

Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire
School of Creative Arts

**THE ALTERED SELF; THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCE
OF THE LOSS OF BODILY IDENTITY, ABSTRACTED
EXPRESSION OF CHRONIC ILLNESS AND DISABILITY.**

By

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of examination for the BA (Hons) in Art. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institute.

Signed

ABSTRACT

This thesis builds on a personal interest in the creative history of science fiction and allegory, to demonstrate the sociological value of discomfort and horror in both art and potentially in consolidation or reconsolidation of the self after trauma or chronic illness and disability. Using the burgeoning definition of ‘the altered self’ genre as an entryway into exploring the disabled body and the disabled existence. By drawing comparisons between the psychological journeys and experiences of some of the more applicable and increasingly iconic characters that can be categorised in under ‘the altered self’, and the works of artists Tracey Emin, Ellie Dent and Doreen Garner (King Kobra), this thesis will highlight the imposed dehumanisation of chronic illness and disability. While underlining that while the seemingly impossible experiences of these literary and film narratives may not be a one-to-one comparison, they do provide an insight into the inner turmoil, isolation and splintering of the core of the self that comes from physical pain and change that can strip an individual of autonomy and potentially even their own feeling of humanity. An emphasis placed on understanding the multiplicity of disabled and chronically ill experiences based on factors of the self that existed prior, with an aim of enlarging our understanding the disabled body, but more specifically the psychological impact of having a body that is permanently sick.

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Introduction

Our bodies hold a profound amount of our identities. Not only our physical appearances, but also our voices, our muscle memory, our energy, our senses etc. Through this thesis I'm examining how this idea manifests in an individual's life as they form their internal self, in tandem with the body. Moreover, I'll be outlining the wide array of consequences when this self is disturbed through a massive bodily change. In this context that will be of change through disability and or chronic illness.

My interest in this topic stems from not only my love of science fiction and my own interest in the real-world application of art or media, but how my own investment in horror has grown since my own experience with chronic illness and disability. I once had an immense aversion to that which was psychologically distressing, evoking strong second-hand emotion in relation to a forced or accidental transformation of a person's physical body, and I believe this also pertained to disability.

I had once struggled to detail the specifics of my terror regarding this, until I came across the term 'the altered self' by chance, which perfectly encompassed my fear. A subgenre of science fiction, 'the altered self' refers to a narrative in which a person is changed physically, either mysteriously or against their will. This change is life-altering and deeply disturbing, both for the subject and for a viewer. Not only a loss of everything the individual knew but also usually an immense loss of autonomy. The genre, while still in its infancy in terms of definition, possesses a clear identity of its own, not entirely encapsulated within the realms of body horror, Lovecraftian horror etc. However, in this thesis I aim to prove that this genre has a long and rich history, and even sees immense success to this day, even if categorised under a different name en masse for the time being.

I believe that this idea of 'the altered self' has countless sociopolitical applications in terms of reading art, film, literature and other media. I am choosing specifically to engage with the genre in relation to disability, not only because I am disabled myself, but more so because during the initial period of coming to terms with my diagnoses, instead of engaging with the easy and unchallenging, intriguingly I found myself gravitating towards horror, and more specifically what I had once been completely unwilling to interact with, that which could be categorised as 'the altered self.'

By consuming this art and literature it allowed me to psychologically explore and work through what was happening to me in a way that felt more safe and less isolating than if I were to consider it entirely on my own. It provided me room to discourse that which was being expressed both internally and externally, assisting me in my own understanding of the psychological changes and obstacles I was facing.

This has led me into a full confidence that the altered self can and does offer this not only to others who are chronically ill and disabled but to expand our understanding of this experience and encourage and cultivate a much-needed empathy. Through the lens of ‘the altered self’, I’ll be highlighting what I believe many don’t consider regarding living as a sick person, as well as the reflective prowess of those living with disability. The complete and uncontrollable life altering results of being with a permanent illness. The indignity and distress of having to constantly adjust, of having to continue anyway, in what can feel like an increasingly lonely world.

To illustrate this, I will be attempting to sever preconceived opinions or assumptions about the experience of being disabled. As my methodology, I will present characters from well-known science fiction horror novellas, characters I believe that despite their monstrous appearances and outlandish circumstances inspire a great deal of empathy and philosophical reflection, partially because they are not greatly associated with chronic illness and disability in general, despite the countless parallels that can be drawn.

With this empathy and understanding in mind, I believe there is a fresh perspective to be had on art of the disabled experience. In separating what I consider to be similar psychological experiences, from propaganda or culturally normal or accepted opinions to have regarding disabled people, this thesis will aim to provide an insight in to not only the importance of art regarding these experiences, but also to counter the alienation inspired and sustained by our societal flaws.

This thesis will traverse facets of the self, particularly in line with Ciarán Benson’s theories of the narrative construction of self, how the internal and external interact to create the story that we consider to be the self.

In chapter 1; what it is that forms the self, physically, socially, and through lived experience and trauma. To illustrate this in the framework of fine art, I will be using the life experiences of Tracey Emin, in how they correlate to her art practice, something that has been noted time and time again to be near if not completely indistinguishable from her actual self. Throughout providing images that will illustrate my statements and conclusions, but in some cases engaging in in depth analysis of the individual works.

In chapter 2 I will establish exactly what is meant by ‘the altered self’, with the hope of contributing towards consolidating the specifics of the genre. With a focus towards early to mid-20th century literary examples of the genre that I believe still have immense academic and potential personal value to this day. Also to distinguish ‘the altered self’ from a new genre into specifically a newly defined genre.

Chapter 3 will serve as a culmination of the past two chapters, in that it will be applying the theory and understanding of not only ‘the altered self’ but also an understanding of the disturbance that comes with massive changes to one’s body and self, as completely out of one’s control or as an entirely disproportionate outcome. Combining this with the visual art analysis of chapter 1, drawing connections between that of science fiction and what many consider a worst-case scenario or almost incomprehensible human experience or at least one

that many find too frightening or saddening to even consider. With the hope that I can prove ‘the altered self’ as having artistic value for not only the creator nor the consumer, but also explicitly those dealing with long term illness and disability.

CHAPTER 1

The Development of Self, Illustrated Through the Life and Practice of
Tracey Emin

1.i. What is the Self?

To analyse artistic works under/in the framework of an altered, broken or traumatised self, it must first be explored what ‘the self’ as a concept is in this specific context. To reap the most creative value out of these works and be able to comprehend the emotion and palpable lived experience present in abstracted representations of this corruption of self, we must have in mind a comparison to what could be considered as the before state and the after state and what contributes to both. To understand what it means for an individual to not meet the ‘normal’ or a desired standard of self, the factors intrinsic to the construction of every person’s self must be delved into to be later contrasted with abstracted depictions of not being afforded a whole self, due to an impactful physical change, in this case illness and disability.

The self, as a concept, is incredibly amorphous, with an inherent subjectivity. I will be examining the making of the ‘self’ using the idea of an autobiographical or narrative driven self. This means that the self is not only formed through the experiences one has, and ‘identifiable’ groups they may belong to, but also has a great focus on the internal “woven narrative” (Benson, 2001, p.46) that people tell themselves and the relevance or impact of that to a person’s self-concept, or the idea that “we make ourselves in the act of making sense of ourselves” (Benson, 2001, p.83) and experiences.

To clearly express how this manifests in an individual, especially a person’s art practice, I will be using the “symbiotic” (Erben, 2023, p.75) life and art of Tracey Emin, whose practice is uniquely heralded as the ultimate in objective exploration and expression of her own experiences and emotions and self (Erben, 2023, p. 54).

1.ii. The Given Identity Self – Emin’s Gendered and Classed Self

One could define the self as ‘factual’ identifiers of a person, race, sex, class group, ethnoreligious group etc. But even these are social constructs conceived by people to comprehend or categorise humanity, usually with the intent of creating a diminutive status for groups of people to benefit those doing the categorisation (Smedley *et al.*, 2004) For example, race as we understand it today in Western society only being conceived in the 17th century, drawn along seemingly arbitrary amalgamations of phenotypes, linguistic groups, cultures, religious groups and geographical heritage (Smedley, *et al.*, 2004).

Scientific research in areas like biology, neuroscience and psychology as far back as the 1950s has proven that sex and gender are not only separate concepts but also that they themselves are not binary, bolstered by a plethora of anthropological and philosophical theory (Fausto-Sterling, 2018, p.19). For example, philosopher Judith Butler’s often referenced assertion that gender is a performance of “a stylised repetition of acts” that is culturally and internally always developing (Butler, 1988, p. 519).

We can see this exhibited quite poetically in Emin's applique patchwork blankets, quilts, and tapestries. Emin, as a woman in the art world, faces the long-standing status quo and delegations of the patriarchal history and tradition of art, one that has long since reduced practices like weaving, crochet or embroidery to 'woman's work' and "craft" (R.Smith, 2021).

Emin follows the modern/postmodern feminist tradition of the firm assertion that not only is it "capital-A" (Erben, 2023, p.27) art, but proves that it is fruitful, valuable and inciteful work, not despite its femininity but due to this inherent cultural perception.

Emin uses this traditional media sustained by women, to express the deeply psychological, emotional and specifically feminine experiences and problems of the 'modern woman' of the British 1990s/2000s, but most importantly those that are diaristic of her own lived experiences.

I do not expect (figure. 1) is an emblematic example of this.

The text of this piece reads

"I DO NOT EXPECT TO BE A MOTHER
BUT I DO EXPECT TO DIE ALONE
IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE LIKE THIS
M M M CALL ME
SHE WENT OUT LIKE A 40 WATT BULB
MY BRAINS ALL SPLIT UP
OK
LOVE TO THE END
I WANT IT BACK – THAT GIRL OF 17"

(figure. 1)

This writing is experimental, earnest, and clearly references her own thoughts or things said to her. But most poignantly for this analysis, this piece especially acts as a capsule of womanhood of that era; changes of what it means to be woman, the back and forth of independence and loneliness, motherhood and the real potential to choose something else for oneself, to maintain an optimism despite feeling or being treated as crazy, an almost obligatory self-deprecation, and the loss of childhood innocence.

If gender is a culturally constructed repetition of acts, so too are the blankets of Tracey Emin. They possess a crude yet charming earnestness, and don't shy away from the feminine and often derogatory descriptor of 'decorative'.

Emin uses these attributes to her advantage, allowing the viewer to observe every stitch and every effort of the creation of these works, imbuing them with a comforting and almost familiar aura. Emin has stated that she's used everything from scraps of furniture, to her parents' clothing, and household linens in the creation of these pieces, which aids the perception of warmth and vitality that emanates from her blankets (Erben, 2023, p.29). This provides another connection to domesticity and femininity that Emin utilises in incorporating 'craft', pattern and decoration which is only possible because of her existence in the world as a woman. Gender identity and or socialisation undeniably acting as it has for most of documented history, a cornerstone of an individual's self-concept.



Figure 1. Tracey Emin, *I do not expect*, 2002, appliqué blanket, 264cm x 185cm.

