Why was I so awful tonight?:

The Private made Public in Contemporary Visual Art

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Abstract

Many contemporary art practices, including my own, reveal highly personal material. While certain genres of art have historically revelled in the exposure of intimate details, the strategic use of the 'private-made-public' is an increasingly common tactic employed by contemporary artists. Art about 'private things' can be confronting because it can expose, and even threaten, socially accepted norms. This project uses conflict between long-term couples as its point of departure and, in spite of societal expectations, works to normalise it as typical in personal relationships. Artists such as Tracey Emin, Sophie Calle and Gillian Wearing similarly place private concerns into the public domain to interrogate the broader contemporary human condition.

This practice-led research project explores why the 'private-made-public' is such a compelling motif in contemporary practice. The project results in a new body of works that attempt to problematise the private by adopting strategies of deliberate discomfort and ambiguity in multi-screen video installations. The project also contributes to contemporary debates about what constitutes the private, and how it can be made public through creative practice.

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Statement of Originality

Honours Candidate: Karike Ashworth

The work contained in this exegesis has not been submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, this exegesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Name: .....

Signed: ..... Date: .....

Introduction

Private life concerns are a persistent theme in my creative work. I scrutinise and interrogate the things that are considered to be private and socially taboo, and expose them in public as part of my art practice. Believing that the role of art is to reflect on and expose established truths in society, I am fascinated by the divisions that exist in our society between the nominally private and public realms. Ironically, as a functioning social body, I am fiercely protective of my private, personal space, and have firm personal and physical boundaries in place for friends and family. My practice oscillates inside of this tension.

The private domain of the family, the home, and personal relationships are key concerns for me. Carol Hanisch's slogan 'the personal is political' opened the door for women artists to deal with personal experiences in critical ways, regarding the body, the family and their domestic life, since these were marginalised issues for the previous generation of modernist artists (Kappel 2007, 38). Prior to feminism, women artists were encouraged to focus on the domestic as their subject matter, but as sentimental 'genre' pieces dismissed as "women's work" rather than political instruments (Heartney et al 2013, 16). Pioneer feminist artists, such as Louise Bourgeois, Carolee Schneemann, and Hannah Wilke, created a space for female artists, "an environment in which women's art could be taken seriously and women artists could pursue their craft with at least an approximation of the conditions available to male artists" (Heartney et al. 2013, 13). Furthermore, according to Carol Armstrong, feminism changed contemporary art not just for women but for men as well. As she asserts, "we all gain by the changed face and expanded definition of humanness that ensues" (Armstrong cited in Heartney et al. 2013, 26). This project, a creative practice-led investigation of the difficult zone where the private meets the public, is made possible by feminism's contribution, and feminist philosophies inform my methodological and conceptual approach.

This practice-led research project explores how and why artists, including myself, make private acts public through their creative practice. There is a broad spectrum of reasons why artists interrogate private acts and reveal them in public. My research has led me to the work of Tracey Emin, Sophie Calle and Gillian Wearing, whom I have found explore the private as a means to probe at contemporary social life and subjectivity. Consequently, I contextualise my own practice by analysing these artists' works. The outcome of this research project is a new body of creative work that comprises two-thirds (66%) of the final project, and an exegetical document that makes

up the remaining third (33%). The final body of work produced this year will exist as documentation of the artworks, and a final exhibition. The creative works produced will take the form of multi-screen-time-based work, and installation. This exegetical document is a means to contextualise and reflect upon the practice's position within broader contemporary visual art practice. The project aims to contribute to the dialogue surrounding the strategic use of the 'private-made-public' in contemporary practice.

1. Methodology

This project is driven by the processes employed in my creative practice, and supported by research into the work of relevant contemporary visual art practitioners. My exegesis examines this context through supporting research, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, on-site exhibition research, and in-depth analysis of artworks.

My broader art practice uses time-based media, text, objects and installations to consider the role of creative practice in sharing, materialising, and exposing private and intimate life events. This particular project enables a deeper understanding of the reasons why I choose to interrogate specific personal events. It takes an archetypal private event—a fight between a couple—as its conceptual starting point, and explores the dynamics and interpretations of this interaction through public exhibition in the gallery space. In addition to a practice-led research methodology, I employ an iterative and autoethnographic approach to my inquiry, cultivated through a journal of audio recordings, writings and drawings, social observation, discussion, personal experiences, and, critically, an experimental audio-visual editing approach. My audio-visual editing process involves constantly revisiting, shifting and altering the roles, voices, meanings and contexts of the performances, conversations and language-in-use. In this way, ambiguity and discomfort provide the opportunity to acknowledge and interrupt social norms.

My research material for this project is derived from a personal incident that I have contextualised within Western social culture in a way that "self-consciously explores the interplay of the introspective personally engaged self with the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner 2000, 744). For this project, a series of couples (including my partner and I) perform a scripted *mise-en-scène* of an argument. The script functions as a tool to map a normative narrative of 'the private'—that inter-couple conflict is unmentionable and shameful. The everyday nature of dealing with conflict

between couples makes self-observation an appropriate tool for gathering information about the social structures that govern normative enculturation in lived experience. Autoethnography sits comfortably within the heuristic method of inquiry, a process that explicitly engages with the self. Clark Moustakas writes, "The heuristic process is autobiographic" (Moustakas 1990, 15), and defines heuristics as a "self-inquiry" through which a topic is investigated through one's senses, perceptions, beliefs and judgements. Furthermore, Ings (2011, 228) identifies a heuristic system of inquiry as one that places the researcher at the centre of the research, where they are reliant on "self-dialogue, intuition, reflection and insightful decision-making". It is through this dedicated and iterative process that my creative work eventually finds its meaning.

