? Going forward with my work I have accepted that, in order to continue to be authentic and honest, my work relies heavily on the state of my relationship. Powerful negative emotions are required for me to make another piece from this collection. As a form of therapy my research has enabled me to move on from this stage of my life and see positivity in the experiences where previously I felt as if there was nothing to gain but sadness and despair. I have come away from it all understanding myself, my motivations for making and my place as an artist in a new and more appreciative light that I am grateful for.

Introduction

I started my own artwork as a form of relationship counselling or self help expedition. Having experienced two unsuccessful relationships with men who had professed to love me unconditionally at the start of my postgraduate study I was faced with a conundrum, do I use my personal experiences to express myself artistically, is this the right move for me as an artist as well as a human being feeling vulnerable and defeated in her personal life. I am not the only artist who has suffered the personal pain of heartbreak, would using my own relationships as a study provide a form of closure I was missing? Can working through personal struggles provide artists with closure?

I wanted to find a way to artistically express myself; honestly and personally, until I had a change of stance on my situation. My exhibition collection that I eventually decided to throw myself into I believe served as a suitable and proactive distraction from what I saw then as a personal failure.

In a relationship we give over ourselves, we pledge our time to someone and we look back on a relationship to judge that period of time in our lives, rightly or wrongly.

From March 2017 following the end of an intense and serious relationship the stance of my work changed from one of smug reminiscence to that of outrage and self pity.

I am deep down a romantic; romanticism in art.

I was drawn to work born from pain, heartbreak and love from the very beginning of my artistic career. The expressionist movement was my main source of inspiration and I have experimented with expressing parts of myself through undergraduate study through the mediums of paint, photography, street art and videography, I consider myself a new media artist.

Chapter 1 Themes that interest me

2013-2016

Undergraduate artist, graffiti and videography

Relationship status: new relationship - 'living the dream'

In the final year of my undergraduate degree my videography work had become elaborate and I was producing pieces that had their own narrative, soundtrack and other media elements that gave my work depth and a plot. I took full creative control of my final piece films, editing and mixing the soundtrack, drawing storyboards for the different scenes, directing, filming and editing the footage. The subjects were my brother and my best friend; this was the most personal my work had been at this stage, this would soon change. Both films had images and writing appear as a mask layer, the written messages appeared for seconds but they pushed home the voice the acting in the film was also portraying. Both men became covered in drawings and caricatures with messages of confession or shame designed by over 40 different volunteers. These contributions then provided the illustrations that are appearing over or surrounding the models bodies as they posed. I used these pieces as a way to imbed confessions and feelings of shame I had within myself, immersed amongst the emotional messages of others, my own contributions didn't matter, they didn't stand out. Cowardly techniques that I left behind, my postgraduate work needed to be brave and I wanted to be more honest and more personal. I needed to look at myself rather than turning to the people I could project on to.



Figure 1. Elizabeth Wood *Confess* (2016) scene from short film, final cut editing

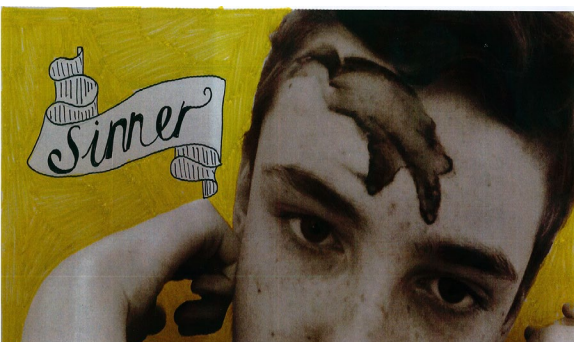
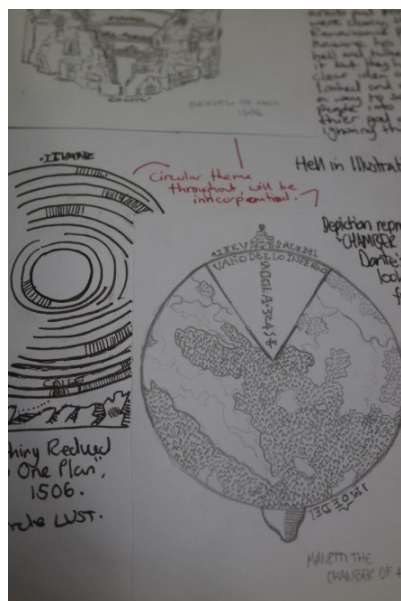


Figure 2. Elizabeth Wood *Shame* (2016) scene from short film, final cut editing

October 2016, start of postgraduate course

Relationship status: 'loved up'

I started my postgraduate study with a mission—to bare myself, to allow myself to be the one under the artistic microscope and to continue my exploration of the links between emotion and art, I was interested in artists that were in the business of over-sharing, displaying the emotional, portraying the sexual and communicating brutally honestly. As a source of inspiration I was drawn to the drama and darkness of the Vanitas and religious guilt that the writings of Dante and the work of Goya were promoting. Lust, greed and gluttony are the sins that contained the most visual imagery throughout art



history and I wanted to explore these further. Symbolism from Dante's *Inferno*, in particular the descriptions of hell, its chambers and diagrams added to my thinking and inspired me to explore the imagery, colours and portraits surrounding this 'propaganda style' Christian artwork (Dante, 2006: 5). My early postgraduate work continued this theme; I recreated and re-imagined the diagrams of the layers of hell by Manetti, I also experimented with different symbolic imagery such as golden pomegranates, a symbol of greed, the exotic fruit, the colour of wealth, and snakes—the animal we were historically told not to trust going as far back as the bible (Gen 3:1-20).

Figure 3. Illustrations of hell in my sketch book, inspired by *Everything Reduced to One Plan* by Manetti (1506)



Figure 4. Francisco de Goya *Man Mocked by Two Women* (1820-1823) Oil on Gesso

Figure 5. Francisco de Goya *Saturno Devorando a Su Hijo (Saturn Devouring His Son)* (1819-1823) Oil transferred to canvas 143 cm x 81 cm

During my exploration of themes linked to lust, for a new videography project, I researched sexuality and how artists use sex to make powerful



statements about life and love. Marlene Dumas was an artist that I was interested in and inspired by within this theme, especially her wet dreams collection – expressive watercolour piece's of sexually explicit acts and poses. Dumas borrows from popular culture, art history and current affairs as well as drawing from a bank of second-hand images so she “can generate first hand emotions” (Dumas, M ,Büttner, A& Higgie, J , 2015.). This work spoke to me because I too draw from a bank of other materials, in this case online conversations, to spark emotions from not just viewers of my work but myself too. Dumas enjoys making work that will be portrayed in different ways depending on the audience, in her conversation with Andrea Büttner and Jennifer Higgie for Tate Etc magazine she explained how the topics of sex, pornography and sexuality that she works within for many of her pieces were preserved differently as a topic in different countries “It was different for me coming from South Africa, where everything was banned. The attitude was so much more tolerant in Holland.” (Dumas, M , Buttner, A & Higgies, J,2015).

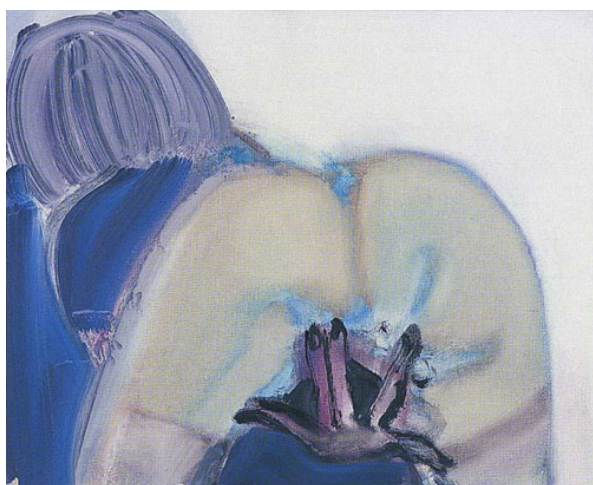


Figure 6. Marlene Dumas, *Fingers* (1999)



Figure 7. Dumas, *D-rection*(1999)

The simplicity of the attention drawing Sarah Lucas' work I viewed attracted me with its satirical set up as well as its unapologetic, feminists' comment on the derogatory way in which women's bodies are often described. Having the women in her work portrayed as in terms of breasts, a vagina, as an anonymous being symbolised as fruit and objects, they are perfect examples of casual sexism. There was a contract between Dumas and Lucas to me, they both shock, both come in within the theme of sex and portray cliché pictures of the female body. However, the humorous and almost sarcastic

method of communication that Lucas used was, for me, more powerful. The strong and unapologetic female voice was calling me to respond in my own style.