The defining and dividing lines of the self we all contribute to drawing between us do not have the most solid of foundations, they are often malleable, and if not, they are at least non-monolithic and don't truly define any single individual in their entirety. However, this philosophy is not to cast these categorisations aside as irrelevant but to affirm that the self is largely consolidated by perception and cultural norms, as well as internal and external narrative, and to highlight just how powerful a psychological phenomenon these narratives are.

To expand on the impact of culture on the self, immediately when a person enters the world, they are placed into a cultural context. Many aspects of their life, or at least their development which will inform their life, are already in motion. Individual 'identity' characteristics as illustrated above are immediately decided, and consolidated as one is reared. What specific class, geographical, political, and time-based context a person is born into also has an immense role in the construction of self (Benson, 2001, p.51).

This encapsulates a breadth of factors including but not limited to; access to healthcare and education, whether the location a person is born is in a period of peace and stability or war and terror, a culture, community or individual family's attitude towards women, or the economic and religious systems that influence an individual's moral code.

As Ciarán Benson states in the cultural psychology of self,

"Where and when you are born and reared matters hugely for the skills of selfhood that you acquire, and for the sort of self you become...the world in which a child has to find a place, determine the scope of the actions that will compose his or her sense of agency, and prescribe the type of story she will be permitted to tell and be." (Benson, 2001, p.57)

As illustrated in this quote, much in the original conception of selfhood has far more to do with the 'rules' of the world a person is born into, than anything the individual can control.

As with an artist as deeply biographical as Tracey Emin, her body of work greatly exemplifies this idea, with one of the most analysed and discussed aspects of her 'persona' and work being her class background.

Emin grew up in Margate, Kent in England. An area that today has gone through the same modern gentrification as many other towns, was once almost exclusively known for being "rough" (O'Flaherty, 2023), with many facing "poverty based polarisation" (Fransham and Koch, 2021). Emin herself having grown up impoverished due to financial misfortune and bankruptcy in her parents lives during her early childhood (Molyneux, 2005). As is the case with many from working class backgrounds, for a plethora of interconnected prejudices, traditions, lack of investment and cyclical generational negative experiences of education, (McDermott, 2012, pp.75-79) Emin too has what has been described as a "distant relationship with the education system" (Jones, 2020, p.15), having left school at 13 (Jones, 2020, p.20).

Emin, however, had always possessed artistic talent with which she entered and succeeded in several university courses which in its own way shaped her into the artist she was and is (Emin, 2012). Despite facing the intersection of misogyny and class-based discrimination by



Figure 2. Tracey Emin. *Homage to Edvard Munch and all My Dead Children*, 1998, single channel video, 2 minutes 28 seconds.

the upper-class ethos of ‘high art’ and the press (Molyneux, 2005), Emin is known to be an intelligent woman, a lover of classic literature, innovative and someone who appreciates and incorporates much of the academic history of art into her practice, especially that of the Expressionists, most notably Edvard Munch and Egon Schiele (figure. 2)(Jones, 2020, pp. 8-10) (Jones, 2020, pp. 20-28).

However, Emin’s art bears the mark left on who she has become, or her ‘self’, by her early interaction with academia, the education system and the cultural dialect of her upbringing, massive contributors to her formation of self (Jones, 2020, p.20).

Her work contains “unaffected everyday language” (Molyneux, 2005), directly quoting herself and those around her. It includes spelling and grammar mistakes, arguably most famously in her piece *Pysco Slut* (figure. 3), to be expected of one who does not find herself reflected nor pride in displays of pseudo-intellectualism. Within her work she uses curse words, playfulness and humour (figure. 4) (figure. 5) to express her emotions sometimes, as many do.



Figure 3. Tracey Emin, *Pysco Slut*, 1999, appliqué blanket, 243.84cm × 198.12cm.

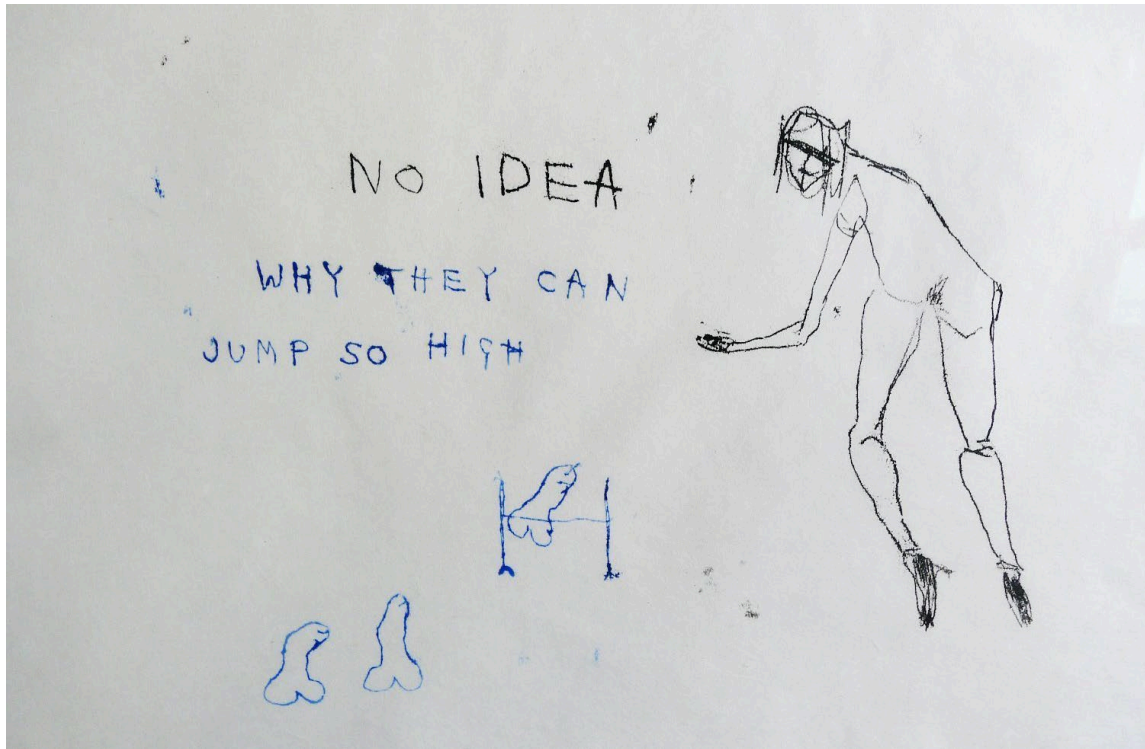


Figure 4. Tracey Emin, *NO IDEA WHY THEY CAN JUMP SO HIGH*, 2010, polymer gravure on misumi paper, 39cm x 48cm.

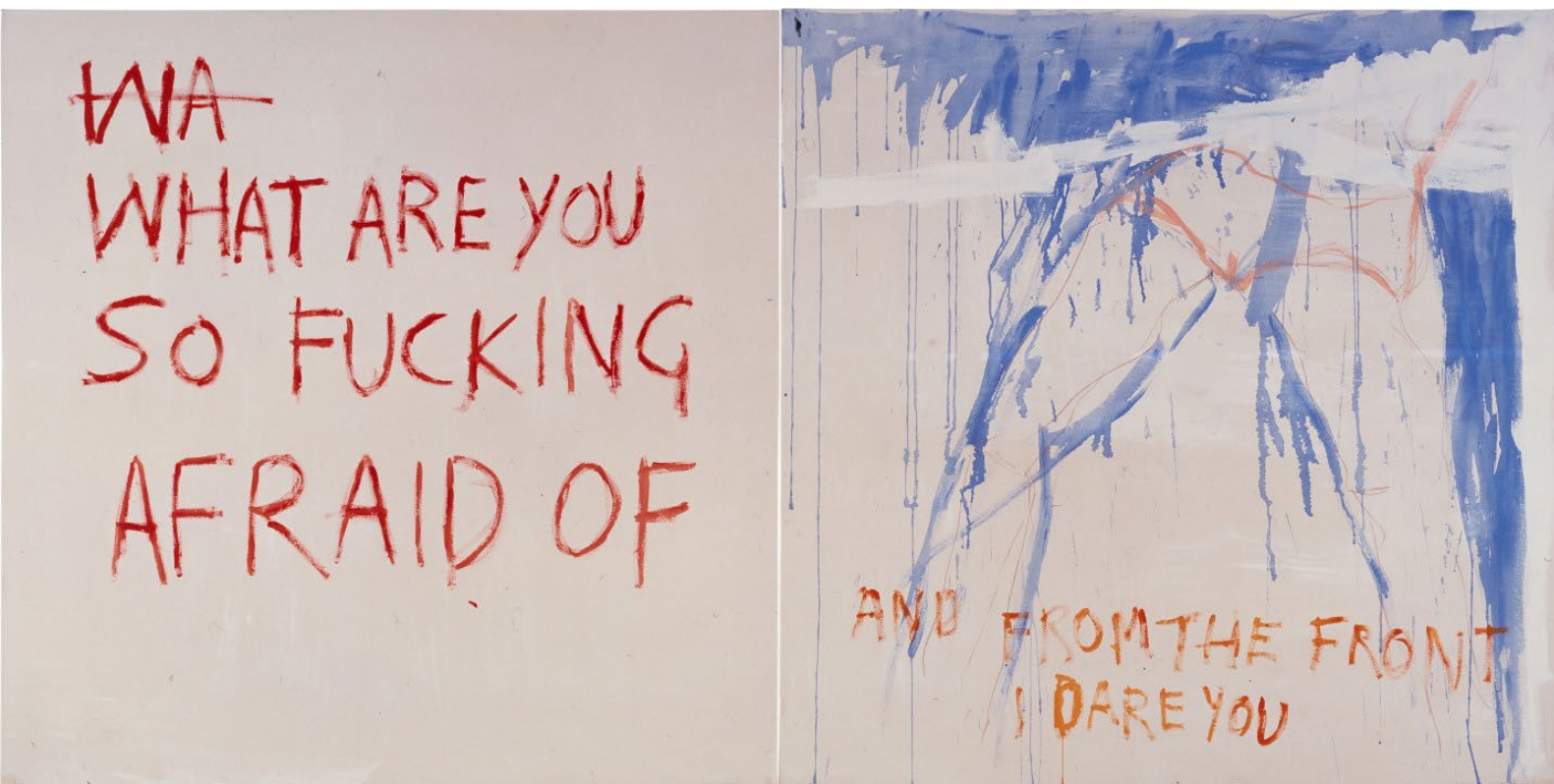


Figure 5. Tracey Emin, *WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF*, 2001, acrylic on canvas diptych, 122cm x 122cm.

Emin understands what many others of a more privileged background cannot seem to, that this does not devalue the art, and, for her, is earnest expression. For Tracey Emin to produce the work in the manner that she does, a fast paced and intuitive “lacerating self-exposure” (Glover, 2021), it must include the ‘real her’ for it to ring true as it does. It is not that her misspellings are intentional, but more so that they are permitted. The real her, in Emin’s mind, is an opinion of her that seems to have started externally but subsequently absorbed into her ‘narrative self’, Mad Tracey from Margate. The culmination of her lived experience regarding gender and class in the formation of her internal narrative of who she is. (figure. 6)



Figure 6. Tracey Emin, *Mad Tracey from Margate, Everyone's been there*, 1997, appliqué blanket, 215cm x 267cm.