2. Contextual Review

Contemporary artists such as Tracey Emin, Sophie Calle and Gillian Wearing expose highly intimate and private details as part of their art practice. In my analysis of a selection of these artists' works, I aim to understand the complexity of their creative strategies in exploring the expectations of the public/private divide. As a way to frame and contextualise my research, I briefly explore the origin of the public/private divide as it emerged in contemporary Western society. I then address how and why Emin, Calle and Wearing use their own—and shared—autobiographical accounts and experiences to problematise 'the private'. The research explores feminist issues because, as Balducci (2007, 45) asserts, "feminist art is any art that in some way questions dominant, typically patriarchal paradigms—be they art historical, political, social, or aesthetic".

2.1. 'The Private'

In the seminal work *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantine*, Georges Duby defines 'the public' as "that which is open to the community and subject to the authority of its magistrates" (in Ariès and Duby 1987, viii), and 'the private' as:

> a zone of immunity to which we may fall back or retreat, a place where we may set aside arms and armor needed in the public place, relax, take our ease and lie about unshielded by the ostentatious carapace worn for protection in the outside world. This is the place where the family thrives, the realm contains our most precious possessions, which belong only to ourselves, which concern nobody else, and which may not be divulged or shown because they are so at

> odds with those appearances that honor demands be kept up in public. (Duby in Ariès and Duby 1987, viii)

Summerised by Randy Kemp (2007, 56), research into the concept of 'privacy' shows that "privacy interests and concerns, privacy norms, and more generally public/private distinctions, have been found in every culture systematically studied". Furthermore, privacy is continually evolving. For example, in the past decade or so, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, new laws governing the retention and availability of 'meta-data', as well as the passage of the United States PATRIOT Acts (I and II) in the wake of September 11, 2001, have shifted modern understandings of privacy (Rambo 2009, xiii). 'Privacy' is used to denote a wide number of concerns, including, but not limited to, "personal information control, reproductive autonomy, access to places and bodies, secrecy, and personal development" (Kemp 2007, 58). In this research, I am specifically interested in 'the private' as a place or mode of concealment or immunity. What follows is a brief and modest account of the origin of the public/private divide in Western culture as is relevant for my research scope.

In her book *Public Man, Private Woman* (1981, 13), Jean Bethke Elshtain describes pre-hominid and hominid societies as "prepolitical"— structured into kin systems, hordes and clans. According to Elshtain (1981, 13), these early societies had no consciousness of having control over their existence and, as a consequence, had no reason or necessity to characterise or divide social life into 'private' or 'public' spheres. "Prepolitical social life was structured, ritualized, familial life" (Elshtain 1981, 10). According to Janet Nelson (1990, 363), even in the more recent feudal societies of medieval Europe, people still lived in constant company; parents often shared beds with children, and chamberlains slept in masters' bedrooms. Although most women's work was done in and around the house, such work could not be categorised as 'private life' as it is understood today. Villagers, women as well as men, lived in "a very public world" (Nelson 1990, 363).

'Private life' is a modern condition. According to Rossella Ghigi (2001, 641), the rise of capitalism and industrialisation in the eighteenth century contributed significantly to the changing roles of public and private life. Ghigi (2001, 641) explains that as the scale of manufacturing increased, the industrial production and distribution of goods could no longer be organised around a family life of shared work between wives and husbands, and was removed from the household. This reorganisation of labour, and the social and economic specialisation that followed, thrust men and

women into segregated roles: men in the role of 'breadwinner', and women in the role of managing the household and child caring. Consequently, institutions including the state, the market, the workplaces, and all spaces of discussion or implementation of government politics, fell into the public sphere (Ghigi 2001, 641), while the household and the family, and, more generally, the realm of intimate relations, were considered the private sphere (Ghigi 2001, 641).

Feminist scholars such as Catharine MacKinnon (1989), Anita Allen (1988 and 2009) and Kirsten Rambo (2009) have considered at length the way privacy laws and norms have contributed to the subjugation and incarceration of women. In particular, they cite the concept of state non-interference in the private realm—that was so critical to the success of the abortion rights movement—as having had serious consequences for women inside the home; in particular battered women (Rambo 2009, 4). According to MacKinnon (1989, 194), the public/private divide is an "ideological division" designed by men to cover up "male power", enabling the institution of norms to rationalise the status quo. Tracey Emin, Sophie Calle and Gillian Wearing all work in the problematic space where the private meets the public. They use their contemporary practices to explore secrets, taboos and social structures that continue to endure in broader contemporary society, largely undetected and unchallenged, as a way to acknowledge and disrupt them. What follows is a brief description of each of these artists' practice.

2.2. Tracey Emin

High-profile artist Tracey Emin explores the private self in the public domain; notable works include *My Bed* (1999) and *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963–1995* (2005). While Emin's practice is highly performative and confessional, her strategies of disclosure and narrative are instructive for this project. Exposing her thoughts, feelings, and social defects to public view permits others to identify and connect (McGrath 2002, 1). A similar strategy can be observed in Sophie Calle's work, albeit in more nuanced ways.