Figure 8. Sarah Lucas, *Au Naturel* (1994)

Chapter 2 Thinkers that interest me

During my exploration of art as a therapeutic aid I came across the work of Alain De Botton and art historian John Armstrong. The pair wrote a book together—*Art as Therapy* in which they attempt to answer the questions – what can art teach us about ourselves? And can it truly help us the same way therapy can?

I chose to focus on 3 topics de Botton touches on in his book, 3 things I hoped art can do for me and what I can use it for;

1. restoring hope,
2. showing us, we are not alone in sorrow and suffering
3. re-balancing us with what our psyche is 'missing'.

Through my exploration for new content and inspiration and through personal experience, I decided to explore how, according to de Botton, art could help restore the hope in me, show me what I am 'missing' and would help me feel less alone with my feelings (De Botton & Armstrong, 2013).

*"Art restores **hope** in us"*- De Botton describes the 'pretty' artwork as a life raft for sentimentality within the darkness of the world today by those artists that create it. There is room for light in the dark and *"to remind us that our lives aren't so terrible and that we really are so transient"*(De Botton & The School of Life ,2014)

*"It shows us that we are **not alone in suffering**- Art is a "communion" where people can acknowledge unspoken feelings and sympathize with each other and ourselves"* (De Botton & The School of Life, 2014 (13min :10 seconds))

Art allows us to experience pain of others through different lenses, it allows us to display moments that we know exist for each of us in private but we can air them publicly, expanding the conversation,

rather than having a private struggle and internalising everything. We can feel less lonely with the sad parts of our life(De Botton & Armstrong, 2013 :26).

*“Art can **re-balance** us – Art can put us in touch with concentrated doses of our missing dispositions, and thereby restore a measure of equilibrium to our listing inner selves.”* (De Botton & Armstrong, 2013 :32)

De Botton describes our quest to re-balance ourselves with what is missing from our lives. He describes how we all contain too much or too little of something and we all have something missing, united in this. Art, he explains, unconsciously acts to fill in our missing virtue, correcting our balance by providing us with that of which we are ‘missing’, this seeks to understand how everyone has a different taste. Different taste in art stems from the different things we all covet, we are all missing something different so it follows that different artwork will appeal to different personalities(De Botton & Armstrong, 2013 :34). Botton is then explaining the decisions, themes and the artistic taste I developed at the beginning of my postgraduate study and why I was drawn to those artists.

We are not alone in our suffering

Relationship status: daily struggles and a large dose of paranoia that I am hiding

1. *It shows us that we are **not alone in suffering**- Art is a communion “where people can encourage a profound engagement with sadness”*(De Botton & Armstrong, 2013 :26).

Art provides a communion for sadness and times of great emotional difficulty that we all face. Artists that acknowledge something and display it in a manner of ‘we are all in this together’ come into this category suggested by de Botton. A perfect example of this being a quote by Mark Rothko when questioned about his style;

“You’ve got sadness in you, I’ve got sadness in me – and my works of art are places where the two sadness’s can meet, and therefore both of us need to feel less sad.”

Mark Rothko - 2010

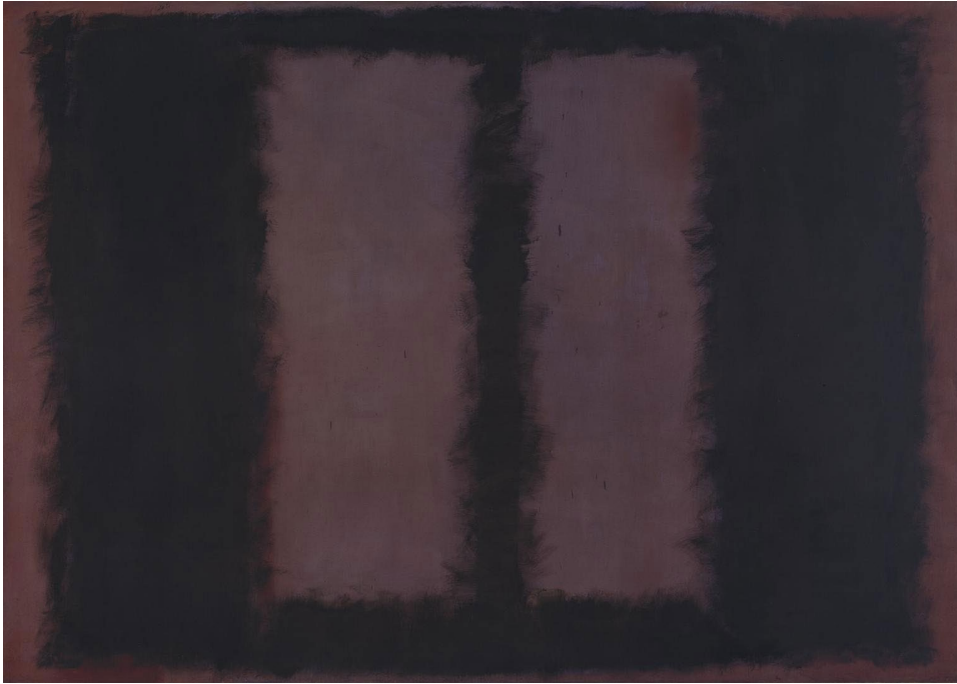


Figure 9. Mark Rothko *Black on Maroon* (1958)

This very telling quote from Rothko underlines the feelings artists pour into their artwork. Rothko encouraged people's emotional responses to his work and would often explicitly articulate his interest in the expression of human emotions such as tragedy, ecstasy and doom, feelings we all can relate to (Schjeldahl, 2016).

Emotion and psychological states did play a large part in Rothko's work and perhaps one of the best demonstrations of the artist's inner sadness can be seen in his later work (Schjeldahl, 2016).

Towards the end of his life the style and nature of Rothko's paintings changed, a change spanning 12 years from 1957 up to 1969, shortly before his suicide. Rothko's palette became much darker; he abandoned the use of high-keyed and bright colours and instead favoured blacks, burgundies and deep greens, rendering the contrast of colour in these large and intense paintings barely visible (Schjeldahl, 2016).

Rothko fits with this manner of art as therapy because he creates a communion of sadness of sorts with his work, he creates a space for people to feel his misery and think about their own.

Another artist who wants us to be in tune with the loneliness and private suffering of others is Edward Hopper. Edward Hopper's work throws you back, rejects your gaze and encourages you to examine what it is that you are feeling about what is in front of you. He creates characters in his world that are depicted experiencing the individual isolation that Hopper captures in his almost claustrophobic spaces. Annie Proulx, an art critic writing for the Guardian describes how Hopper displays the

psychological inner life of his subjects in his paintings, a solitary figure, alone in one of his great landscapes or a modern city scene (Proulx, 2004).

Artist and writer Victor Burgin described the interaction with Hopper's works, "We may encounter him by chance at random places where his world intersects our own". To know Hopper's work is to be predisposed to see the world in his terms, consciously or not (Proulx, 2004).

If we have ever felt lonely we can therefore connect with his work.

Loneliness is also something that has often concerned me. I personally do not like being alone. I have to really feel like I need it, time by myself, as company is important to me, I think this has always been a main problem when it comes to relationships. The late night dinners, lonely train journeys and dark hotel rooms that we find the Hopper population in amongst his paintings is what I find powerful, as a person that tends to dread these situations.