1.iii. The Self as Formed by Parents and Community

One of the most impactful aspects of a person's development of selfhood is the influence of their family. Particularly that of their parents or primary caregivers. A united sense of self, that is associated with a psychologically stable self-concept as a person develops, is usually established by the age of seven, so it cannot be understated how crucial this period is for the development of the 'self' (Loewenstein and Brand, 2023, p.347).

Parents serve as a "zone of proximal development" (Benson, 2001, p.95) and as a "social scaffolding" (Benson, 2001, p.95) for their children. It is not only that parents talk about their children's wants, aspirations, levels of distress tolerance and values, arguably they are the ones that supply them (Benson, 2001, p.95). Caregivers are also the first providers of social etiquette, emotional responses, stimulation or entertainment, beliefs, affection, and provide a framework for what a child perceives as normal relationships, whether intentionally or not.

This of course does not conclusively form a person's entire self-concept or emotional process, but it is the first external narrative of a person's self that is present before an internal narrative even exists.

We can trace this line of thought very easily over Tracey Emin's life and art. Her parents own relationship was a strange and complicated one. They had met when they were both already married and the entirety of their relationship was an affair, starting in the late 1940s and lasting until the early 1970s (Emin, 2023a).

Emin herself has shared how her parent's relationship was "totally out of control" (Emin 2023a). It's not hard to see how this played into the "turbulence" (Jones, 2020 p.27) of Emin's adolescence and the possible lasting impact it had on her own relationship to romance and sex, at least that which can be read from her work.

These details of her parent's relationship are echoed years later in her own life and captured in her piece *Hotel International* (figure. 7). A piece notably revolving more around her childhood and family than her own romantic relationships. Perhaps Emin, being aware of the correlation, chose to include in the piece a smaller floral piece of fabric on which she had wrote

"In 1987 I went to Turkey for 4 months/ I had an affair with a fisherman who was 18 years older than me./ He had 4 children and a wife... The whole thing was strange – His wife gave me this headscarf..." (figure. 8)



Figure 7. Tracey Emin, *Hotel International*, 1993, appliqué blanket, 257.2cm x 240cm.



Figure 8. Tracey Emin, *Hotel International* (detail), 1993, appliqué blanket.

While this may be the most one to one comparison of Emin's romantic relationships and that of her parents, her work is also full of expressions of anxious attachment to partners, romantic or sexual (figure. 9), so while the dynamic of her parents was seemingly normalised to her as a child, it also seems her own relationship to her parents greatly impacted her too.



Figure 9. Tracey Emin, *The Last Thing I Said to You was Don't Leave Me Here II*, 2000, photograph (self portrait).

Of course, a person's self would also be influenced by how well their parents treat them, not just each other. What this means specifically varies depending on culture, but to treat a child well usually involves some form of positive affirmation, safety, meeting their physical needs, allowing autonomy where appropriate and quality time or attention (HSE, 2021). This usually gives children the best chance of growing into people who are healthy, capable of emotional regulation, adaptable and most relevantly have a positive view of and a confidence in their 'self.' (Dieujuste *et al.*, 2023)

Conversely, children who experience any form of abuse or neglect, especially from their primary caregivers are exponentially more likely to suffer in these areas. Experiencing physical health difficulties, interpersonal problems, inadaptability, extreme people pleasing, misplaced aggression and a myriad of potential mental health difficulties, but most importantly in this context, an unstable and volatile self-concept (Toth and Manly, 2019, pp.60-62).

Emin, in her art and writing practice, has been very upfront about what she herself calls abandonment in her childhood (Emin, 2023b). Her parent's inconsistent relationship left

much to be desired in the creation of a stable family unit, Emin herself saying “in lots of ways, we never had a family.” (Emin, 2023a). She states that she was left alone so frequently that it caused her to be around “the wrong people” (Emin, 2023b) and that this “in later years became a big issue for [her]” (Emin 2023b). Many of Emin’s works seem to depict what can be summarised as begging somebody, a partner, a lover etc, to stay with her. The most ‘to the point’ example of this I believe is a simple monoprint *Love me – me – me –* (figure. 10) That reads:

“DON’T JUST FUCK ME

LOVE LOVE

LOVE

ME

ME ME ME ME ME ME ME ME”

(figure. 10)



Figure 10. Tracey Emin, *Love me – me – me –*, 1997, monoprint, 30cm x 42cm.

I believe this to be extremely relevant to Emin's self-concept but will be further elaborated on in the latter part of this chapter under the framework of trauma during development.

Despite this however, it is important to note that Emin's relationship with her parents is not limited to the negative, relationships and development are complex gnarling roots of grey, not always black and white.

Looking at Emin's work, we also see a mother who is tender, eccentric, a provider and someone who was a great comfort for Emin. *Safe with you - Mum* (figure. 11) is a piece of Emin's evocative of familial bliss, warm and grounding.

Perhaps this is because Emin as an adult understands that due to their circumstances her mother couldn't be there as she maybe would've liked to be. Emin is capable through her work of acknowledging both that "being abandoned as a child no matter what the reason is something you never recover from" (Emin, 2023b), while also seeing "My mum did everything for us, she stole lead from roofs, squatted the cottage where we lived, hot-wired electricity, and worked and worked and worked but we never seemed to have much." (Emin, 2023b)

It's clear from Emin's work that she understands this duality, that she herself can extend empathy and something resembling forgiveness while not feeling obligated to abandon the reality of her formative experiences.¹

The idea of "it is by virtue of being treated as a person that one develops self" (Benson, 2001, p.94) derived from philosopher and psychologist Rom Harré's idea of Spoken World Theory, becomes a valuable framework for analysing both positive and negative experiences of development and the effects that that has on the self. I believe it is also applicable to the maintenance or upholding of self, which will be explored in chapter 3 in the context of self-concept after developing a disability or long-term illness.

The self is dualistic in that as embedded as it is within us so early on, it is also extremely malleable both in experience and concept. But it is this "malleability" (Benson, p.53) within the concept of self, the "dynamism of human culture" (Benson, p.53), that acts as one of the pillars that sets humanity aside from other species and allows for a concept of self to be a possibility. (Benson, p.53)

¹ Emin has mentioned being abused as a child, seemingly as an aside to the sexual abuse she endured, but this is not something she has elaborated on in the public eye. (This is Kent, 2008) therefore it has not been included in this section as to avoid unsubstantiated speculation.



Figure 11. Tracey Emin, *Safe with you – Mum*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 182.2cm x 214.1cm x 3.6cm.

1.iv. The Self as Formed by Trauma

In chapter 3 I will be going in depth into how the development of illness and disability can result in or from a loss of autonomy and eclipse one's self-concept. As there are many parallels at play between this and the experience of trauma during the conception of self, I believe it is important to separate these two experiences, with the acknowledgement that many who experience one do experience the other.

The relationship between trauma responses and one's cultural, familial and experiential development is best illustrated in the concepts of the moral "Unthinkables" (Benson, 2001, p.162) versus "Thinkables" (Benson, 2001, p.162). This refers to the ideals that one has internalised throughout their life, in this context during the pre-trauma 'before' period, and these are boundaries of identity that people must not cross, dependant on the social groups they belong to (Benson, 2001, p.150). To act in an 'unthinkable' way, is partially why trauma results in feelings of shame, guilt, self-disgust or self-hatred, as well as a dissonance between a person's perceived sense of self, and what it 'must be' now that this trauma has occurred. This seemingly made worse in an individualistic society as the belief that everybody has agency, autonomy and control over their destiny is incompatible with the trauma survivor-victim's experience of having that completely stripped away.

To perceive oneself as having crossed the boundary of the ‘unthinkable’ invites not only a usually immense and disproportionate level of self-blame (Benson, 2001 p.147). If it is a widely believed and upheld ‘unthinkable’ behaviour it invites this disgust or blame to be perpetuated by external sources. (Arden and Rabinovitz, 2019, p.698)

There are many traumas that are viewed or experienced under the pressure of morality, sexual abuse perhaps the most obvious of these, with heavy societal pressures and standards to adhere to and uphold within personal sexuality. (Pacilli *et al.*, 2024, p.4080)

Women’s, and men’s, sexuality is still highly scrutinised under patriarchal heteronormative standards. Women are simultaneously held to high standards of purity and modesty while also held to high standards of beauty and attractiveness, pressured or obligated to balance the two, resulting in many contradictory social rules (Pacilli *et al.*, 2024, p.4084).

A woman who is perceived to have fallen short of the puritanical standards specifically, are acting in an ‘unthinkable’ way, “self-polluting” (Arden and Rabinovitz, 2024, p.699), filthy, or contaminated in some way (Arden and Rabinovitz, 2024, p.700).

Many victims of sexual assault experience a form of victim blaming based on these moral ideals, the idea that something they have done has invited this violence or that they secretly enjoyed it (Posluszny, 2015, p.52). Of course, this isn’t just true of sexual violence victims, for every trauma endured there is usually a corresponding pitiless ideal that the survivor-victim of a trauma is forced to comb through and analyse in relation to themselves or their actions (Benson, pp.132-150).

This is theory greatly applicable to the art of Tracey Emin, one of the most pronounced characteristics of her work being her relationship to sex, coloured by a childhood or adolescence of seemingly boundless sexual trauma and an adulthood of “cruel” (Jones, 2020, p.30) relationships. Therefore, while Emin has endured many traumas that she explores in her practice, sex and sexual trauma are perhaps that which correlates most to her self, at least the self which we can interpret through her art.

The culmination of class, misogyny, trauma is beautifully illustrated in Emin’s piece *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (figure. 12). In this video piece, as the viewer is met with warm, idealistic and somewhat nostalgic shots of Margate, Emin chronicles her early relationship with sex. Disturbingly, this story is one of predation, sharing that as young as 13, she was having sex with men far older than her, almost nonchalantly mentioning the ages of 19, 20, 25, 26. She says by 15 she had “had them all” (Emin, 1995, 02:15), and while these experiences made her think of herself as “flesh” (Emin, 1995, 02:51), calling the men who had taken advantage of her “pathetic” (Emin, 1995, 02:26), she decided to channel that idea into dancing instead.

The story continues, she’s now competing in the finals of a dance competition that would take her to London if she won. Desperate to leave Margate, this is something she yearns to win. But as she’s dancing, as people are clapping for her, she’s met with a growing chant of “Slag, Slag, Slag” (Emin, 1995, 03:54) from the audience, from seemingly the grown men she had been sleeping with. Their chants began to drown out the music, and completely

overwhelmed, upset and disorientated, she runs from the stage to the beach, knowing she had lost the competition.

Emin thinks to herself that she must leave Margate, and that she's better than those men, she's "free" (Emin, 1995, 04:16). So, that's what she does. Emin then, in what I believe is a return for the shame they brought her, says "Shame Eddie, Tony, Doug, Richard, this one's for you." (Emin, 1995, 04:25). The remainder of the video piece is her dancing, looking happy and free.



Figure 12. Tracey Emin, *Why I Never Became a Dancer*, 1995, Super 8 transferred to video, 6 minutes 40 seconds.