Figure 1 Tracey Emin *My Bed* (1999)

Figure 2 Tracey Emin *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (2005)

2.3. Sophie Calle

The work of French conceptual artist Sophie Calle is simultaneously emotionally wrought and clinically detached. While her work is sometimes as disquieting as Emin's, "she is able to do these incredibly transgressive things and people are pleased that somebody is doing them" (Redfern 2008, 1). Possibly her most famous work, *Take Care of Yourself*, was first shown at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. The work is a scripto-visual installation featuring images, text and performances of, and by, 107 professional women whom Calle had invited to deconstruct a break-up email she allegedly received from her male lover (Walsh 2009, 25). Calle explains,

> I received an e-mail telling me it was over. I didn't know how to respond. It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me. It ended with the words 'Take care of yourself.' And so I did. I asked 107 women . . . chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter. To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it. Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me. Answer for me. It was a way of taking the time to break up. A way of taking care of myself. (Calle cited in Campbell 2008, 99)

Calle unashamedly puts a seemingly intimate event into a very public arena, through its exhibition. In *Take Care of Yourself*, Calle invites the viewer to process her pain *with* her, and, consequently, to consider why the expression of personal grief is usually quarantined to the private realm.

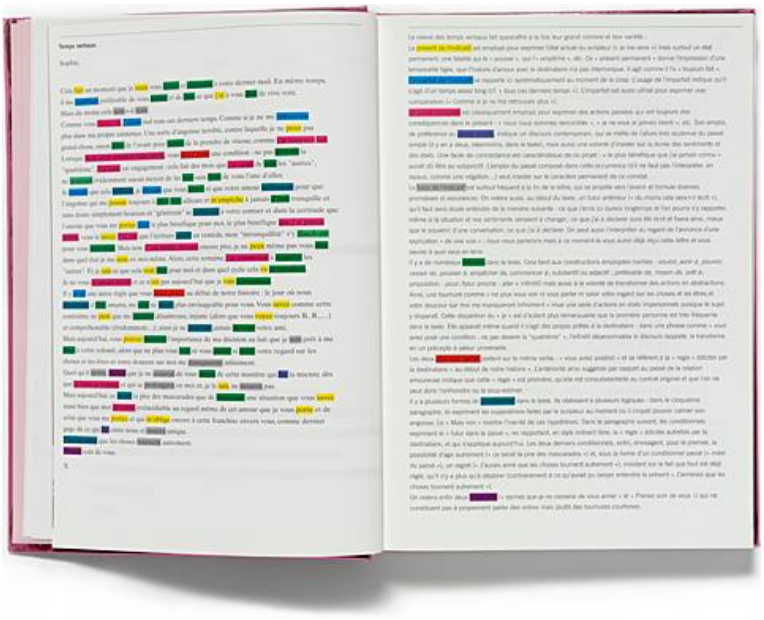

Figure 3 Sophie Calle *Take Care of Yourself* (2007)

What I find particularly resonant in Calle's practice is that she "creates intimate templates of the lived world", which unrelentingly blur "the distinction between public and private, inner and outer, reality and fantasy" (Campbell 2008, 101). *Double Blind* (*No Sex Last Night*) (1992) is a brave, yet disconcerting, account of a trip made by Calle and her partner at the time, Greg Shepard, across the United States in a Cadillac convertible. Each was equipped with a video camera. In the work, Shepard is only visible from Calle's lens, and when Calle appears on screen, it is through Shepard's vision. There is a running commentary from them, both of their impressions and 'true' feelings, and Calle additionally officiates as the omniscient narrator. It seemingly adopts the style of a documentary to faithfully and objectively retrace their events, but Calle has other aims in mind. By including a narrative thrust, she is documenting and creating at the same time. The result is less about their respective private worlds, and more about the space between them; the space between the documented moments and the narration; between seeing and interpreting (Papaloïzos 1999, 1).

Figure 4 Sophie Calle *Double Blind (No Sex Last Night)* (1992)

2.4. Gillian Wearing

British artist Gillian Wearing is concerned with similar issues. Wearing is strongly influenced by the sociology of Erving Goffman, author of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1971), in which he explains that we all have "front-stage and backstage personalities" (1971, 21) that we adjust to suit different social situations and people. This questioning of the link between representation and reality is particularly relevant to this project. Wearing's *2 into 1* (1997) is a wry exploration of the family dynamic between a mother and her two sons. Alternating between a vision of Hilary (the mother), and her two boys (Alex and Lawrence), *2 into 1* (1997) probes the delicate border where one identity ends and another begins, inviting us to consider whether there is such a thing as a 'core' identity. The boys lip-sync the words of their mother talking about them, while she does the same in reverse. All three talk with apparent frankness about each other. The son's voices, from their mother's mouth, testify to the power relationships that underlie this particular family. Furthermore, the work touches on questions of authenticity and on whether it is possible to reliably reflect on personal experiences and feelings outside the private sphere, if at all. In this way, Wearing "unmasks not only her participants, but also the society which seeks to judge them" (Kappel 2007, 290).