My fascination with Edward Hopper's lonely and dismal outlook is also strongly linked to the level of loneliness I now feel. I am alone with my thoughts for the first time in a long time and it does scare me, currently living away from my family I find myself alone in the flat waiting for my boyfriend to come back home from work. When I made work that is angry, uses bad language and displays a level of frustration, that is my way of feeling less alone, displaying my emotions through my pieces also allows the viewers an insight to my inner self, the same way Hopper allows us to feel the feelings of his subjects.

Hopper's work *New York Movie*, for example, shows a busy cinema hall but the lonely and melancholy expression on the usherette who is bathed in a warm golden light is what your eye is drawn to, the cinema merely sets the scene for the main character in this painting's narrative. We have all felt this



way at some point, surrounded by people but someone still so alone.

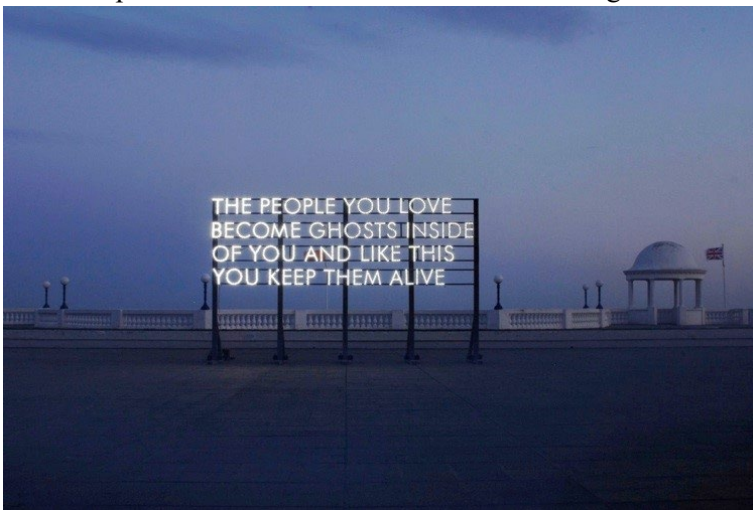
Figure 10. Edward Hopper, *New York Movie* (1939)

Hope

“Hope is something to celebrate”

(De Botton & Armstrong, 2013 :16)

The people you love become ghosts inside of you and like this you keep them alive by artist Robert Montgomery, for me is a perfect example of an artwork that restores hope in us as Robert himself explained in an interview. He wanted to hang on to the idea that somehow love can triumph over death.



He also explains that he made the work to keep himself sane.

Figure 11. Robert Montgomery
the people you love become ghosts inside of you and like this you keep them alive
(2010) Sign, painted wood & solar-powered LED lights

In December 2010, When asked for his take on mortality Robert answered that :

“I find ideas of angels and ghosts very comforting in that context. I find the idea that somehow love can triumph over death an idea I need to keep sane. After my close friend Sean Flynn died I made quite a lot of work about death. The most uplifting piece I think is the one I showed in Basel this year – THE PEOPLE YOU LOVE BECOME GHOSTS INSIDE OF YOU AND LIKE THIS YOU KEEP THEM ALIVE. It’s made from recycled sunlight – the sculpture recycles sunlight to illuminate itself, as a metaphor for what we do when we remember someone we love. And I really like the idea of ghosts as a positive thing....”(Montgomery, 2010)

Robert is using his artwork as a form of self help, the suggestion from the artist that making this work helped him when he was in a low place after the death of a friend shows how creating art allowed him to make something positive from such a sad, negative experience.

Death is something that everyone struggles with and Montgomery’s attempt at showing love can triumph over death and that nothing is exactly ‘the end’ is starting the difficult conversations and providing hope and light in the darkness. I want my work to be a communion of sorts for whoever

views it. My post graduate work dealing with the emotions of shame attracted keen responses from a lot of people that found it powerful and compelling, I believe that this is because everyone at some point has felt ashamed and I tapped into that emotion.

It's not all perfect

De Botton and Armstrong's ways of seeing has benefited my work and my understanding of *perhaps* why I made the work that I do and why my artistic taste is just that. Everyone does not share their influence and understanding of art and its therapeutic benefits in the wider art community and this is important if I am to have a balanced view on this sort of literacy manifesto the authors have put out into a culture that is very much up for individual interpretation.

The Rijksmuseum, that allowed de Botton to change the layout and the experience that the public have and the way they interact with the work, have come under fire for allowing their museum to be changed based on the suggestions made in *'Art as Therapy. Why Alain de Botton is a moron'* was how the British magazine *The Spectator* headlined their review of the book, even claiming that the Dutch art museum that chose to restructure based on the psychological advice about the 'proper' way to view art, should be 'ashamed of itself' for confronting its visitors with the texts by de Botton (Pfauth,

2014).



Figure 12. The entrance to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Online journalist for the independent new site *The Correspondent*, Ernst-Jan Pfauth, visited the 'new' museum and described how he felt some of the post-it notes were not a useful insight to the museum but instead self-explanatory, the queue post-it for example simply read 'waiting in the queue has become a feature of the Rijksmuseum experience' (Pfauth, 2014). Waiting is involved anywhere

popular, this isn't a new or interesting revelation for anyone to read and certainly isn't exclusive to that museum. Pfauth does however go on to explain how de Botton 'encourages you to look at art in a way you never have before and this is exactly what I found when I look through the 'de Botton lens'. He directs you to move beyond gaping at pieces of work that interest you and to really look at it and how it makes you feel. Pfauth describes his own experience of this when he was faced with *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt- a painting he confesses to have 'looked at overcome with awe' many times. But it wasn't until he saw the same painting accompanied by the museum's optional audio tour on his iPad that he noticed the 'irony' (Pfauth, 2014).

'You are standing in a crowd and you're looking at a painting of a crowd. But there is a difference. Your crowd is anonymous and nothing good can come of it. You would love to be alone here. Whereas



the camaraderie in the painting brings light to a dark and rainy day"

(Pfauth, 2014)

Figure 13. Rembrandt Van Rijn *The Night Watch* (1642) Oil on Canvas

These kinds of accompaniments to pieces that aid in describing the therapeutic effect of art are also the comments that have sparked criticism of the views. Art critic for the Guardian Adrian

Searle described the lack of credibility de Botton has to act as a gallery guide due to his "evangelising and his huckster's sincerity make him the least congenial gallery guide imaginable" (Searle, 2014).

Also described as pseudo-therapeutic and overly sentimental work, this is always going to be the case with books that make you see a new way of seeing, we all want to prioritise the way WE see art. De Botton has a way of understanding art that I choose to add into my own way of thinking.

Chapter 3 Artistic influencers

Relationship Status: content, with its challenges of course

"I realised I was my work, I was the essence of my work- I always say that after I'm dead my work isn't going to be half as good"

Tracey Emin The South Bank Show, 2001

Tracey Emin's art pieces work as a kind of self-mapping for the artist, she conveys experiences and events from her own life and makes her stories her art, her life experiences her subjects, both are revealed with a raw open honesty that I greatly respect and wished to replicate within my own personal pieces. Her stories don't act to cast her in a favourable manner; the promiscuity, the abortions, the heartache and the self destructive behaviour she has put herself through are part of her she doesn't shy away from, Emin instead uses her platform as a confessional space (White Cube, 2018). I found this part of her artistic identity resonated within my own work, both now and within my undergraduate confession and guilt pieces.

Emin is strong willed, unapologetic and, at times, a highly poetic individual. It was from an engagement with her art, including the personal text work that I drew precedent and inspiration from my own textual interventions.

Emin has been using neon as a medium since the early 1990s, she uses this modern, more commercial method in a different way, displaying simple, handwritten text that you'd expect to see scratched into a monoprint, another way the artist incorporates text, but you instead see it mounted on the exhibition wall, pastel coloured, bright neon tubing that looks as if it belongs in a 'trendy' café or bar.