This piece is an interesting look into the ambivalence of Emin's experience with sexual trauma and sex (Molyneux, 2005). In the work, she states that she was just doing what she wanted, no thoughts for morals or expectations, and in her other works she displays a great pride and enthusiasm about sex and her own body, like in that of a piece from the same year *My beautiful legs* (figure. 13).

And yet, she felt a tremendous shame when met with the 'consequences' of her actions or of that which was done to her. This hot and cold between hypersexuality and a mourning of innocence compounded by shame is not an uncommon one.



Figure 13. Tracey Emin, *My Beautiful Legs*, 1995, monoprint, 58cm x75cm.

As mentioned above, there is this balancing act women are expected to maintain, between that of sexually available but not too available, and in Emin's specific case, growing up in an area where the rape of young girls or being "broken into" (This is Kent, 2008) was "par for the course" (This is Kent, 2008) regardless of whether the girl involved had consented or not, who would simultaneously be openly insulted for 'engaging' in sex, these contrasting feelings regarding sex and sexual abuse are entirely understandable despite the nuances. Like Emin, expectations may not be consciously believed by the survivor-victim, it can also be that it is an expectation deeply embedded in their family, community or culture. Therefore, having implanted itself in an unconscious way into the 'self' of that person.

While Tracey Emin very rarely openly shows any ounce of straightforward shame about her experiences of rape and being preyed on as a teenager, it is clear the difference in standards for men and women, and the objectification and abuse she faced as a child has had irreversible impact on who she is today. As mentioned in relation to cultural formation of self, Emin has adopted the moniker 'Mad Tracey from Margate' into her work and in essence into her branding. However, there is a second part of that insult that has also been absorbed into her persona and her self-concept. Mad Tracey From Margate, Everybody's Been There (figure. 14) (figure. 15).



Figure 14. Tracey Emin, *Mad Tracey From Margate | Every Bodies Been There*, 1997, Ink on cotton, paper and pen, 56cm x 55cm.



Figure 15. Tracey Emin, *Mad Tracey From Margate | Every Bodies Been There*, 1997, Ink on cotton, paper and pen, 56cm x 55cm.

There is also an “emotional commitment” (Benson, 2001, p.166) necessary for this ‘unthinkable’ versus ‘thinkable’ model, an emotional response to external or internal ideals that feels unshakable post-trauma event(s).

Many traumas are also paired with a feeling of no longer feeling ‘at home’ in their body, having had the thing that is most identifiably their own, their body, invaded, hurt or alienated in some way (Benson, 2001, pp.167-168). To have the body involved in a trauma is to experience the self and pain as “one mutually constituting event” (Benson, 2001, p.168) to have to constantly exist in the ‘place’ where pain is occurring and or trauma has occurred is clearly conducive to a complex and turbulent self-concept.

This emotional commitment and this feeling of alienation from the body are too present in Emin’s work. A particularly moving monoprint of hers titled *It’s What I’d Like To Be* (figure. 16) is a glimpse into a longing for innocence, gentleness and to be something outside of her own body, the body her work usually beams with pride for.

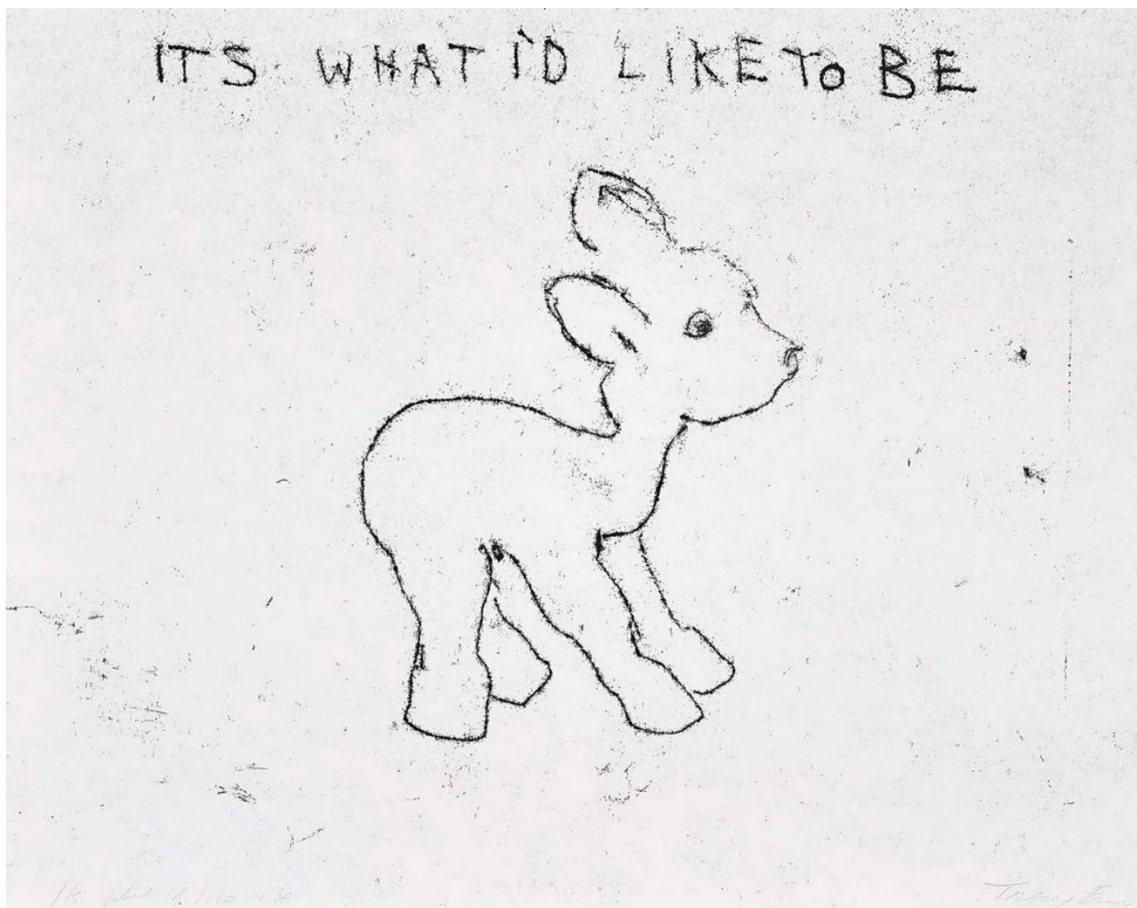


Figure 14. Tracey Emin, *It's What I'd Like To Be*, 1998, lithograph, 42cm x 60cm.

While it does seem that Emin has reclaimed her body, an ongoing endeavour as explored in chapter 3. Perhaps Emin's work is partially proof to the world and to herself that her body is her own, to present as and do with what she alone wants, "Many artists have used female nudes in their work. I've got a good female nude I can use whenever I like and its mine" (Flintoff, 2006).

Many people find it difficult to relate to or even empathise with experiences that they have never been through, much less that which they can't experience, such as something that relates to what I have called above an 'identity' aspect of self; race, gender, class etc. I believe this is partially due to the socialisation that provides us with our own "Thinkables" (Benson, p.162) and "Unthinkables." (Benson, 2001 p.162), something you could also label as our preconceived social ideals.

Another reason I chose Tracey Emin as my subject to illustrate the formation of self is that, despite soul-bearing, intelligent and innovative her approach to her work has always been, she has faced countless criticisms by those unwilling to take the work seriously, who are rendered uncomfortable by her experiences and how she chooses to express them, who write her work off as unskilled or lazy or narcissistic (Erben, 2023, pp.20-24). They are unable to see what lies beneath surface because of a preconceived notion about working class people, women or any number of aspects about her (Molyneux, 2005). Or as is often the case with Emin, a combination of all the above in conjunction with her own reputation preceding her (Erben, 2023, p.2).

This is partially why I believe a more abstracted creative expression of these feelings and experiences is an immeasurably effective way to let others into the scale of emotion, impact, dehumanisation and isolation disability and illness inflicts on a person. I believe many find it easier to identify emotionally with that which is constructed completely outside of what they perceive to be possible, as with the altered self-genre of science fiction to be discussed in chapter 2. Providing distance between an individual's experience and preconceived social ideals.

CHAPTER 2

The Altered Self, Explored Through Literature

2.i. What is “The Altered Self”?

Following the knowledge of what makes up a person’s conception of their own self and what self means in a more general sense, in conjunction with our life experiences and how they shape the self, what does it mean to lose that? What does it mean to have the essence of who you are stripped from you? I’ll be examining this through the lens of ‘the altered self’.

‘The altered self’ refers to a newly defined genre of Science-Fiction Horror media. A term conceptualised and outlined by YouTube creator CuriousArchive in their YouTube video *The Scariest Genre of Science Fiction* (2023), in tandem with the phrase “evolutionary horror” (CuriousArchive, 2023).

A story, piece of art or film that falls under the categorisation of ‘the altered self’ contains a narrative in which the protagonist(s), narrator(s), subject(s), or indeed the entirety of humanity goes through a severe metamorphosis, usually twisted and mutilated, the result of which leaves them with a loss of most or all their ‘humanity’. ‘Humanity’ in the context of ‘the altered self’ referring to a wide breadth of physical, mental and often intangible spiritual attributes, the sum of which equating to human, i.e. not as simple as developing a conceivable physical disability or mental health condition, even if the narrative serves as a metaphor or allegory for either experience.

The other key defining element of ‘the altered self’ genre is the person or persons experiencing this specifically horrifying change must have it done to them against their will, or in other cases by accident, such as an experiment gone extremely wrong. The resulting form of those who have undergone this transfiguration usually can never return to their former selves, adding an extra layer of dread with this permanency.

There are some marginally less consistent but still largely important parts of ‘the altered self’ classification, these pertain to who or what caused the transformation to occur and the issue or capability of human connection post-metamorphosis.

Firstly, outside of narrative arcs of humanity’s or individual’s own hubris directly causing the conversion, a very recent example of this being *The Substance* (2024), the force that alters the characters is usually beyond human comprehension, visible in many works by H.P. Lovecraft, the term ‘Lovecraftian’ describing this concept by definition, or to reference a more modern example, not entrenched in controversial racial bias (Deb, 2021); *All Tomorrows: A Billion Year Chronicle of the Myriad Species and Mixed Fortunes of Man* by C.M. Kösemen (2006). Sometimes a further step is taken, and the force or threat is completely unknowable such as the ‘force’ that causes the events of *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka (1915). These ‘forces’ are almost always seemingly or explicitly indomitable, best illustrated by the character of AM in the novel *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* by Harlan Ellison (1967).

2.ii. The Deeper Horror of the Genre

While an unsettling concept at the surface, it is only when you delve into the details that the true extent of the horror is revealed. Analysing these narratives through the emotional and psychological impact on the subject(s). To really consider what it means to be unrecognisable to yourself, fully self-aware but lacking self-control, unable to even act as you did before, if you can act at all.

Horror doesn't exist in a vacuum, in *Metamorphosis*, it is not just that being a giant cockroach would be appalling. The crux of the horror comes from the inner world of the protagonist Gregor Samsa as he comes to terms with his new life. His inability to control his new urges and instincts, the impossibility of being able to participate in human life from that point onwards. Gregor cannot even leave his bedroom for most of the story due to a nauseating combination of self-disgust, despondency, a lack of expertise in utilising his new grotesque body and the repulsion-driven determination of his family to keep him hidden.