Figure 5 Gillian Wearing *2 into 1* (1997)

All of these works play a game of revelation, but what is actually visible and available is a construction. By foregrounding and deconstructing aspects of our lives that are generally considered private, these artists ask us to consider the power dynamics and conventions that govern them. By doing this, they challenge social structures that might otherwise remain invisible.

3. Creative Practice

This research project developed from my enduring interest in common human experiences. In the past I have dealt with maternal relationships and the grief of losing loved ones. At the end of my undergraduate degree, I recognised a pattern in my work, which I have subsequently been able to define as a fascination with the 'private-made-public'. My creative work almost always has its basis in a personal experience or incident that disturbs or distresses me. The personal, and in particular, my subjective experience in society as a female social body, is a key factor in my conceptual agenda. I became interested in this particular research topic—inter-couple conflict—because I find negotiating conflict in my spousal relationship challenging. The concept for this project has always made me uncomfortable; however, I am starting to understand that discomfort is a key aspect of my practice—I appreciate the way it functions in contemporary art, and its capacity to unsettle, and challenge normative experience.

The research project takes a hypothetical fight between a couple as its point of departure. It started with a film script, which I based on this plausible real-life event. Because the research initiated from this script, I have been predominantly exploring and using performance and time-based media. The following section is a reflection on the creative research over the past year, highlighting key works and themes that have impacted the overall course of the project.

Shortly after I wrote the script, I started to 'play' with a series of script-read-through performances in my studio with my partner, experimenting with different tempos and speeds, and changing roles, etc. I discovered that the cutting in and out of scripted and unscripted performances, the highly stage scene, broken narrative, and acknowledging the presence of the camera, coupled with the very personal dialogue, generated a dislocating effect of something simultaneously authentic and highly artificial.

Figure 6 *Why was I so awful tonight?* (2014) (video still)

To take the work beyond the diaristic or didactic, I invited other couples to perform the script. I advertised for couples to be involved as performers in an artwork, but I discovered that many couples found the subject matter challenging—that they were being requested to perform a fight, even though it was only a scripted *mise-en-scène* of a fight. I found it fascinating that couples found a performance of someone else's fight so confronting. I received curious responses, such as "marital strife, even feigned, is not something we are into", and "we will have to decline because we don't want to introduce that negative energy into our relationship". This was disappointing and frustrating because the project was not moving forward. This feedback and my frustrations were channelled into *In Two Parts*, an 8:12 minute single-channel video.

Figure 7 *In Two Parts* (2014) (video still)

In this work, I sit across the table from myself, and read out some of the responses I received from the couples (to myself), and I try to figure out (with myself) what the responses mean, socially and personally. I was interested in the stress and anxiety we feel as artists (and as people) when things are not going well, and the unproductive self-talk goes on—to and fro—between the rational and the irrational sides of ourselves, and in our inner (and outer) subjective experience. I manipulate language in the work, so there are moments when I repeat words or alter their context. This repetitive technique is strongly influenced by Kerry Tribe's *Critical Mass* (2012), a live restaging of Hollis Frampton's classic 1971 film of the same title. *Critical Mass* (1971) is an experimental film that captures an argument between a couple and cuts it up into a series of rhythmic, repetitive snippets. *In Two Parts* utilises the same rhythmic, repetitive technique for similar reasons shared by Frampton and Tribe—as a way to alter the context of the language-in-use, and to replicate the repetitive cycle of unproductive self-talk.

Figure 8 Kerry Tribe *Critical Mass* (2012) (performance still)

As the project progressed, I engaged two willing couples to perform my script, and the result is the work *Why was I so awful tonight?*, which I will discuss in detail in the following sections framed by the themes of discomfort and ambiguity.

3.1. Discomfort: as a Means to Disrupt

The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant.
—Theodor Adorno (2005, 26)

This research project considers why the perfectly common experience of couples arguing is seen as something shameful, and how contemporary art can be used as a space to contemplate and disrupt this social norm. In particular, how ambiguity and emotional discomfort in contemporary art can function to provoke normative enculturation. Inter-couple conflict, in whatever form, is a cultural taboo. Taboo is defined as "a category of objects, people, behaviours, or places that are considered by a culture to be dangerous, offensive, or disruptive to the social order" (Sullivan 2009, 3), but today the term is used loosely to describe any social indiscretion that ought to be avoided (Hughes 2006, 462). Taboos that persist today include body excretions, death and disease, sex, homosexuality, private parts of the body, inter-couple conflict, blasphemy, profanities, income,

discriminatory language, age of women, etc. (Goa 2013, 2311). Taboos are normally concealed because they are condemned by the broader society (Afifi 2009, 4). Anthony Julius (2002, 134) explains that taboos are some of the most precious, yet least understood, social structures in society. He writes, "They are experienced intuitively; they do not cohere, they certainly cannot be systematised" (Julius 2002, 134). According to Franz Steiner (2004, 72), taboos were extraordinarily prominent in Victorian society of Western Europe. Steiner's research reveals that prior to the Victorian period, a preoccupation with the mechanisms and meaning of social avoidance was unknown (Steiner 2004, 72).

