

Emily Howard

*Unit 2*

*Positions Through Iterating*

*Written Response*

*May 2nd 2025*

Ahmed, S. (2017). 'Introduction: Bringing Feminist Theory Home' *Living a Feminist Life* Durham: Duke University Press. Pp. 1-18

"A concept is worldly, but it is also a reorientation to a world, a way of turning things around, a different slant on the same thing. More specifically, a sweaty concept is one that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world ... A sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying. The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty." (Ahmed, 2017)

Sara Ahmed's introduction proved a helpful read in pinpointing the difficulty of describing, presenting, and unpacking feminist concepts, which she refers to as 'sweaty concepts'. Ahmed underlines moving away from a demanded immediate response. I have had a hard time defining and narrowing my stance on the male gaze and from where I want to approach it. Ahmed validates the reorientation to a new world that comes with 'sweaty', undefined conceptual work. Her writing helped me in avoiding getting caught up in an exact end goal response and keeping the line of questioning open.

Ahmed describes the 'home' as our society and the 'body' as feminist concepts and the point of view of not being at home in the world. This struck home in the way the male gaze alienates the woman and denies her ownership of her habitat. This 'sweaty concept' surrounding eviction from home as a result of the male gaze is something I began to uncover in my second round of iterations and want to explore further through the coming weeks.

Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. New York, Viking Press.

“But the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in a quite different way from men — not because the feminine is different from the masculine — but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him. If you have any doubt that this is so, make the following experiment. Choose from this book an image of a traditional nude. Transform the woman into a man. Then notice in your mind’s eye or by drawing on the reproduction. Then notice the violence which that transformation does. Not to the image, but to the assumptions of a likely viewer.”

Berger’s book was the driving force of much of my work, specifically in the second week. The final paragraph with a call to action to reproduce famous works demonstrating the male gaze guided my second set of iterations, and as a result, generated many of the critical questions that came out of my exploration. Berger’s unpacking of the gaze, which parallels Laura Mulvey’s take, helped me understand the breadth of impact the male gaze has beyond just media. It is embedded in the way society functions and the way women have been instinctively trained as the passive ‘viewee’.

In rewriting/reproducing my set of works, it revealed, as Berger suggests, a violence of sorts and a level of intense discomfort when the female is converted to a male yet the position of the viewer remains. It immediately provides visual queues to make the viewer assume the subject is in some form of drag or is highly feminine — solely through vulnerable body language. Why does a man in a vulnerable and ‘on display’ position immediately appear homosexual in nature? This question goes back to Berger’s inquiry surrounding the social constructs society has created and their irrevocability.

Lee, P.M. (2011). *OPEN SECRET: THE WORK OF ART BETWEEN DISCLOSURE AND REDACTION*. [online] Artforum. Available at: <https://www.artforum.com/features/open-secret-the-work-of-art-between-disclosure-and-redaction-197372/>.

“The secret in itself an ideological contrivance; it’s withholder — its visible withholding — is as critical to its power as whatever content we might imagine it conceal.” (Lee, 2011)

In my initial iterations exploration using redaction and censorship to simultaneously take away but also highlight the male gaze, this project helped me to define the use and impact of censorship, especially in the context of screenprinting, which was where my initial iteration stemmed from. When I first came across using screenprinting to redact, I was drawn to the way it often turned into a highlight due to the transparency of ink. This calls out the notion that when something is redacted, you want even more to know what is underneath. Redacting also amplifies. Applying this to my iterations, I aimed to both call attention to the male gaze through transparent ink redaction while also attempting to reverse the objectification of women by covering them with traditional black ink censor blocks. Through this method, I wanted to explore the duality of the two and its effect on the viewer.

Haraway, D. (1988). ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’ *Feminist Studies*, 14(3). Pp. 575-599

“The imagined “we” are the embodied others, who are not allowed *not* to have a body.” (Harraway, 1988)

“Vision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualising practices.” (Harraway, 1988)

Harraway’s excerpt correlated interestingly with a thread from John Berger’s book, *Ways of Seeing*. In both, they mention the violence situated within vision and the ‘looker’. In my second week of iterations I explored the effect of the gaze before and after it being flipped on its head. While Berger points out the violence in flipping the gaze through gender transformation, Harraway speaks to the violence that exists in the male gaze from the start. I began to recognize the perverseness in the subjects and the way they were painted as a vehicle to provide a sense of power and ownership to the viewer. On the reverse, when the female forms are converted to male, another layer of uncomfortability arises with the taboo nature of visualising men in such vulnerable and feminine postures. The duality of complex viewpoints underlines the overarching importance of the eye when considering the male gaze and even the female gaze.

In an alternate way of considering perspective, Harraway’s excerpt reminded me of the importance of collective viewpoints and sourcing opinions. While I am a woman who has experienced the male gaze, I am not the only one and my experience and opinions on such differ from others. My output in this project will lose its impact if I claim to see from others positions. Moving forward, I want to focus on gathering others perspectives and experiences to further enrich my inquiry.

Mulvey, L. (1975). *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. London Afterall Books.

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.” (Mulvey, 1975)

While more specific to film than fine art, Laura Mulvey's article defined for me the complexities built in our society surrounding the objectification of women in media. Unpacking the roles of the viewer (male) and the subject (female) aided in further understanding the way in which women have been positioned in society as an object for male pleasure, dating back to male scientific cognitive fear and desire. This places women as something to be used. For emotional reassurance, gratification, validation, base need to reproduce, and then once no longer able to provide these pleasures, is labelled obsolete. Reading this unpacking of the way this has been represented in media and this instilled in the way society functions lit the fire to call it out, understand it, and begin to dismantle it.

White Cube (2024). *Tracey Emin, Bermondsey (2024)*. [online] White Cube. Available at: <https://www.whitecube.com/gallery-exhibitions/tracey-emin-bermondsey-2024>.



*Like A Cloud of Blood, 2022*

This fall, I visited Tracey Emin's exhibition at White Cube, and it was my first introduction to fully considering the female gaze. In such raw and intense representation of the true female form in its most vulnerable, and in this case hurting, state, I began to think about the lack of such representation in mainstream art. Yet the female form is consistently prevalent in art across centuries. Why do we not see the female body represented in uncomfortable yet authentic ways such as this? Once I began to consider within this inquiry the male gaze and its counterpart of the female gaze, Tracey Emin's work served as the other end of the scale when it comes to the gaze. This began to gather even more meaning when considering the common positioning of a woman's body in a bed, often 'awaiting' the viewer. This is a prime example of countering the male gaze with the reality of a woman in her most vulnerable state and place.

*A Brief Statement Regarding My Line of Inquiry*

Within this project, I want to consider overall the male gaze in media both in the past and today. By exploring this history in the representation and display of women as sexualized objects I hope to then explore the way this looks in today's environment and use the past to inform my inquiry of the present. Through my exploration thus far I have begun to question what this looks like in the context of graphic design and consider how the gaze can be rewritten.

Through my iterations I began to question where I want to position myself in this space and found challenge in that. Does 'rewriting' these works still bring light to the original authors and therefore give weight to these problematic artworks? Is reversing the gender roles equally as problematic? While shedding light on the male gaze in this way seems most drastic and effective it does not neutralize the 'gaze' - but would erasing the gaze as a whole erase its important history? How can time play a role in this? It took me 30 minutes per work to redraw the gaze in these paintings -- but we have still yet to rewrite the way women are represented and viewed in our society. I hope to hone these lines of questioning and define my positioning in further iterations.