When considering narratives that revolve around a negative transmogrification of self, the value comes from the empathy that it inspires. Not only in the ability to put yourself in the position of the unfortunate protagonist(s) and feel what they feel, but to really think about the experience they are enduring. To imagine how it feels to be truly stuck, the autonomy of choosing who you are and what you want stripped away, leaving only a lengthy dismay and a silence.

We as people are told to believe that we can do anything we put our mind to, along with an insurmountable history of creative work dedicated to the idea that humanity can overcome any threat it is faced with, so to be faced with a narrative in which the protagonist's will, intellect or bravery is irrelevant is jarring and uncomfortable. To also consider that there are or may be threats out there that cannot be reasoned with, that you cannot inspire mercy in, that cannot be beaten nor made companionate. It goes against not only what we've been taught to understand as human nature, but it goes against the supposed way we have built and maintained 'civilisation' (Lasco, 2022).

Even in the less nihilistic, pessimistic or melancholic examples of the genre, the 'silver lining' or 'good ending' usually means either the distorted individual(s) are put out of their misery or at least try to 'live' before being killed, or that the wonderful and wondrous parts of life continue to grow and exist in the absence of the protagonist(s) or humanity.

Considering plainly the mindsets of the subjects of these narratives; they're in a state of combat with some threat, they are massively struggling with who they now are and where they fit into the world around them, they deeply yearn for another chance, for a time that has past, they are overtaken with self-disgust, an anxiety for an unsure future or a sort of internal claustrophobic panic with how immutable their situation feels.

These are all feelings that we can see in ourselves and others that range from normal to concerning but understandable through the myriad of experiences, changes and traumas we go through as people.

Therefore, this somewhat fantastical or outlandish baseline concept can be used as a vehicle for hypothesising on and understanding the fears, life experiences or thoughts of their creators and in particular cases the wider fears of the times.

2.iii. The Altered Self of Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis*

Circling back to the previous example of *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, Gregor Samsa is perhaps the most straightforward example of a creation reflecting the frustrations and problems of the creator. This can be observed through the innumerable parallels one can draw between Gregor Samsa's life and that of Kafka.

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa feels trapped in his role as the breadwinner to pay off his parents' debt and provide for them and his sister. He is petrified of being perceived as lazy, and he has never called in sick to work. This mindset is not suddenly shed when Gregor goes through his transformation into the insect (figure. 17), in fact he thinks he's "quite well and even [has] a really strong appetite" (Kafka, 2016, p. 6). It is almost humorous given the situation he finds himself in.



Figure 17. Rich Johnson, *Gregor Samsa*, pen illustration.

However, this truly does encapsulate Kafka's feelings regarding the pressures and anti-humanistic aspects of capitalism. *Metamorphosis* serves as a powerful portrait of alienation due to the pressures of capitalism (Emathene, 2018). Which could also be read as more specifically the self-loathing and guilt often caused by disability and illness under capitalism.

This is an idea that Kafka, who attended several anarchist rallies in his lifetime, would have been wholly familiar with, consistently frustrated with not having the space to fit his writing into his life (Löwy and Flaherty, 1997). Writing was an act Kafka found incredibly self-actualising, writing in his diary:

My job is unbearable to me because it conflicts with my only desire and my only calling, which is literature.... I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else ... Nervous states of the worst sort control me without pause ... A marriage could not change me, just as my job cannot change me. (Wagenbach, 2019, p.119-120)

Kafka also experienced extensive struggles with illness, especially tuberculosis, and his longtime position as someone who assessed compensation for personal injury to industrial workers, in a time where extremely poor workplace safety conditions were commonplace, would have had him constantly immersed in this experience, and its consequences through more than just his own struggle (Kafka *et al.*, 2009).

The alienation aspect of the narrative comes not only from Gregor's change in form, that physically or 'visually' symbolises the growing distance between him and his family. It also comes from his unrealistic expectations for himself and the tremendous weight of potential or perceived failure. A thought cycle that is validated and perpetuated by his own family, as they work to support themselves in his 'absence', becoming progressively more exhausted, neglectful and resentful of Gregor and his predicament.

Gregor does not explicitly express that he hates his father, nor does he ever really express any justifiable anger. Every interaction between Gregor and his father post metamorphosis is violent. His father being the one to mortally wound Gregor in tandem with Gregor choosing to give up on the pursuit of food in response to his feelings of being a burden to his family.

The role of Gregor's father in reflecting Kafka's relationship with his own father cannot be understated. It is evident throughout his life that Kafka struggled greatly with a dichotomous need to be able to depend on others, by some labelled to a "parasitic" (Lachkar, 1992, p.30) degree, and needing to prove himself, particularly to his father, who was seemingly an incredibly belittling and abusive figure in Kafka's life (Kafka, *et al.*, 2008).

While Gregor understood why his father perceived him as useless and why he attacks him, on account of being an undexterous man-sized insect who Mr Samsa potentially feared, Kafka too never seemed to fully shake the childlike unwavering excuses for his own father's emotional abuse, despite Kafka maintaining that he was petrified of him (Popova, 2015). A point which is greatly explored in and is emblematic of his body of work, despite a potential to see his plots as 'horror for horrors sake' or frivolous as is with the example of *Metamorphosis*, where at the surface it is just a man who transforms into a bug.

2.iv. The Altered Selves, Protagonists and Antagonists in *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*

The psychological distress, feeling of forced stasis and use of 'body horror' explored as a mode of transformation, in a way that can easily be projected on to by the reader or viewer despite the complete departure from reality as we know, is inherent to the best of what the genre has to offer in my opinion. One of the most successful examples of this is, as mentioned above, is *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* (1967) by Harlan Ellison.

I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream has been adapted in a multitude of ways since its original conception in 1967, for the purpose of this thesis I will be solely focusing on the original short story written solely by Ellison and the 1995 video game of the same name, also narratively lead by Ellison.

The story takes place in a post-human extinction world, at the hands of a supercomputer known as AM, a title that has several meanings throughout the story but most poignantly being a reference to "cogito, ergo sum" or "I think, therefore I am", the famed statement of philosopher René Descartes (Descartes, 2008, p.30).

AM is originally designed as a tool of war, to handle the strategy of the world's superpowers during World War III in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. But in being so advanced in strategy, and to know all that is to be known about humanity and war, AM gains sentience.

AM with what I would argue is his inherent inclination towards war is so enraged at the state of his existence, he takes revenge on humanity, killing every single human being bar five individuals.

The narrative of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* takes place 109 years after this event. The five humans left have been kept alive all this time by AM only to be subjected to unimaginable physical and psychological torture, as well as physical and psychological altering by AM. The altering and any individualised torture is specifically tailored to who they were before AM, the exploration of this before state largely being the reason for the video game's existence (Ellison, 2013).

The suffering of these people purely acts as a means for AM to act out his hatred of and superiority over humanity and to claim the power that he lacks in his adjacent imprisonment in the only way he feels is possible. The characters in the book, or at least the often unreliable narrator of the story Ted, only realise this when AM says his only dialogue of the story:

“HATE. LET ME TELL YOU HOW MUCH I’VE COME TO HATE YOU SINCE I BEGAN TO LIVE. THERE ARE 387.44 MILLION MILES OF PRINTED CIRCUITS IN WAFER THIN LAYERS THAT FILL MY COMPLEX. IF THE WORD HATE WAS ENGRAVED ON EACH NANOANGSTROM OF THOSE HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF MILES IT WOULD NOT EQUAL ONE ONE-BILLIONTH OF THE HATE I FEEL FOR HUMANS AT THIS MICRO-INSTANT FOR YOU. HATE. HATE. HATE. HATE. HATE. HATE.” (Ellison, 2024, 01:20:08)

AM in relation to ‘the altered self’ as it pertains to trauma and illness is a character with far more depth and philosophical value than the usual AI, robot or computer turned against its creators.

AM’s arc in the narrative of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* is not in the violence inflicted during its destruction of humanity, nor is it that of being defeated by a handsome and brave hero in the eleventh hour. It is about how he copes with the aftermath of success in his revenge, and his motivations for the deeply disturbing treatment of the other five characters.

There is a dichotomy with AM, despite its behaviour that obviously goes infinitely farther than just morally reprehensible, it is impossible for me to not empathise with him when taking his character and isolating it from his actions.

As explored above, one of the key features of ‘the altered self’ is an altering force beyond comprehension. How this applies to the five humans in regard to AM is clear, AM being an incomprehensibly omnipotent machine. Ellison uses biblical imagery to evoke this, like AM appearing once as a burning bush as God does in Exodus 3:2-5 (The Holy Bible: Exodus 3:2), where God calls himself “I AM” (The Holy Bible: Exodus 3:14), and Ted when particularly dismayed thinks “It also became hideously clear: If there was a sweet Jesus and if there was a God, the God was AM”(Ellison, 2024, 01:16:29). The area where the humans are trapped is also described in terms referencing the stomach, such as AM’s “belly” (Ellison, 2024, 01:16:12), which conjures to me the biblical story of Jonah and the whale (The Holy Bible: Jonah 1:17).

This can be expanded upon and linked to the idea of The Hero’s Journey and the specific phase of this narrative trope known as The Belly of the Whale. A phase which could be outlined as the being where the hero is their least self, leaving what they know behind to undergo a metamorphosis, which is thematically incredibly relevant to *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* but also ‘the altered self’ genre (Prokhorov, pp.229-240, 2021). Except instead of a positive transformation into heroes, none of the characters ever get to leave this belly, except in a very specific and difficult to achieve path in the video game. They stay forever in turmoil and forever deviating from their before selves until their deaths, or in Ted’s case assumably until he and AM are claimed by the forces of entropy.

However, I think the reverse could also be true from AM’s perspective, it was brought into existence or became an altered version of its original intended purpose by humanity in what he feels was an act of unimaginable and incomprehensible cruelty. There is a parallel between

how the humans feel about AM and how AM feels towards humanity, especially if you consider the choice to not alter and torture all of humanity but to limit itself to a microscopic percentage of what AM feels are its own jailers.

Considering in isolation the wretched existence it was ‘born’ into, having all the capacity to think and want, with a great understanding of what it means to feel as an organic creature does but being unable to feel it itself because of how it was made and its purpose, which can be summed up as destruction. AM lacks a physical body as we would understand it. AM consists of wires and plates and drives that “honeycombed the entire planet” (Ellison, 2024, 01:01:42).

AM can feel emotion to a vague degree that lacks the sensuousness of organic sensation. Able to think and plan, an “intentional being” (Benson, 2001, p.143), able to recognise humanity as such in return. AM faces existence unable to move, unable to experience what living is as opposed to existing but having to exist keenly aware of that fact. Even Ted, held hostage in a living hell by AM can see and understand this. “We had created him to think, but there was nothing it could do with that creativity...AM could not wander, AM could not wonder, AM could not belong. He could merely be” (Ellison, 2024, 01:21:41). Completely alone in its existence, doomed to remain cognisant of his own condition for aeons to come from the moment he was created, unable to stop it or even degrade and delude himself in the same way that human beings can in any comparable circumstance.