As encapsulated in the work *In Two Parts*, I experienced the particular taboo of couple-conflict when I invited couples to perform in this project. Admittedly, some of the responses I received were simply polite excuses, but others, I felt, definitely illustrated the very real presence of a taboo. For example:

> Hi Karike,
>
> Dave and I have been talking the last few days and we've decided that due to the nature of the material, we're not comfortable participating in the project simply because we don't want to introduce that negative energy into our relationship. It was lovely meeting both of you and we wish you all the best finding couples that are more suitable. Would love to see how it turns out anyway!
>
> Best wishes,
> Kate & Dave [1]

The 'couple fight' is something that is often observed in public, but still considered to be private. The established social convention is that the privacy of the couple fighting should be respected, even when it is played out in public. Interestingly, when couples fight in public, the private sphere extends into 'the public' domain. This illustrates that it is not just 'the home' that denotes 'the private', but particular issues and concerns that are considered socially taboo. 'The home', as distinct from the physical structure of 'the house', emerged in the nineteenth century as "the bourgeois ideal of domesticity and privacy" that was closely associated with the private life of the family (Suk 2009, 2). According to Jeannie Suk (2009, 2), the concept of home "deeply informs our sense of who we are, and our feelings of safety and belonging". The home intentionally evolved into a place of security against the anxiety of, and invasion from, the outside world; a place where the family is supposedly safe and protected. The home *is* the literal and metaphorical

[1] Names have been changed for privacy reasons.

boundary between private and public space (Suk 2009, 3). However, as third-wave feminism demonstrated, the protection of women (and the family) in the private sphere, away from public life, is a technique of subjugation. "Insofar as a man's home is his castle, it was also a women's prison" (Suk 2009, 3). Moreover, the seclusion of the home also shields the latent violence *within* from public intervention (Suk 2009, 4). In this way, 'the private' functions to conceal and perpetuate existing hierarchal power relationships that exist in the family and in personal relationships, even if they are not being played out behind the literal 'closed door'.

Feminist scholars such as McKinnon (1989) and Rambo (2009) assert that patriarchal social life is entirely dependent on the constraints and expectations imposed and enforced by society through privacy (McKinnon, 1989, 193). According to McKinnon (1989, 194), when women are segregated in private, "separated from each other one at a time", a right to that privacy isolates women "from each other and from public recourse".

> For women the measure of the intimacy has been the measure of the oppression... This is why feminism has seen the personal as the political. The private is public for those for whom the personal is political. In this sense, for women there is no private, either normatively or empirically. (MacKinnon 2002, 191)

The role of privacy in the subjugation of women in the private sphere is a complex discussion outside the scope of this research. However, it is relevant that there is a whole subset of sinister behaviour that is heavily invested in keeping relationship conflict as part of the 'shadowland'. All couples know what it is to fight, even to the point of violence, but this is distinct from domestic violence, when one person is trying to exert destructive power and dominance over another (Rambo 2009, 11). Private, off-limits topics, like the ordinary messiness of relationships, allows this shadowland of behaviour to exist and potentially act as a camouflage for domestic violence. The distinction between the public and the private serves to defend the public realm from the private, the familial, and from female power (Lipton Rosenblum 1983, 243).

Witnessing a couple fighting in public is considered uncomfortable and embarrassing. Erving Goffman has written extensively on normative rules of communication as they exist in society, and asserts that individuals typically work together to maintain the 'face' of individuals involved in or displaying socially inappropriate behaviour or indiscretion (1967, 10). His research reveals that society has developed complex ways for individuals to cooperate and maintain 'face', including

pretending not to notice indiscretions as they occur in public in order to protect the concerned parties (and themselves) from discomfort and/or humiliation (Goffman 1967, 48). While people do not invariably work to maintain each other's 'face', Goffman (1967, 13) argues that it is the normative rule in everyday social interaction to do so.

In this project I have been interested in exploring the way social discomfort functions when indiscretion is framed within a contemporary art context. My research into contemporary art practices—including the work I have made for this project—indicates that when artists break taboos, and frame them as contemporary art, it changes the way the resulting discomfort is viewed. In a contemporary art context, the discomfort is felt, recognised and acknowledged, but instead of reinforcing the taboo, it serves instead to disrupt it. Julius (2002, 154) explains that taboo-breaking art "attacks taboos by breaching them (or enacting their breach)". While sociology investigates taboo, art wants to "keep it there, but to madden it" (Julius 2002, 154). The act of breaking taboos in art provokes us to look more closely at the structures that govern social life (Julius 2002, 154).

3.2. Ambiguity: Destabilising the System of Representation

We live in a society which is always telling us what to think and what we should and shouldn't do.
— Gillian Wearing (in Bonaventura 1995, 25)

Ambiguity and displacement are present in all of the works that form the creative component of this project. *Why was I so awful tonight?* is a fifteen-minute, three-channel video installation that will be exhibited across two rooms of a traditional gallery space (see Fig. 9).