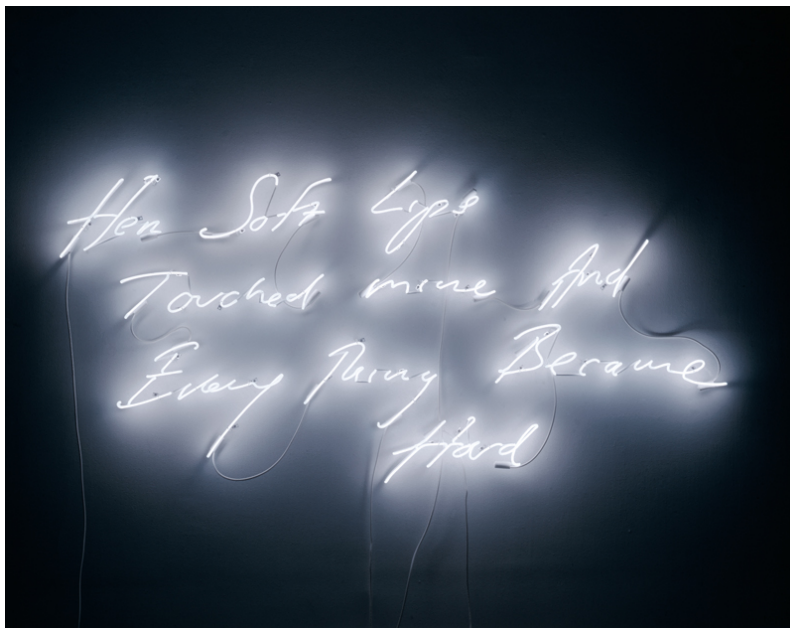


Figure 14. Tracey Emin *For Her* (2008) Neon

Relationships and the anger, love, frustration, longing, and jealousy that consume them are often featured heavily in her work. Since my own focus was turned in a similar direction I found her words seemed to speak of my own feelings. We are different women, at different stages in our lives, in very

different relationships, but the hurt and bliss that are experienced when you share a part of you with someone can feel the same when it ends. This is true within my work, I only want to create work when I feel it - I have to feel a connection with whatever I produce to feel that what I have made is worthwhile.

What struck me about the typography work of Emin's was that despite the wide variety of mediums she creates with her work maintains this style that is clearly hers. There is a personal monologue that is an important thread that runs through all of her work (Smith, 2011).

Reading about Emin and her motivations to make work, what struck a chord with me was where she talked about how she could never make her early work now as it was years ago and how much has happened since that has changed her as a person. Over time, of course, people change both internally and externally. This speaks to me as an artist, as this sense of time, of change, is what I look for in my own body of work. As proud as I am when I look back at my own pieces, I like to see them as conditioned by a state of mind that I have since left behind. My graffiti work, for example, I feel has a lot of rage and frustration coming through. The short films contained the version of me that was coming to terms with mistakes I had made, as well as producing a film that stood by my brother after he came out as gay. These pieces stand as not only the development of my work as an artist but also the development of myself as a person. (18 – 21 years old.) I like to see how I dealt with my emotions at the time and hence to feel at peace with that stage of my life. It's reassuring.

The Tracey Emin 'I promise to love you' collection is another source of inspiration for my MA practice. The incorporation of sexuality, nonconformity and the vivid depiction of a singular



personality within Emin's work make me strive to achieve that same raw honesty and powerful commentary in my own work. Emin channels her life into and through her artwork and I too believe I create my best work when I channel my own personal feelings, I need to get back to this place, working for something I feel passionate about: heartbreak, anger, understanding.

Figure 15. Tracey Emin *Love is What you want II* (2011)

Monoprint

I created several handwritten text pieces as a response to the work of Emin, I used ink, gold paint and intricately cut stencilled text to channel some of my own personal experiences, a way of re-telling a memory without depicting it, instead with a focus on my feelings at the time of the experience. Using the stencil and the light box I too incorporated light, technology and hand written words.



Figure 16.

Elizabeth Wood *You Looked into My Eyes but it Wasn't Enough* (2016) Ink and gold paint on canvas

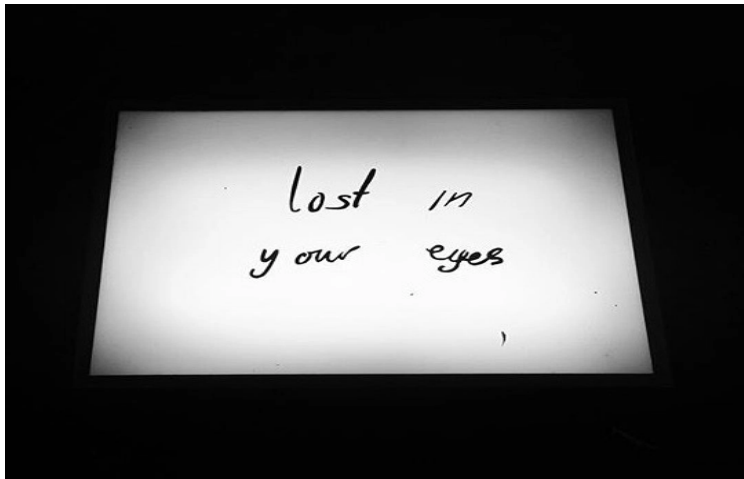


Figure 17. Elizabeth Wood *Lost in Your Eyes* (2016) Stencil on light box

Although I was pleased with these pieces they seemed too detached from the style I usually worked with, they were too delicate and to me lacked the 'demanding to be looked at' feel my work had previously shown. They were too dim and could easily be overlooked, the language and the messages Emin displays within her work is one of the main reasons I was drawn to her work initially, I needed to be more honest and work with something that encouraged the same amount of emotional interaction that I knew I could achieve with a subject matter that was more raw and thought provoking for myself.

Sophie Calle

Relationship Status: Reminiscing a failed relationship, a thing of the past?

I received an email telling me it was over.

I didn't know how to respond.

It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me.

It ended with the words, "Take care of yourself"

And so I did.

*I asked 107 women (including two made from wood and one with feathers),
chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter.*

To analyse it, comment on it, dance it, sing it.

Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me.

Answer for me.

It was a way of taking the time to break up.

A way of taking care of myself

You're heartbroken. Then you think of its potential as art.

Take Care of Yourself, Sophie Calle, 2007

Based upon the last words in a letter written by her lover leaving her.

I decided to travel further down the route of using the raw and honest parts of my life to stimulate the kind of pieces I was trying to create. I came across Calle's work after a research colloquium when her work was referenced to and discovered the powerful side to a 'woman scorned'. I myself had recently started to create prints and text work based around found emails from my ex boyfriend, his words that were particularly spiteful and cutting were the source I believe I had been looking for to make work that was more intimate and personal.

Encountering the intimate and painful details of Sophie's break up transformed into art came as a sort of relief. She provided an insight into and justification for the work I wanted to make. Seeing how Calle had risen above a difficult, not to say traumatic period in her life, by dissecting and analysing the email to the point that the self-absorbed words became obsolete, allowed me to feel closure in our shared alliance, we had both been hurt but we weren't taking it lying down. Rather than rereading her email, sitting in tears wondering what she could have done differently, wondering why she wasn't enough for her former lover, Calle immortalised her experience in a way that will be remembered for many different reasons, not a single one of them being 'I didn't deserve him' in fact, quite the opposite!



Figure 18. SOPHIE CALLE *Take Care of Yourself* (2007)

106 elements: 7 films + 33 films and prints + 57 prints and texts + 6 wide paper texts + 5 small films and prints

'The Ex' is Calle's subject; he had his grammar, syntax and manners ripped apart by editors, etiquette consultants, judges and scholars of many kinds. Strong women who do not wallow in pain but instead use their profession to see a selfish partner for who they are.

The chorus of strong female voices, 107 women and a parrot to be exact, encouraged me to follow this path of striving to create something empowering and iconic with the ashes of a failed relationship.

I was acting as my own 107women; I re-read, questioned, wrote about and painted - all based on the words of one man.