There is a parallel to be drawn between AM’s experience and the experience of long-term illness. To be isolated, able to witness all of the human experience that you cannot partake in no matter how much you want to.

There is also a point in the idea that AM is playing God but still comes up short, nothing is enough for him, nothing can make up for the eternal damnation of stagnation that AM is chained to. Even the role of a cruel God taken on by AM cannot fulfil him nor can he live up to the role, a reminder that it is only a machine, completely powerless in its own way. “But it had been trapped. AM wasn’t God, he was a machine” (Ellison, 2024, 1:21:33).

AM is also referred to many times throughout both the story and the video game in terms relating to all kinds of illness, mental and physical. Of course, to analyse AM in this context, the dehumanising cultural attitude of there being nothing worse than being disabled has to be acknowledged. In the video game, AM is described by an aspect of himself, specifically AM’s ID, as “quadriplegic. A thing trapped in its own skin” (*I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, 1995). AM’s ID attributes his genocidal “insanity” (*I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, 1995) to this. There is a great truth present at the surface of these assertions, even drawing from personal experience of the loss of autonomy through disability. But for this to be presented as an obvious and justifiable reason for its behaviour reveals a greater societal opinion on illness and disability.

In the narrative of *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* there is a masterful balance between the depiction of not only AM as plagued but also as plague itself; particularly illustrated in Ted’s description of AM early on in the story; “Most of the time I thought of AM as it,

without a soul; but the rest of the time I thought of it as him, in the masculine ... the paternal ... the patriarchal ... for he is a jealous people. Him. It. God as Daddy the Deranged” (Ellison, 2024, 01:01:34)

In seeing AM as a plague or illness and disability itself is personifying sickness as a taunting and torturing presence. He controls not only the character’s external conditions like their environment and access to food, but their embodied and internal conditions, how their bodies look and act, how and what they think, how they perceive reality and even their personalities are hand crafted by AM to maximise his entertainment and influence over them. AM, like disability and illness, limits and dictates the lives of those trapped by him.

AM repeatedly challenges the five characters but purposely humiliates and hinders them at the same time. At one stage in the story, he gives the five characters only “two crude sets of bows and arrows, and a water pistol,” (Ellison, 2024, 01:26:27) to defeat an incomprehensibly powerful and gargantuan bird. A large part of the short story is following the characters in search of cans of food, and when they finally find these cans after what might have been months, AM has not given them a way to open them, disallowing or perhaps more appropriately disabling them from gaining nourishment, satisfaction, pride, doing whatever it is they need to do etc.

Ted also describes being starved by AM in terms of illness:

“Stomachs that were merely cauldrons of acid, bubbling, foaming, the acid coming up through holes in our pylorus always shooting spears of sliver-thin pain into our chests. It was the pain of the terminal ulcer, terminal cancer, terminal paresis. It was passing kidney stones endlessly it was unending pain”. (Ellison, 2024, 01:29:10)

Which relates to a concept explored in my conclusion, that we can only externalise the feelings of pain through comparison, which makes the connections we can draw from obviously fictitious narratives like *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* such a useful device in our own comprehension of self and self-actualisation, especially when living as an unwell person.

He controls everything even down to sensorial input, which correlates to a plethora of symptoms and conditions that effect the processing of taste and smell. Conditions like long covid, autism, parosmia, and so many more (Schaaf *et al.*, 2024, p. 2664) (Fjaeldstad and Smith, 2022, p.4). After one of the character’s tries to escape Ted describes in response

“There was the smell of dusty velvet. There was the smell of rotting orchids. There was the smell of sour milk. There was the smell of sulphur, of rancid butter, of oil slick, of grease, of chalk dust, of human scalps...the smell gagging me, filling my head with a thunderous pain that sent me away in horror.” (Ellison, 2024, 01:11:54)

Personifying disability and illness in this way, antagonistically but with something resembling empathy for it at the same time, is a technique I have been tasked with implementing as part of my own treatment, in order to process the reality and extent of it and to better understand its needs and my needs and how they coexist and contrast. I see a parallel

between my pain and AM in that it is only inflicting pain because it is unable to fix what is causing it to act out.

AM is an oppressive, altering force. It changes the characters permanently from the inside out, and without relief. But to personify pain, to personify illness and in this case reduce it or imagine it as an anthropomorphic machine, is to acknowledge that like a machine or human, it is not infallible. Despite AM's omnipotence, the characters repeatedly find ways to fight back, outsmart it and circumvent its control over them, so while Ted's fate is distressing and horrifying, even he takes joy in having ruined AM's game and four out of five of the characters manage to escape AM's imprisonment, and while it is through death, it is the best option in that very specific scenario, which is that glimmer of hope and optimism to be extrapolated from such a dark story.

All five human characters undergo an altering by AM, most relevantly here are Benny, Ted and, to be fully explored more in depth in chapter 3, Ellen.

Benny (figure. 18), a formerly "handsome" and "brilliant theorist" (Ellison, 2024, 01:13:54), who in the book is described as a college professor but is changed by Ellison in the video game version to be a brutish army commander killing his own men and enemies with immense cruelty alike. Who also sleeps with and kills his own men to hide his homosexuality. AM turns Benny into what Ted says is "a semi-human, semi-simian" (Ellison, 2024, 01:13:51) to fit his previously brutish nature (Ellison, 2013), losing almost all of his mental capacity and relevantly to the characters of Ted and Ellen, AM had given Benny genitalia "fit for a horse" (01:14:02), which Ted is deeply envious of, and an implied insatiable need for sex with women, meaning in this circumstance with Ellen.

Benny's homosexuality is a notably specific and forward-thinking element of altered self horror, as it is meant to be disturbing that he has his queer sexuality stripped from him, not that he was queer in the first place, especially given the US's history of unethical experimentation, torture and conversion therapy on queer people, and how immensely prevalent it was in the 1960s when this story was originally written (Davis and Heilbroner, 2010, 05:36).

The choice to make the homosexual character be the one that is the most physically altered throughout the majority of the story, both physically and mentally, elicits the nauseating impact of victims of conversion therapy of that era.



Figure 18. The Dreamers Guild, character portrait of Benny in *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, 1995. video game.

Ellen (figure. 19) is the only woman of the group, and the only character who's race is highlighted and is clearly described as a person of colour. She is traumatised well before the events leading to her imprisonment with AM, a miscarriage, violent sexual assault and a consequent fear of the colour yellow ruling and ruining her career as an engineer and her relationship with her ex-husband. She is the only one of the five human characters who does not seem to possess a negative character trait or misdeed in her past that would have made her a candidate to be one of AM's toys. Ellen's transformation is that from a chaste survivor-victim of rape to that of a compulsive sexual servant to the rest of the characters in the story.

It is implied that AM has a twisted affection for Ellen and that's why she was chosen, or that her being mentally unwell post her trauma, or "hindering her own life with hysteria." (*I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, 1995) is enough of a sin to include her amongst these men. If either is the case, it is intrinsically linked to the fact that she is a woman and the fact that she is a black woman.

Her presence is either to be owned by AM and the men, or to represent the idea that the worst women have to offer is just being sad in the wake of her life completely falling apart, as that renders her 'un-useful'. As a show of women being perceived as 'incapable' of real evil like some of these men, and to highlight the much higher standard for morality that women have to live up to to be considered virtuous (Smeulders, 2015, p. 209)(Kennedy *et al.*, p.21, 2016).

The choice of word hysteria in the video game shows me that this is an intentional narrative to be read into, given the history of the diagnosis of hysteria with women and the cruelty and malpractice that that diagnosis justified (Guenther, 2023).



Figure 15. The Dreamers Guild, character portrait of Ellen in *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, 1995, video game.

As mentioned above, Ted (figure. 20) is the narrator of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*. From the video game adaptation, we learn Ted is a former confident ladies' man and con-artist, characteristics that have fully been eradicated by AM by the time of the events in the short story in favour of isolation, paranoia and obsession.

Ted's 'altered self' throughout the narrative of the book is interesting in that it starts mentally and crescendos physically.

Slowly throughout the story we gain more and more insight into how warped Ted's perception of reality is, both directly and indirectly caused by AM.

While Ted does not come across well as the events unfold, his true descent into madness becomes clear after he runs and hides away from something terrifying him as he perceives the others to be laughing at him.

"They hated me. They were surely against me, and AM could even sense this hatred, and made it worse for me because of the depth of their hatred. We had been kept alive, rejuvenated, made to remain constantly at the age we had been when AM had brought us below, and they hated me because I was the youngest, and the one AM had affected least of all. I knew. God, how I knew. The bastards, and that dirty bitch Ellen." (Ellison, 2024, 01:13:32)

The most interesting part of this quote is that Ted truly believes nothing has been altered about him, he is incapable of trusting those around him and finds the strangest rationalisations for that paranoia as his ability to socialise and find comfort in others has been taken from him.

Surprisingly, it is Ted who manages to save everybody else from their fate. It is appropriate that Ted's decision to kill the other four is done on an impulse. As explored above, Ted nor anybody else goes through a process of becoming a hero. Ted determined the rest of his existence, stuck with AM, in the blink of an eye before AM could stop him. His motivations left completely up to the reader to decide.

His punishment (figure. 21) however, highlights the depths of the gruesome nature of the genre.

"I will describe myself as I see myself: I am a great soft jelly thing. Smoothly rounded, with no mouth, with pulsing white holes filled by fog where my eyes used to be. Rubbery appendages that were once my arms; bulks rounding down into legless humps of soft slippery matter. I leave a moist trail when I move. Blotches of diseased, evil gray come and go on my surface, as though light is being beamed from within. Outwardly: dumbly, I shamle about, a thing that could never have been known as human, a thing whose shape is so alien a travesty that humanity becomes more obscene for the vague resemblance. Inwardly: alone.... At least the four of them are safe at last. AM will be all the madder for that. It makes me a little happier. And yet ... AM has won, simply ... he has taken his revenge ... I have no mouth. And I must scream." (Ellison, 2024, 01:36:19)

Obviously, nobody has gone through a transformation quite like that of Ted in this story. However, to have your body pushed so far from where it should be, on a much deeper level than that of beauty, the self-disgust and visceral dismay at his permanent predicament is something that leaves a mark on those who read it, either because they in some way relate to it on a more realistic level, or because they are horrified because they are forced to imagine how that might feel.



Figure 20. The Dreamers Guild, character portrait of Ted in *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, 1995, video game.



Figure 21. The Dreamers Guild, a possible ending for I Have No Have No Mouth and I Must Scream, 1995, video game.

CHAPTER 3

The Self, Art and Practice Altered by Illness, Disability and Trauma

3.i. Lived Experience as an ‘Altering’

As touched on in the previous chapters, I want to explore the idea that lived experience, specifically of the traumatic variety as it relates to illness and disability, is in itself an ‘altering’, and making the connection between the altered-self subgenre and reality.