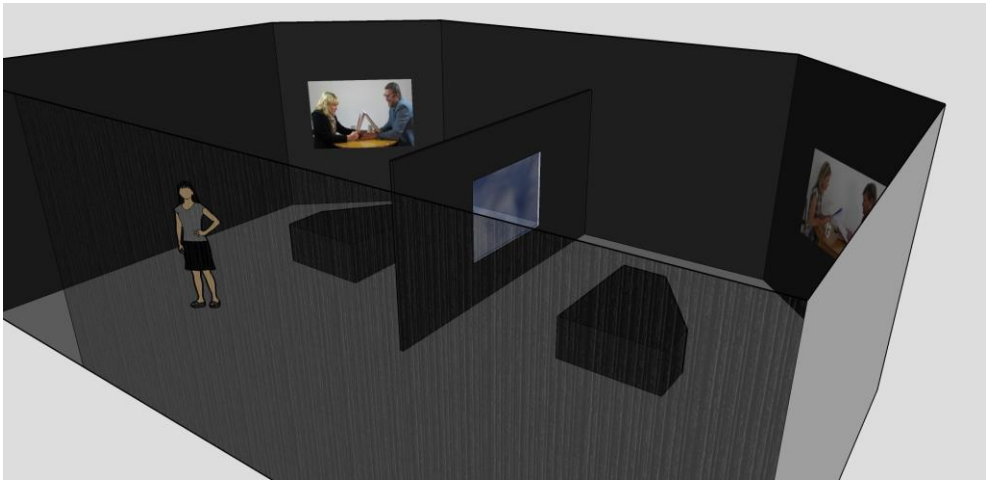

Figure 9 *Why was I so awful tonight?* (2014) (installation design sketch)

In this proposed exhibition design, the dividing wall is a rear-projection, visible from both rooms. The videos show three different couples performing both scripted and impromptu performances, and fragments of text, one-on-one dialogues with the camera, music, role-reversal and lip-syncing techniques are used. The film sequence opens with a stripped-back quotidian scene of a table, two chairs, and a white wall, followed by short sequences involving a female and then a male character.

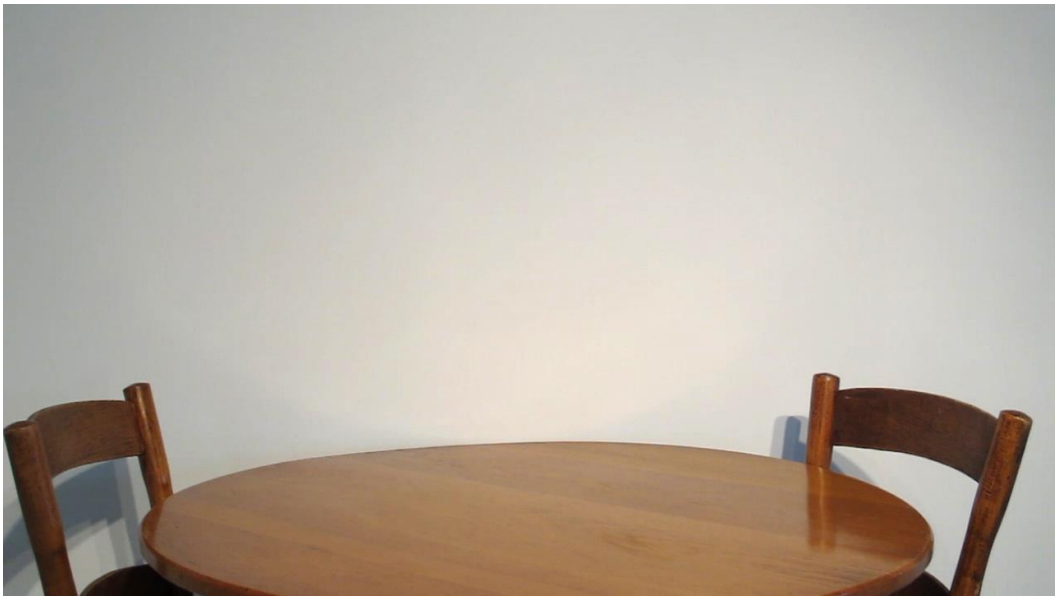

Figure 10 *Why was I so awful tonight?* (2014) (video still)

It is obviously a highly contrived situation; one realises that definite decisions have been made to construct a staged area for the performers and there is professional lighting. No attempts have been made to disguise the artifice. The technical construction and staging techniques are highly influenced by Estonian artist Mark Raidpere's work *Shifting Focus* (2005). In this work, Raidpere similarly uses a simple yet precise narrative technique to create a staged game of meaning (Lübbke-Tidow 2007, 10). *Shifting Focus* is a nine-minute unfolding psychodrama between a mother and her son, which opens with a scene of a table, two chairs, and an old-fashioned clock on the wall. A man (the artist) comes into view, fiddles with the camera, removes the floral tablecloth, switches the camera to night vision, and then back to normal. He sits and looks at the camera, resting his head on the table as though he is tired or checking positions as a stand-in for actors soon to join the set. The film cuts, and then Raidpere is seen on the other side of the table; the clock has vanished, and a middle-aged woman—the artist's mother—enters the scene and sits down.