Christopher Wool

“I define myself in my work by reducing the things I don’t want, it seems impossible to know when to say ‘yes’ but I know what I can say ‘no’ to.” – Christopher Wool, 2013

Wool keeps tamping himself down, mark making and then bleaching work out like he is in doubt that the whole process of making work is actually worthwhile or even possible. He obscures earlier works with whorls from a spray can. Wool employs palimpsest by layering patterns, headlines, graffiti scrawls and Jackson Pollock like splatters and drips, then all of this is silk-screened onto linen. Wool then smothers this with more paint and finishes it with a smudge; he seems to be avoiding a perfectly refined product, manically adding more and more layers until the original work is obliterated (Budick, 2013).

Choosing to work with text and a sort of ‘re-telling’ I have become interested in the work of Christopher Wool, this ‘less is more’ approach taken by Wool as described by Ariella Budick (Budick, 2013) is something I admire, knowing when to stop and knowing what not to do is a challenge I face whenever I put together a collection of work. Stencils of black block-capital words, Wool’s text based works are devoid of feeling except somehow ominous. Stencilled demandingly on white paper in an impersonal font.

The font I use in my work is more a decision based on presentation; I want the words themselves to matter rather than the font they were written in being the main draw for a viewer so I used a basic font that wouldn’t detract from the words. Wool also uses this aesthetic, with stencils of black, block-capital words; Wool’s text based works are devoid of feeling except somehow ominous. Stencilled, his Untitled works from 2012 (Enamel on aluminium paintings) can be almost viewed as violent; the sloshing of the paint is reminiscent of a crime scene. Manically expresses himself and then feeling unsatisfied. There is a level of urgency in his work, ripping the vowels from “trouble” and removing the spaces in his THESHOWISOVER pieces. There isn’t time for proper English. That or it just doesn’t matter.



There is a manner of urgency within my own mark marking, especially within my spray paint pieces; created work with an aerosol is freeing and immediate.

Figure 19. Christopher Wool *Untitled* (2000) Enamel on aluminium

Barbara Kruger



Figure 20. Barbara Kruger *Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face* (1981)

Barbara Kruger is a conceptual pop artist who uses her interest and skills in graphics to produce direct, aggressive and eye opening works.. Often, ironically, mass produced and used in advertisement campaigns that she directly critiques. Kruger’s works often evoke an immediate response from the viewer barraged by both her confrontational statements and the mainstream images alongside them which subtly assist the ‘selling’ of the ideas expressed, to the viewer (Wolf, 2018).

Or putting it the other way round –Kruger incorporates found images, mostly from media sources that she then

directly and crudely juxtaposes with overlaid text criticising the very ideologies the images put forth, with a focus on sexism, misogyny and consumerism. This use of media, images and strong female expression also fed into my work, especially when I worked, with spraypaint and stencil designs, as Kruger’s powerful block text is the style of typography that I enjoy replicating. Slogans that grab the viewers attention, bright colours and basic font that stands out are what I appropriate in a quite unapologetic manner .

The Guerrilla Girls can also be closely linked to Kruger’s work through their use of text, and critique of culture. The Guerrilla Girls consist of a group of anonymous femanist artists that make work that focuses on the sexism and racism present within the art world, they use facts, humour and outrageous visuals to create videos, stickers, posters and demonstrations to make thier voices heard. Their work has been influential and focused on starting a conversation and a voice for the often overlooked female artists in the male-dominated contemporary art world. Roberta Smith cited the Guerrilla Girls with starting a movement that women could use as a trendy and relevant way of demanding the same opportunities as men. They “*took feminist theory, gave it a popular twist and some Madison Avenue pizzazz and set it loose in the streets*” (Smith, 1990).

Chapter 4 Masters Artistic exploration

During my postgraduate work I explored different techniques of making work as well as different ways of thinking and looking. I wanted to change how I had previously made work, to strip it down to the parts I thought would work with a new 'honest' style and create a 'less is more' attitude that would produce only the most concise message and a set of pieces that I could be proud of.

Found Text

I have begun looking for the material that I could use to produce the honest, emotional and striking work that I was striving to make following the influence from Emin and Calle. I chose to work with some original emails I received during the infamous break-up of my first proper relationship when I was 17.

On Thursday, October 2, 2014, [REDACTED] wrote:
 Oh and here's the attachment of a fucking lie you told me only three weeks ago,
 Straight back to how you were before we met, you were with loads of Boys. My mates called you a slut and to not get involved. I Haven't changed you at all have I, on to the next one and go out with anyone. Hope you enjoy fucking him whilst I'm here actually caring about what we had,
 Don't care if this is harassment now or me not being the same you deserve to see my angry side now. Still isn't as bad as what you've done so whatever.
 How can you say you loved me and not to hate you always. You can't have everything you want in life you need to learn that and start appreciating shit more.
 You made me believe you were different and a loving girl rather than a playing around normal Essex girl that I was trying so hard to avoid.
 Worst thing is you've effected my trust for future girls and that's not at all fair. I hope they aren't gonna be like you.
 Bitch

Figure. 21 Elizabeth Wood *Bitch*, (2016) edited found email,

I liked the idea of using the original text font to recreate some typography based video work around the emails I had saved. I used the font Microsoft sans, that comes as a default in hotmail emails, and it gave the text, which incredibly personal, a simple look that will encourage the viewer to look at the words being said, rather than distracting them with a pretty design.

Directly influenced by how Tracey Emin's work is grounded in the personal experiences and events in her life I also chose to create in this style. Work based around a small collection of moments from my own life. Whereas Emin's work is autobiographical in nature, my artworks were beginning to provide a brief and miserable picture of my romantic relationships. That was where the centre of my creating stemmed from during my postgraduate practice.

Before the path of my work became directly personal to myself and my own emotions the previous multi layered videographic attracted more output in the form of artistic expression and materials used to create pieces. However I am beginning to realise that it isn't necessarily the amount of techniques and different artistic methods you use that allows you to best interact with a piece, the emotional, intimate connection you feel when the messages you are displaying are of a deeply personal nature allow for an even deeper connection. I took more care with this work than I had ever before because I cared so much for my artwork.

Within this new series of work I was leaving myself open to scrutiny and dissection from strangers. I was airing my dirty laundry , my private conversations that paint me in a negative light , but this isn't necessarily apparent to the viewer, they are first shocked at the way the language was used to hurt me and within the act of taking ownership and control of how these words are seen by others I surrendered a certain amount of creativity and expression. I was being careful with the sections of text I used, editing the conversation and putting out the parts that hurt or made me feel the most. While the end product was usual for me, profanity and swearing that often shock, much like my graffiti mural in my undergraduate practice, the words had been carefully curated themselves.

Typography meets Graffiti

I wanted to get back into making physical pieces of work, that way I felt an attachment with the work I produced. The graffiti style typography work was created in a variety of stages, a spontaneous process that I incorporated for the second piece 'Typical Essex Girl Slut' except this time round I covered the



insult and let the kinder attempt at conversation speak for itself. The contrast in the two pieces represented the contract in the way we talk to a lover when they hurt us. We flit between nicety and insulting words when we can't hide how we really feel.

Stage 1 **Figure 22. Stage 1 Elizabeth Wood *Typical Essex Girl Slut* (2017)**
Spray paint on metal sign

Free hand spraying the original and painful insult chosen from a series of emails, I chose Typical Essex Girl Slut, the title of this piece, because the generalisation of becoming 'typical' in his eyes hurt after four years of love, also the word slut is degrading and has a biting edge to it. Coming from Essex is part of my identity as an artist, so I felt like it was keeping a part of this work personal to me, the words throughout this process became less and less about an attack towards me and more like a tool for me to pick apart and use for my work.



Stage 2 **Figure 23. Stage 2 Elizabeth Wood *Typical Essex Girl Slut* (2017) Spray paint on metal sign**

Covering the rest of the sign was a decision I made on the spot, I originally wanted the origin of the aluminium to be apparent but the message was getting lost in the bold red of the sign beneath, I chose a bright, garish pink to emulate as well as personalise the bold clash of colours used by Kruger on her propaganda poster pieces. I always admired the red on black and its powerful effect of getting noticed, the pink serves as my own attention drawing colour.