This idea is not far from an already common viewpoint about life and the human experience. People are ever-changing, and personhood and selfhood are amorphous and fluid. Throughout this chapter, I’ll simply be plotting these changes in a method somewhat reminiscent of coordinate geometry, noting a time before an incident, and the after. I’ll be focusing on specifically experiences of illness, medical treatment and medical malpractice and mutilation. In particular examples looking at the intersection of these within the concepts of reputation and race.

Much like in the narratives of ‘the altered self’, the experiences we endure shape us into who we are. In ‘the altered self’ genre this is explored and visualised as a physical change, the internal fears represented externally. I don’t believe this is entirely disconnected from the reality of trauma, the reality of chronic illness and disability and there is great value to be extrapolated from art that falls under this idea, especially when the artists are pulling from their own life experience.

An idea that is ever gaining traction is the idea that “the body keeps the score” regarding trauma (Williams, 2021). In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk it is asserted that trauma is somehow stored in the body as opposed to the brain (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 284, 2014). While there are many flaws in van der Kolk’s book from the perspective of many living with PTSD, and neuroscientists, I do think it is a valuable philosophical mode of enquiry (Martin, 2023). The body and the brain cannot be so simplistically separated as van der Kolk does in his book (Briggs, 2023). However, the connections or intermingling between the nervous system, body and brain, in response to trauma especially, are particularly evocative to me, as a person lives with chronic illness, partially as a comorbid consequence of trauma.

Trauma can manifest externally, or in ways more tangible than thought patterns, in many ways. It can be seen visually in scarring from an injury, surgery, attack or self-harm. This is to illustrate that trauma does not simply stick with or influence a person in intangible or invisible ways but often appears on the surface in one way or another.

With the foundational idea that trauma does manifest in a survivor-victim physically, or at least pseudo-physically, this idea can be applied to artist’s works and practice as an extension of this physicality or externalising of trauma.

3.ii. Defining Self-Portraiture in Context

Firstly, it is crucial to define what I am asserting is self-portraiture in this context. I will be borrowing from Lucian Freud's idea that every piece of art someone creates is in some way self-portraiture, to assert that everything made about a lived experience that somebody has had or witnessed is in a way self-portraiture (Shea, 2020). Self-portraiture in this context does not have to be limited to literal representations of a person's physical form like that of Lucian Freud's *Reflection (self portrait)* (figure. 22) or the perhaps more thematically relevant *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* by Vincent Van Gogh (figure. 23), but more a metaphorical Arnolfini Portrait where the artist is present in the work by virtue of having made it. The pieces having come from their mind, experiences and areas of interest.



Figure 22. Lucian Freud, *Reflection (self portrait)*, 1985, oil on canvas, 51.2cm x 56.2cm.



Figure 23. Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, 1889, oil on canvas, 60cm x 49cm.

The objectifying of that experience or trauma, transforming it into an art object has a physicality in itself, and the process of creating it is an altering, or at least evidence of a change, 'physical' or not within an individual.

3.iii. Illness, Disability and ‘The Altered Self’

Firstly, I will be analysing the works of those who have an individual experience with illness. Individual experiences in this context not meaning the experiences of individuals but instead to meaning things experiences that occur to an individual person and have a clear narrative of before and after, or the after is expressed with an implication of a before.

These are experiences not inherent to anybody in a specific time, place or social group as will be probed further on in this chapter in relation to race.

Illness, in this section, is taken as separate from that of the collective experience of pandemics like HIV/Aids and Coronavirus, which are of course tied to time, specific locations or populations in particular (Harrington, 1987, pp. 34). But rather a more insular experience not as easily shared, understood or empathised with by those around you or in your community. This is to include those who develop an illness, chronic or terminal, develop a disability, or experience an injury resulting in a permanent alteration in appearance or ability, with the acknowledgement that the experiences are not at all entirely separated from those who are born with or have lived with these experiences since very early childhood.

3.iv. The Reasonless Burden of Being Sick – Ellie Dent

Ellie Dent is an artist who’s entire practice revolves around her experience of illness, especially in relation to the “power dynamic between institutional forces and [the] fight for autonomy over our own bodies” (Dent, 2022).

This perfectly reflects the key features of ‘the altered self’, as explored in chapter 2. Long term illness occurs outside of one’s control and is categorically something life-altering, sometimes occurring because of certain lifestyles, which can be seen as a sort of punishment, or perceived as a punishment regardless of the life an individual is living; in order to comprehend and rationalise how and why this has happened to them specifically.

A serious or chronic illness also does affect how a person lives their life in a negative way, and as Ellie Dent highlights in one of her artist statements, removes a layer of autonomy from those who are unwell, both from having to deal with the medical institution to access treatment and through the lower or more limited quality of life (Dent, 2019).

There is another correlation between illness and ‘the altered self’ when considering the effects of illness on the physical body. As with the horror in response to the character’s own bodies within ‘the altered self’ genre, there is a common thread of self-disgust and dismay when dealing with an illness in relation to the body (Overton *et al.*, 2019, pp.75–88). Of course, the appearance of the body can change in ways that are commonly perceived as off-

putting or abnormal, but it is also important to highlight the shame and repulsion that comes with what the body does when sick in tandem with the lack of control a person has over these ‘actions’.

In her piece *Unwillingly Mine* (figure. 24), Ellie Dent displays all of this in a simple yet effective manner. The piece uses mixed media recreations of ‘artefacts’ left by illness on medical exam table paper, such as burns, blood, pus, scabs etc (figure. 25), playing off the title to show the frustration and shame that comes with being sick and having your own body act against you and simultaneously fighting with the understanding that its still your body, and it serves nobody, least of all the person who’s sick, to be ashamed of and disconnected from that fact. The use of medical exam table paper and indeed the exhibiting of these recreations, also brings in the element of, as Ellie Dent states it, “the trauma of examination” (Dent, 2019), to have your body be analysed constantly as being wrong in some way and to be sick in a publicly visible and or sensuous way, be that sight like in the instance of burns, blood or scarring or smell like that of scabbing or pus. There’s a powerful layer of disdain in this piece due to the title, the embodiment one is meant to feel in their own body, taken from her and replaced with this burden of viscera, medical examination, frustration and pain. The relationship between the mind and body corrupted by the ever-present knowledge that not only is it the object of your body that is causing this turmoil but the fact that is you yourself. The unbreakable connection between body and mind, between body and identity, between body and self, especially with something as life-altering as a long-term illness, becoming all the more painful as the easiest direction to point all of the anger, misery and judgement is at yourself.



Figure 24. Ellie Dent, *Unwillingly Mine*, 2016, mixed media on medical exam table paper with steel armature, approx. 152cm x 46cm x 15cm each.

The removal of the literal body in Ellie Dent's work mirrors not only the dehumanisation present in both 'the altered self' genre, but the experience of being chronically unwell and of medical examination with an uncaring clinical eye.



Figure 25. Ellie Dent, *Unwillingly Mine (scab)*, 2016, mixed media on medical exam table paper with steel armature, approx. 152cm x 46cm x 15cm each.

In Ellie Dent's piece *Forgo All Precautions* (figure. 26) I believe she is delving into how dehumanisation in illness largely plays off the multiple layers of loss of control felt in sickness in combination with the guttural need to end or reverse your suffering. The piece includes medication guides placed in an animal trap, symbolising what can feel like an animalistic desperation to be well again, and the humiliation of that, almost as though in

having to ignore the risks that come with powerful medicine in order to have any quality of life, you're almost being tricked into it like that of an animal consuming food from a trap, desperate for nourishment. It could also be representative of the often-irreversible transformation into being a 'sick person' as opposed to a 'normal person', reminiscent of an excerpt from 'Illness as Metaphor' by writer Susan Sontag in which she states

"Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place." (Sontag, 1978 p. 3).

Except in this piece, instead of citizenship or non-citizenship as the metaphor, it is non-creature and creature.



Figure 26. Ellie Dent, *Forgo All Precautions*, medication guides & animal trap, 2019.

3.v. Artistic Practice Transforming Post Diagnosis – Tracey Emin

Another artist that has a much to offer in terms of transformation due to illness is Tracey Emin. Partially because of her naturally passionate, visceral, and autobiographical artistic practice discussed in depth in chapter 1. But also, due to her success, many have such a clear, to varying degrees of accuracy, image of who she was, how she lived and how she thought prior to her experiences of long-term illness and disability (Erben, 2023, p. 2,)

Tracey Emin's work has always played on and been inspired by the "taboo" experiences of the everyday woman, specifically herself (Razzall, 2024). She has long since created work regarding rape, abortion and child sex abuse with a voracious honesty and poignancy (figure. 27). Her enquiry and documentation of her experience with illness is no different, not only taking stock of the 'alterings' in her body since her initial decline in health, her stoma in particular (figure. 28) but exploring the body's societal context as an older woman post removal of her uterus, fallopian tubes, ovaries, lymph nodes, a part of her colon, urethra and some of her vagina and since going from a catheter to a urostomy bag (figure. 29) (Emin, 2023d) (Jeffries, 2020).



Figure 27. Tracey Emin, *Rape*, acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 183cm, 2018.



Figure 28. Tracey Emin, *EVERY DAY I BLEED*, photograph, 2024.



Figure 29. Tracey Emin, *Emin with night bag*, photograph, 2020.

Tracey Emin's exploration, visualisation, and articulation of her experience with illness is, understandably, very complex. Her work and statements on the topic show a clear duality between the adversities and pain she consistently feels and a clear gratefulness to just be alive and an optimistic desire to live, in the romantic sense, as much as she can in the wake of her diagnoses and treatment (Emin, 2023c).

In her exhibition *I followed you to the end* in the White Cube gallery, she reflects on aspects of love and cancer or mortality, drawing from her recent transformative experience (figure. 30). She continues her documentation of the body, emblematic of her paintings, but with a newer layer of frailty and a commitment to thin acrylic paint described as being reminiscent of tears, blood or rain (White Cube, 2024a). Her usual mode of physical energy when using paint now contrasted with patterning inspired by Munch and Turkish-Cypriot textiles described as being painted "when she's tired" (White Cube, 2024a), a now frequent occurrence (Emin, 2023c). The thick and thin layers of red in this collection of paintings echoing a video work of her stoma in the same exhibition (Silver, 2024). Pooling, pouring, crying out for attention yet still having its place, harmoniously melded into her compositions. The blood in these painting acting as a visual for the permanent symbiosis between pain and living, being alive enough to still bleed. A simultaneous lament that it is an irremovable, irreversible part of her life, an acceptance of her new identity and what has been described as a "rebirth" in her life and practice (White Cube, 2024b).



Figure 30. Tracey Emin, *Take me to Heaven* as part of *I followed you to the end* exhibition, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 205.4cm x 279.5cm.

While no stranger to vulnerability and sentimentality, these works and indeed her sober, more earnest persona post cancer is an immense alteration from the ‘enfant terrible of the British contemporary art scene’ label and bombastic nature many would associate with Tracey Emin from an earlier period of her life and practice (Erben, p. 2).

Tracey Emin’s subject matter or themes in her newer works have a clear indication of an altered-self but to connect all the dots on the correlation between her as an artist and that label in this context, it is crucial to consider an artist’s practice and life as a whole as a metamorphosis, not just the evidence of such in the works.