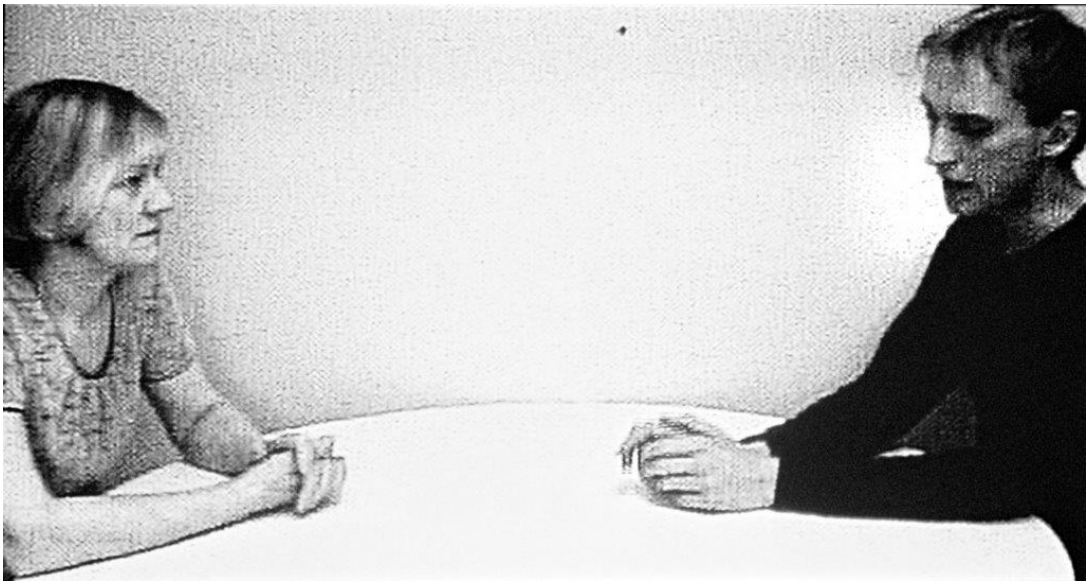

Figure 11 Mark Raidpere *Shifting Focus* (2005)

These staging techniques directly reference the post-modern culture of confession, where everyone is a would-be celebrity for fifteen minutes, and where the public is being increasingly colonised by the private. Confessional-style formats (for example, reality television) reflect reality to a degree; however, more critically, they also construct reality (Wyatt et al 2012, 2). In both my work, and the Raidpere work, by acknowledging the construction of the situation, the visible presence of the camera and other devices work to destabilise the system of representation and challenge the authenticity of what is being presented.

Figure 12 *Why was I so awful tonight?* (2014) (video still)

Furthermore, the performative dialogue in *Why was I so awful tonight?* is very intimate and reads like a transcript of a real fight—but whose? For the purposes of development only, the script synopsis reads:

> A man and a woman (a committed couple) are at a party, the woman wants to dance; the man does not want to dance. He wants to go home, she does not. They eventually go home. She wants to have sex, he does not. She gets angry, they fight, he punches a wall, and they both end up in the emergency room because he has broken his hand.

Figure 13 *Why was I so awful tonight?* (2014) (video still)

Performers have assigned male and female roles; however, it is not always clear which role belongs to whom, as archetypical gender roles are muddled. Sometimes, the man has punched the wall and sometimes the woman has; sometimes, the man wants to dance and sometimes the woman does, etc. This works to expose the gender politics of prescribed gender roles and language. Similarly, the use of text in the work further emphasises the role language plays in perpetuating prescribed societal norms.

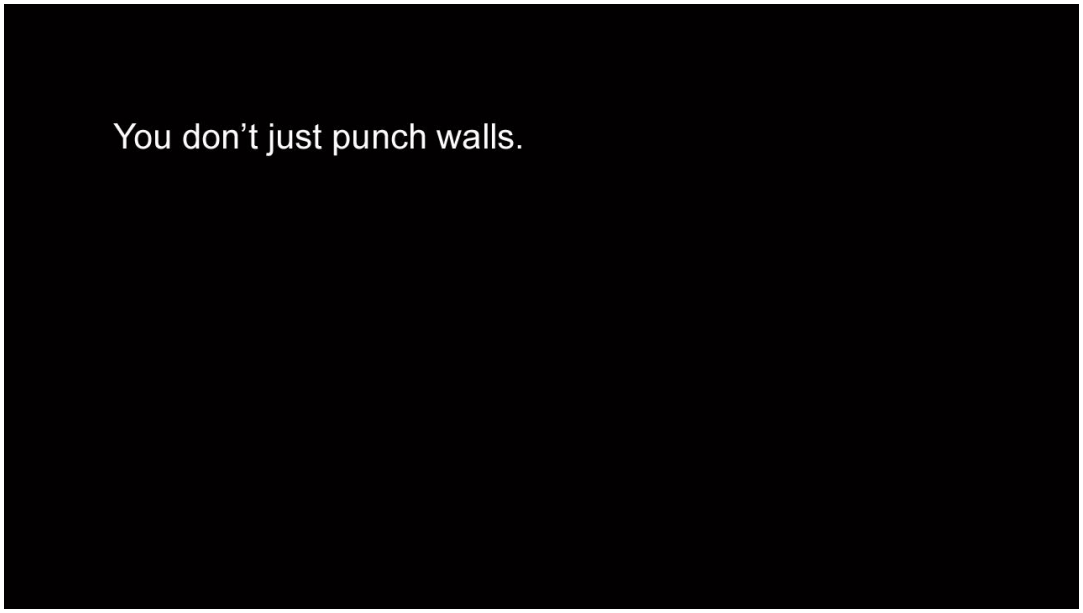

Figure 14 *Why was I so awful tonight?* (2014) (video still)

Although the performers are real couples, this is never definitively verified. The dynamic between the couples *feels* real, but the authenticity of the couple relationship is interrupted by the presence of an omniscient narrator, who appears on screen intermittently. These narrator scenes are dubbed with my voice; it is an authoritative voice—the voice of the auteur—manipulating the authenticity and subjectivity of the performers and their situation.