Stage 3 **Figure 24. Stage 3 Elizabeth Wood *Typical Essex Girl Slut* (2017) Spray paint on metal sign**

The covering of the hidden message started initially as a mistake, I decided the words were too big and it looked to me like an angry tag that a scorned lover would scribble, this pettiness was something that interested me about the words as they read as a desperate insult. I didn't want to confuse the viewer with words I had spoken, I wouldn't use these words against someone and I didn't want it to come across

as such.



Stage 4 **Figure 25. Elizabeth Wood *Typical Essex Girl Slut* (2017) Spray paint on metal sign**

I made the new, happier words that had been said in an attempt to be civil during an awkward conversation, smaller than the insult that lay underneath. The word 'slut' was still visible after the first layer of pink but I liked the effect this created. There was a clear attempt to cover the words but it was enough, the same way this nicety, the wishing happy birthday, was an attempt for my ex to mask his anger towards me.

For these new pieces I decided to channel the direct feeling I had at that moment of time about the relationship into making work that portrays those feelings. Everyone types what they really want to say, deletes it, edits it or simply never sends how they really feel in the empty and emotionless correspondence that is email.

Overhead projector work

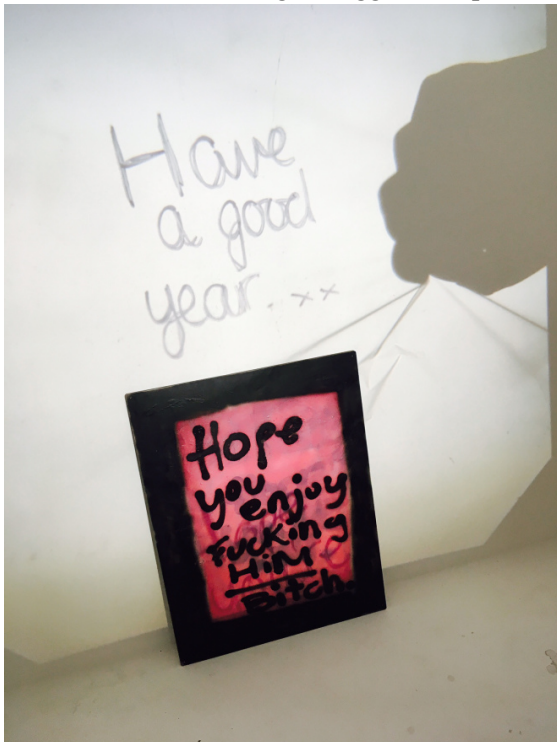
December 2016

Relationship status: smug

Realisations , new perspective and a peaceful understanding is what I want moving forward. Delving into the harsh and uncomfortable memories helps to bring back how I felt and I need to have powerful feelings triggered within me to make work I am proud to show.

Reflection when making the O.H.P pieces.

During the process of creating what would be my final exhibition pieces I began to incorporate other technological elements just as I did with my undergraduate work. My graffiti text pieces were based on the two versions of ourselves we show people on the internet or over text. The civil persona when we are holding back, and our aggressive, angry, and perhaps true self that comes out when we are protected by the veil of social media communication. I wanted to see how my work came across when I depicted this difference in language literally, scrawling a kindhearted message and projecting it onto the wall above the original aggressive piece to show the juxtaposition. I did not go any further with



this technique as I found that the projected message, above and lit by the bright projector light was overshadowing the powerful nature of the painted piece.

Figure 26. Overhead projector experiment

Lino Prints

Relationship status: still smug

After painstakingly cutting out each letter of a long-winded email I began to feel 'done' with the words, after going over and over them previously and using them to make work, I have become

desensitised to the language used, I almost forgot that the text was aimed at me, my actions, my insults to receive. I feel that it doesn't affect me anymore, I used to stumble upon the messages when searching for a delivery notice or University email and my stomach would feel as though it was going to fall out of my mouth. I saved them as justification that I had made the right choice. I don't need them anymore.

It's refreshing.

Reflection when making the lino print text work

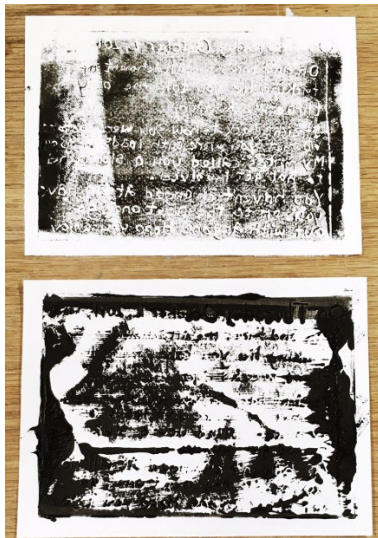


Figure 27. Lino print of found emails

I tried a complicated way of showing an entire email in lino printing form. I drew and cut out every word from a piece of A5 lino as a way or appropriating the words in a directly artistic way. The prints themselves came out backwards as I forgot they key parts of making prints with text- design it backwards or you can't read it! Although, I loved the outcome, they appeared mysterious and abstract since you cannot make out any of the words at first glance. This subtlety is something I wanted to incorporate as I progressed with my new style of making.

Palimpsest

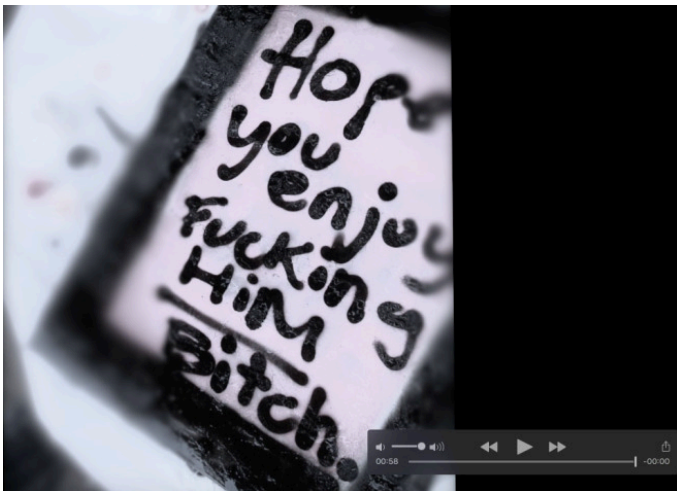
There are several techniques that I used to create my work that were done instinctively without a clear objective as I worked purely from my emotions, however my artistic mind chose a particular technique that has been used for hundreds of years by artists who work quickly or expressively.

Palimpsest, it has several meanings but the one I am choosing to focus on when contextualising my work is; Material that has been used one or more times after earlier work or writing has been erased. A multi-layered record of several processes.

So an artist that uses palimpsest will produce work that has diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface. This is where I have adopted this technique. My expressive and at times aggressive text in my aluminium piece's are either seen below the surface of a pleasant exchange or are the top layer of my work with the more pleasant text seen beneath. My works are all multi layered, thick layers of paint, spray paint and even scratches in the surface, all produced manically upon a reused traffic sign.

Film

For an experiment I filmed myself graffitiing over an old artwork of mine, first with the positive words "Hope you're well" then going aggressively over that with "Hope you enjoy fucking him. Bitch." This piece represents to me the difference between being civil with someone that has hurt you,



and being honest. - This is where my exhibition series of work originated from, an experiment, filming myself making my art to see if there was a point I could identify when I connected with a piece and why. If I was to truly make my work personal I wanted to also understand how I do so instinctively.

Figure 28. short film of artist creating
Hope You're Well

Viewing the process of making in this way showed me that it was just that, a process, there isn't any hesitation, I keep spraying, repainting and covering the metal sign until I am finished.

Another experimental video I made with the same found emails was handwritten quotes from the conversation projected onto a dirty plinth. As the words come into focus I slowly wipe my hand across the words, the projection works its way over my skin - the words sinking into me. Appropriated several different ways, the words had become part of me and I liked how the dirty backdrop was reminiscent of the unclean implications the words are accusing, 'sleeping around' would render someone unclean, just like the surface the words appear upon.

I used an inconsistent letter size as a way of dumbing down and mocking the speaker.