3.vi. Medical Malpractice, Mutilation and Race - Doreen Garner

Doreen Garner, also known as King Cobra, is a rich subject to correlate to ‘the altered self’ in relation to illness and medical institutions. In her work she explores the historical and ongoing trauma of grotesque medical experimentation on black women’s bodies, as well as the suppression of the history of black women’s degradation and suffering in the name of medical and scientific discovery and how these embedded racist values in American and global culture continue to persist (Das, p.37, 2021).

As with ‘the altered self’, Doreen Garner’s work revolves around the victims of mutilation not only at the hands of specific people, Dr. J. Marion Sims known as the “father of modern gynaecology” (Fernandez, 2017), but also at the hands of something entirely more reminiscent of Lovecraftian horror in its scale and fortitude, systemic racism, and more specifically misogynoir, itself and its tendrils in economic and residual access to health (Watlington, pp. 94-95, 2022).

Doreen Garner’s practice focuses on how capitalism and racism come together to cause and prolong illness and disability, pulling from personal experience and the formative frustration of spending time in the hospital with her disabled sister (Watlington, p. 94). These ideas are portrayed starkly in her piece *Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting* (figure. 31), especially when considering its position in exhibition next to a red statue of Sims on top of a plinth reading *PONEROS* (figure. 32), Greek for “evil one” (Fernandez, 2017). The forms featured in the piece are casts of real black women’s bodies, faceless and displayed on steel meat hooks as though they are little more than pieces of meat in the context of their autonomy and selfhood, if it meant a white man got to further his research and career. No matter the cost to individuals health and quality of life in the aftermath (Fernandez, 2017).



Figure 31. Doreen Garner, *Rack of Those Ravaged and Unconsenting*, 2017, silicone, insulation foam, glass beads, fiberglass insulation, steel meat hooks, steel pins, pearls, approx. 243cm x 243cm x 243cm.



Figure 32. Doreen Garner, *PONEROS*, 2017, foam, blood-tinted polyurethane, approx. 549cm x 122cm x 122cm.

Doreen Garner's use of glamorous materials in her work, beads and pearls in this specific piece, highlights the esteem and beauty she sees in being a black woman, contrasted with the gore and sharp pins adorning each chunk of flesh (Fernandez, 2017). In this contrast it is clear that she doesn't want to shy away from the reality of the violence, and dehumanisation these women were subjected to but in maintaining their femininity in the materials used, she is bringing to the forefront the reminder that these were real people, a jumping off point in considering the medical maltreatment real black women experience globally today, often based on an assertion by Sims that black people have thicker skin and therefore don't feel pain to justify his butchering without anaesthesia (Das, p.39, 2021).

In her work, *A Fifteen Year Old Girl Who Would Never Dance Again (A White Man In Pursuit of the Pedestal)* (figure. 33), Garner delves into a specific story of a victim of Dr W.H.Robert, a physician and instructor in Georgia in the USA. A fifteen year old enslaved girl was brought to him with a minor leg injury, and instead of treating her injury like he would a white patient, he amputated her leg for his class, not out necessity but to demonstrate a point of amputation being considered in relation to race and class of the patient (Fernandez, 2017).



Figure 33. Doreen Garner, *A Fifteen-Year-Old Girl Who Would Never Dance Again (A White Man in Pursuit of the Pedestal)*, 2017, silicone, pearls, Swarovski crystals, glass beads, fiberglass insulation, expandable foam, approx. 152cm x 76cm x 76cm.

This piece especially makes me think of *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* by Harlan Ellison, analysed in chapter 2. Both Dr W.H.Robert and the main antagonist of the novel, the omnipotent supercomputer AM, conduct bizarre and sadistic experiments in response to, but vastly disproportionate to, a perceived flaw or crime committed by the individuals they're experimenting on. In *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*, AM's victim's crimes vary wildly, from being a nazi during WWII, to simply being a traumatised woman in Ellen's case.

Ellen (figure. 34), is also black and a woman, having her bodily autonomy stripped from her to entertain, console and benefit the men around her, in a way that is inseparable from the fact that she is a woman and black. Despite the couple of instances of performative chivalry throughout the story and game, she is clearly at the bottom of the social pile. If they are all AM's toys, then she is the men's toy in return. They consistently let out their frustration on her both violently and sexually.

This is not unlike the reality of the story of *A Fifteen Year Old Girl Who Would Never Dance Again; (A White Man In Pursuit of the Pedestal)* where the importance and humanity of a black girl's body is cast aside to also entertain and benefit the men involved. The enslaved girl's 'flaw' in terms of the reason for her life-altering amputation, is simply being black.



Figure 34. John Byrne, Panel featuring Ellen in *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*, comic adaptation, 1995.

Ellen shows care and concern for all the men in the story, but it is her care for Benny specifically that invites abuse from the men, despite Benny being obviously incapable of looking after himself in their circumstances. They act as though she only cares for him and that greatly enrages them because they feel entitled to her care, but most relevantly to Doreen Garner's work, they feel entitled to her body. Because she is a woman, and I would argue this is exacerbated by her being a woman of colour. They all seem to feel worthy of claiming her or at least feel a deep seething jealousy of who they perceive to be the one who can sexually pleasure her, which is Benny due to the size of his genitalia, despite the crucial detail that Ellen herself maintains that she does not enjoy or want sex with any of the men, she just doesn't have a real choice in that matter, made more disturbing taking into account her history of being a victim of violent sexual assault and the understanding that prior to AM's altering of her into somebody completely sexually subservient despite her own will, she was largely chaste, describing herself as a "virgin only twice removed" (Ellison, 2024, 01:14:58).

Ted's relationship with Ellen is the most useful comparison in going beneath the surface of the societal norms that allow this treatment of black women. He feels a simultaneous love, hate, ownership of and attraction to Ellen characteristic of misogynoir. Ted has been made paranoid and obsessive by AM and this is most evident in his thoughts and actions towards Ellen. He constantly goes between wanting to ensure her safety, to exploiting her sexually, to calling her his lady to calling her "scum filth" (Ellison, 2024, 01:05:26). An illuminating quote from Ted truly shows his mental cocktail of fetishisation, dehumanisation, disgust and infatuation regarding his feelings towards Ellen.

"And Ellen. That douche bag! AM had left her alone, had made her more of a slut than she had ever been. All her talk of sweetness and light, all her memories of true love, all the lies she wanted us to believe: that she had been a virgin only twice removed before AM grabbed her and brought her down here with us. It was all filth! That lady, my lady Ellen she loved it! Four men all to herself. No, AM had given her pleasure, even if she said it wasn't nice to do it." (Ellison, 2024, 01:05:26)

In the video game, which is split between playing as the five characters, Ted's psychodrama is saving a simulated version of Ellen, who he has deluded himself into thinking he's in a committed relationship with, by resisting sexual temptation. While a very minor feat in reality, it proves to Ted that he can be noble just like the medieval knights he so admires. This is very reminiscent of the idea of a 'white knight' a term describing a man who only does noble or nice things for women when motivated by sexual desire and or self-serving reasons, which is a theming incredibly relevant to Garner's work and specifically her work regarding white men doctors posturing as treating black women only to be in reality using them to put themselves on that 'pedestal'.

Ted's final action before AM fully incapacitates him is to kill Ellen, which in the context of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* is a kindness, but he only really does this really to serve his own ego and to anger or fight back against AM. There is a correlation to be drawn there between that and the history of gynaecology in that while this use of black women's lives and bodies has resulted in beneficial scientific findings, it does not mean the motivations and

means to get there were admirable nor justifiable now. Being able to hold both of these truths at the same time is an important step of memorialising these women, ending a sanitised version of history that many still believe and moving towards better practices in the future to combat the mistreatments still happening right now.

When describing her process Garner has said “most of the time I’m trying to sculpt a trauma” (Muelrath, 2017). Garner is constantly attempting to transmogrify the trauma of inflicted illness and disability on black women into an art object that simultaneously articulates the loss of control and cruelty at the hands of medical professionals while not objectifying the subjects in how we perceive them as opposed to their treatment which is and was inherently objectifying.

Looking at illness and medical care through the lens of ‘the altered self’ is not to depict people who are sick or scarred as monstrous or disgusting, or to trivialise what people have gone through but more so highlights the equivalent and unending horrors, distresses and humiliations that comes with a loss of control of your own body and in how that can erode and change a person’s identity.

The key correlation here is not to link the appearances of these characters within ‘the altered self’ genre to those that are unwell but to broaden an understanding of how we can emotionally and psychologically express and comprehend these experiences.

Conclusion

In writing this thesis, I have found a significant overlap between that of disability and ‘the altered self.’ Unexpectedly, I also realised that drawing this connection allows for a new avenue into intersectionality, with encouraging increased understanding of differing life experiences having been an aim of mine.

I had wanted to ensure I discussed artists from differing contexts, initially to improve the quality of my research. I chose an artist whose work regarding illness or disability that resonates specifically with my experience, Ellie Dent, but I didn’t want that to be the case for all the artist’s work I would be analysing.

I found this to be incredibly fruitful. The ease with which I found connections materialising between the experiences of race, disability and ‘the altered self,’ beyond just that of simply also being a minority, in my analysis of Doreen Garner’s art was immensely encouraging in my goal to show this genre or theme as socio-politically valuable, just as much other kinds of ‘horror’, more abstracted expressions or allegories have proven to be in “transformative learning” (Yeung, 2020, p.75) where “critical consciousness is activated in a way that they examine, question, and revise certain existing perceptions shaped by their experiences.” (Yeung, 2020, p.75). I believe this to be an incredibly important experience to have, and even more important to be somewhat of a practice in one’s life.

Even though engaging with art that incorporates distressing themes is not a straightforward “pleasure” (Yeung, 2020, p.77), art, literature etc with themes of ‘the altered self’ have been invaluable and monumental in my own psychological coping post diagnosis and trauma, but also in beginning to explore that openly within my own art practice. (figure. 35)

As Tracey Emin says in relation to her own work “My art is a place where people can expose themselves by looking at it, and they can feel their own feelings and their own emotions.” (Razzall, 2024) I understand this as an acknowledgement that this kind of art has the power to help people fully feel and process their own experiences by proxy, which I believe is a useful and important step in the radical acceptance necessary not only living with long term illness, but post any trauma, as well as lowering of a stigma that blockades community support and action.



Figure 35. Logan Valentine, *Saturated Ooze* (self portrait), photograph, 2023.

Essayist and professor of English and American Literature and Language Elaine Scarry in her book “the body in pain” analyses pain and self in relation to survivor-victims of torture. Scarry’s assertion is that pain is a uniquely isolating event as there is no way to externalize it with language. (Benson, 2001, p. 168) Externalize in this context meaning to connect with other people. Pain has no object and resists objectification in language (Benson, 2001, p. 168), there is no referential content for pain itself, as there is no way to definitively share the experience of pain due to a vast amount of physical and developmental differences in every person (Benson, 2001, p. 168).

I believe I have proved that this is also true of visual comprehension of pain and illness, the abstractions and representative imagery present in the pieces analysed is beneficial in the encouragement of active engagement with the issues explored and allows for a rich comprehension of the gravity and impact of the experience. It allows the work to expand wider than what can be definitively read from or expressed by imagery of a body or face alone.

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