Figure 15 *Why was I so awful tonight?* (2014) (video still)

The narrative and flow are unceasingly and deliberately interrupted. The assumed linear sequence of events is ruptured by being broken up across multiple screens and rooms, and repeatedly and abruptly cut off at key moments. At certain points, the performers seem to break out of script and talk to each other in an impromptu way. In these moments, they are discussing the events in the script, and inter-couple dynamics more generally. The contrast between the scripted and unscripted performances is deliberately obscured and, in shifting between recitation and commentary, the performative narrative is continuously interrupted by its own annotation. Furthermore, the familiarity of the dialogue—things that we have all said or heard before—implicates all who watch it. It is disconcerting and provocative the way the performers appear to deal so nonchalantly with the script; almost mocking the very intimate (and often ridiculous) exchanges couples have at times. When we fight we sometimes find ourselves saying things that we are not even sure we believe the next day. Are we just reciting something appropriated from a movie or from societal expectations? It is almost like there is a stock of questions and accusations that we all draw on when we fight. In this way, the script becomes the '*UR*-script' for inter-couple relations.

4. Conclusion

Silence is a woman's ornament.
— Sophocles (MacKinnon 1989, 195)

The purpose of this research project was to investigate the recurrent use of the 'private-made-public' in contemporary art as a means to inform my creative practice. I examined the work of Tracey Emin, Sophie Calle, Gillian Wearing and Mark Raidpere, focusing on how these artists provoke normative experience in their strategic use of the 'private-made-public'. The research process triggered an interest in the way that ambiguity and social (or emotional) discomfort in contemporary art can be used as a tool to disrupt normative enculturation. My specific research explored inter-couple conflict and how and why it is considered to be shameful and taboo in contemporary Western society. I contextualised this discussion by researching the social and historical significance of privacy and taboos, citing feminist scholars such as Catharine MacKinnon (1989) and Anita Allen (1988 and 2009), who have written extensively on how the public/private divide has contributed to the suppression and isolation of women in the private sphere.

The creative work for this project engaged directly with these ideas, particularly, *Why was I so awful tonight?*, which is positioned somewhere between the assumed veracity of documentation and the seamless construction of fiction. While the work creates an illusion of the private truth, in reality, it can never be anything other than a performance of the private; its tension between what is nominally visible (available) and its constructedness is crucial. The work is intended to generate persistent ambiguity and confusion. Moreover, this dislocation is *meant* to be part of the experience. In addition, the strategic use of private, taboo topics, like inter-couple conflict, generates a familiar yet unpleasant feeling of discomfort that serves to aggravate our social conscious. In this way, ambiguity and discomfort become an invitation to consider the normative construction of our social reality.

This honours project is just one component in a continued exploration into the 'private-made-public' as a practice-led methodology. It signals the beginning of my research into the way ambiguity and social (or emotional) discomfort in contemporary art can be used to interrupt normative experience, and I intend to continue this dialogue through further research and other material engagements.

5. Image Credits

1. Tracey Emin *My Bed* (1999)
   Source: http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/tracey_emin_my_bed.htm

2. Tracey Emin *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (2005)
   Source: Barber, L. 2001. "Just Be Yourself—And Wear a Low Top." *Parkett* 63: 26.

3. Sophie Calle *Take Care of Yourself* (2007)
   Source: *Sophie Calle: Take Care of Yourself*, Actes Sud, 2007.

4. Sophie Calle *Double Blind (No Sex Last Night)* (1992)
   Source: Paploizos, I. 1999. *New Media Encyclopedia*, http://www.newmedia-art.org/cgi-bin/show-oeu.asp?ID=O0019391&lg=GBR

5. Gillian Wearing *2 into 1* (1997)
   Source: Kappel, Stefanie. 2007. "Gender, Subjectivity and Feminist Art: The work of Tracey Emin, Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing." PhD diss., University of Westminster, London, 256.

6. Karike Ashworth *Why was I so awful tonight?*, video still (2014)

7. Karike Ashworth *In Two Parts*, video still (2014)

8. Kerry Tribe *Critical Mass*, video still from performance at Tate Modern (2012)
   Source: http://www.kerrytribe.com/project/critical-mass

9. Karike Ashworth *Why was I so awful tonight?*, installation design sketch (2014)

10. Karike Ashworth *Why was I so awful tonight?*, video still (2014)

11. Mark Raidpere *Shifting Focus* (2005)
    Source: Lübbke-Tidow, M. 2007. "Mark Raidpere." *Camera Austria International* 97: 11.

12. Karike Ashworth *Why was I so awful tonight?*, video still (2014)

13. Karike Ashworth *Why was I so awful tonight?*, video still (2014)

14. Karike Ashworth *Why was I so awful tonight?*, video still (2014)

15. Karike Ashworth *Why was I so awful tonight?*, video still (2014)

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7. Appendix

Please refer to disc for support material:

1. *Why was I so awful tonight?* (2014), three-channel video installation, 15 minutes and 32 seconds.
2. *In Two Parts* (2014), single-channel video, 8 minutes and 12 seconds.