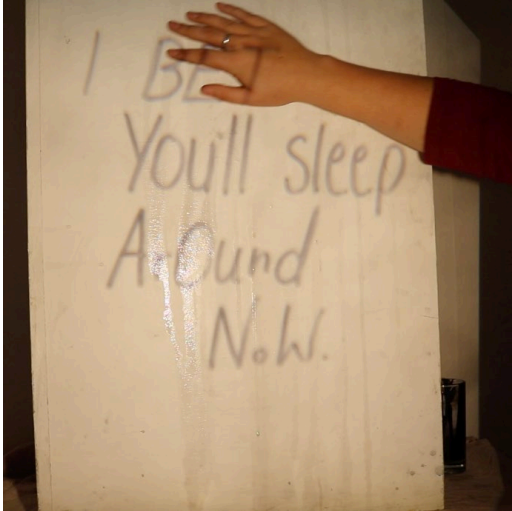


Figure 29. Elizabeth Wood *I Bet You'll Sleep Around Now*

Contextualising my new style

The broader sociological influences that underlay my work arose from the way in which we are able to communicate today and how we choose to communicate with each other. There has been a shift towards using technology such as texts, WhatsApp, email etc. to talk to one another and express feelings. This allowed me to have a bank full of raw text based conversations that allowed me to access the pain and emotions that perhaps weren't as fresh in my mind as they had been previously and incorporate these into my artwork, especially the textual paintings. Contemporary art as a whole has been greatly influenced by the rapid development in digital technology, not just on the way in which artists can now make art (materials and technological advancements of equipment) but also in the way that technology gives the contemporary artists an even wider field of society to pick apart and comment on throughout their work. Some of my favourite artworks would simply not exist or would have been made very differently without the communication technology we have today, Sophie Calle for example used email as a tool to gather information for her *Take Care of Yourself* installation as well as the original inspiration for the artwork being based upon an insensitive email she received from an ex lover.

There were also psychological influences that helped me produce my collection of artworks and these originally came from my desire to use my creative output as a means of therapy or relationship counselling for myself. I felt a deep inner guilt for the first scenario that I created work based on, and an on-going heartbreak that influenced the other.

I believe art is a therapeutic medium, just as my generation and younger think of music as therapeutic and many of us now have access to a playlist of relaxing songs on our phones. With playlists called 'motivation mix' 'mood booster' and blogs offering lists of songs that will 'will your anxious mind to sleep', it has become common place for music streaming sites and social media platforms to promote links between well being and what music you are listening to. The belief that songs, melodies and

lyrics can have an affect on your mood and mental state is popular, since the wide spread use of portable music devices and music streaming sites that let you take music with you everywhere sites are creating moods alongside genres of music as if the contents of these albums offer relief or consolation for the listeners feelings, a kind of musical therapy used by popular culture by today's generation.

Art, too, as de Botton states, is a vehicle that can be used. To recover from an emotional trauma, something that makes us laugh and feel contentment, even in desperate times, gives people a sense of belonging in a world that is constantly changing (De Botton& The School of Life, 2013).

Developing empathy and creating awareness of suffering, signifying hope, these are all things that art has accomplished through history and these are all factors that therapy aims to give us. My main use of therapy came through looking at my failed relationships and gaining a certain sense of belonging, hearing how other people responded to my work made me feel less alone in my feelings.

An artist who also looks at relationships closely in their work is Jessica Todd Harper. In the work, *The Agony in the Kitchen*, Harper displays a couple, a man and a woman, in their kitchen. The woman looks defeated; her head in her hands and the man has a look of confusion and anger written across his face. You get the sense that their evening has all gone wrong, but we aren't given any context, we are not encouraged to judge the couple or either one of them, but instead to feel the feelings they are displaying. Anyone who has been in a close relationship with someone knows the strains and



frustrations that come from existing alongside someone else, even if you love that person dearly.

Figure 30. Jessica Todd Harper
The Agony in the Kitchen
(2012)Photograph

In contrast my artworks however, do deliberately attempt to lead the

viewer to judgement. The aggressive nature of the language and the underlying sense of betrayal that my text revolves around do not present a relationship in the same way Harper does, but both display raw emotions and look at how relationships make us feel.

I feel that my artwork is consciously an attempt to bring the viewer to make a judgement on the bad behaviour of a man, from two very different stand points. The first judgement viewers of my work are encouraged and, to a point, led to make is on the way a man has spoken to me. It is made apparent that it is indeed this way round, as uncomfortable as that might be, with my inclusion of the “typical Essex girl slut” and “bitch” emails, insults typically used toward women. The language used in these emails is aggressive and before you are left wondering what the woman has done to deserve these words you firstly find yourself shocked by the personal and hurtful nature of the conversation.

The reason I did not discourage this judgement within my pieces was my own personal feelings towards this individual and my feelings towards men in general that would use these words towards a woman. There is a cowardliness that comes with verbally abusing someone over the Internet or by text that I detest and I believe that my work depicts my anger towards the story behind this. I want my pieces to start a conversation, is it okay for men to talk like this? Do women react with the same viciousness? I don't doubt that they do, but just as socially women are seen as the weaker of the two sexes, we can also use words said to put us down to our advantage, artistically as I have is one of the ways we can expose this behaviour.

Chapter 5 Conclusions

Success or failure

Exhibition, May 2017

Relationship status: newly single and angry

I didn't feel the same shame or anger that I had harboured for up to a year after the end of the relationship. I choose to reflect on how I felt then compared to how I felt making the work in 'the now'. What stood out to me when reading back the emails we shared was the difference in the raw, angry and hurt messages to the 'civil and polite' emails we shared more recently. The one thing I both regret and in one sense I'm proud of, is that I never told 'him' how it wasn't okay to talk to me the way he was. I accepted how he felt through guilt. Words stick with you.

Reflection written when creating the 'Let's Be Civil' graffiti pieces

The final curatorial decisions I made to condense my work were determined by how I wanted my work to be seen by the public who did not know the journey of emotions I had experienced during the last year of making my final pieces.

I chose to use explicit language to ensure I did not censor myself in any way and to present an honest depiction of the conversations and a truthful representation of both feeling and expression both in the way I created my work and in the words I chose to use to paint and type. I wanted to offer an insight to the relationships I had been a part of through two sets of typography working together, a set of experiences displayed stripped-back to essentials.

The wild, explosive and loose spray-painting on the reclaimed, imperfect aluminium text pieces provided a sharp contrast with my video work. Both of the moving image pieces presented a cold and basic aesthetic with a purposefully expressionless font, white text on screens (though using the same colour palette as the paintings accompanying them).

I felt that this collection of artworks successfully and accurately encapsulated my expressionistic style, the incorporation of new media within my art and the truthfulness to life I strive for in my practice.

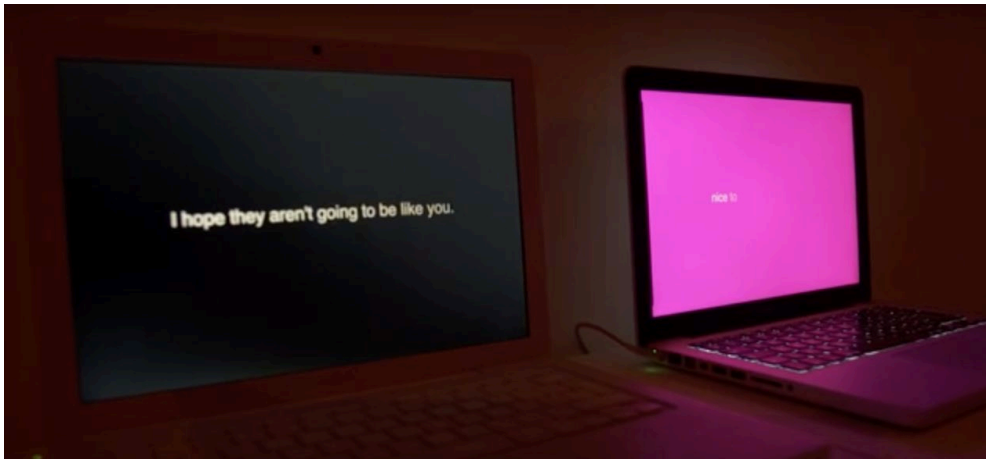


Figure 31.

Elizabeth Wood*Two Thousand Fourteen, 2014 (2017) found emails short film* & *Two Thousand Seventeen, 2017 (2016) found emails short film*

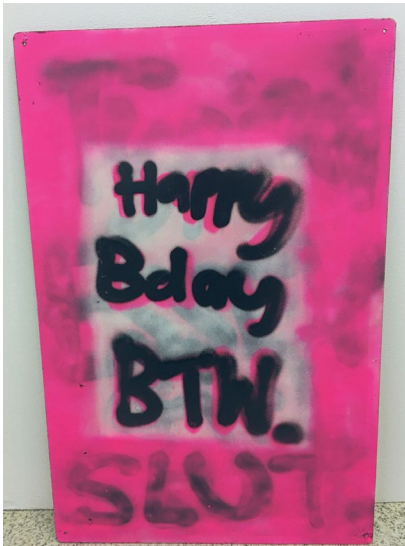
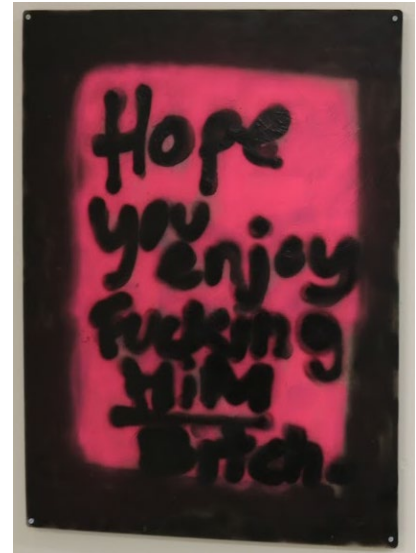


Figure 32. Elizabeth Wood *Hope You're Well (2016)* Spray paint on metal sign

Figure 33. Elizabeth Wood *Typical Essex Girl Slut (2017)* Spray

paint on metal sign



I feel that my exhibition collection was a success in that it was the artwork I has set out to produce at the beginning of my postgraduate study. I wanted my pieces to retain my style whilst also being more honest with the subject and the message I was trying to portray through artistic expression. By putting my relationships, more specifically the breakdown of those relationships, at the forefront of my work, I was bringing the gaze towards myself. I was letting the viewer into an experience that I was still very much working through. I was choosing to let the viewer sit back and judge.

The pride and strength I recieved from peers and loved ones that viewed my work helped me connect with the emails in a new way. I left the negativity in that collection, by externalising my vulnerability I learnt a valuable lesson in moving on. I was able to rebalance my emotions and look positively on my time with the individuals involved in my work.

I feel as though my work slowly became what I wanted it to be. Through exploration of not just a wider variety of artistic styles and art movements but also exploring what work made me feel comfortable as an artist and what made me proud.

The response

The initial response I received when first showing my exhibition pieces was that of shock and curiosity. There was a sense of people I know very well being surprised at the kind of shocking use of words and images in both my undergraduate and postgraduate that prompted the question; is this work really yours? As a generally happy, bubbly and outgoing individual my peers did not expect to see words such as these levelled against myself.

There was also the sense of community that I experienced as a direct result of my work revolving around the subject of relationships. Everyone I spoke with and received feedback from seemed to reminisce a time that their loved one or ex-partner had hurt them or spoken to them in that manner. People seemed to find comfort and familiarity in seeing the personal struggles of someone else who has been through the same experience as them. This was a response I hoped for but didn't expect, I expected a more curiosity-fuelled judgment, especially due to the language used, but this is what seemed to grab people's attention and make them look closer at what they were reading.

Future directions

September 2018

Relationship status: new partner 'honeymoon phase'

I live my 'darker side' through my work and I want to continue to do this. The sadness, anger and other difficult emotions that I face I want to continue to experience not only to develop myself as a person but also to develop my expressionistic artwork. I am however now faced with the issue of continuing my work in this way. The therapeutic side of my investigations has opened me up to the reality that art does provide a release and a cathartic way of working through difficult emotions such as sorrow and anger. My personal experience with my artwork has provided me with a greater understanding of my sense of purpose in the art world and my mental health and general well-being has been affected in a positive way. I feel as though I have worked through my feelings towards ex-partners while realising the harder moments of our relationships and their endings in particular. My project has allowed me to re-see my circumstances and has instilled in me a new inner strength that I

didn't realise I had within me. I was hurt and myself hurt others but in the grand scheme of things I am lucky and grateful for the lessons I learnt along the way. I have more hope and my explorations in the personal lives of other artist have helped me appreciate the feelings of community that art provides. It has, as proposed by De Botton, allowed me and taught me to 'suffer more successfully'. (De Botton, 2014 page 26)

I feel that continuing along the lines of where sorrow meets art without some sort of crisis to work through will undo the therapeutic side of my project. By purposely surrounding myself with sadness for the sake of making art I wouldn't be working through legitimate or personal problems. I would instead work towards expanding my use of technology and look at pushing myself professionally through the ways I choose to display art. When I was originally planning to show my text videos, I wanted to show the pieces on several different computer screens, or on low-fi tv screens. I feel this could have given my work a more professional and interactive look rather than playing the videos from two separate laptops on plinths. Images following the narrative of the text would be the most appropriate logical stop for me as the director within me missed that element of human interaction with my final piece work, it was all very mechanical.

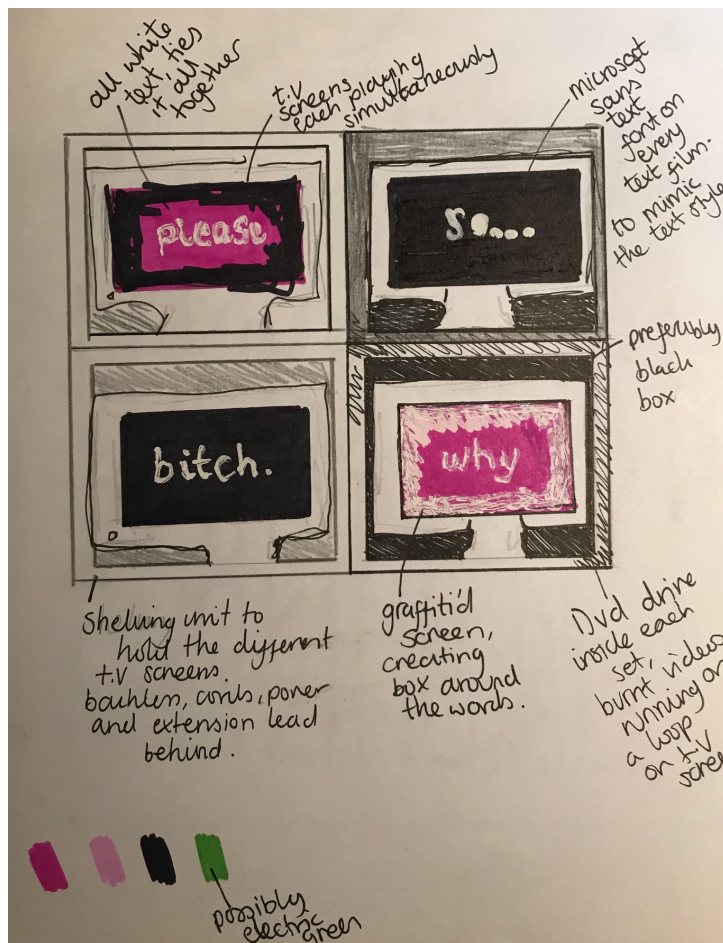


Figure 34. Multiscreen plans for further video pieces (2017)

My future work would certainly still involve telling a story, my story. I have found a new form of bravery, and the chance to create something good from the darkness of my feelings over the past year has truly made me not only a better artist, but I would argue, a better person who understands herself so much more. Art has taught me to be passionate, to go boldly and not to be afraid to get personal.

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