

**Tamsyn Challenger speaking at
Co-Habiting: Contemporary Art, History & Feminism**

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As an artist I tend towards making work that deals in socio-political concerns. And so before I read what I've prepared for today, I want to just say a little bit about the vile killings of the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists on Wednesday this week.

As I'm sure it has for many in this room, these 'ideological' murders, attacking people who use pencils, affected me truly deeply and probably more than ever before.

It feels close to home.

And I thought it was important to recognise that we, here, are free to debate, now and today, and debate in safety. This is a privilege, and one that is not shared around the world. It's been fought for in the past and we are now in another age where we have to protect this crucial and fundamental right to speak, write, draw, sculpt freely. We, in the artistic community have had a sharp shock this week and I just want to say that, whilst I'm not brave, (as will be evidenced later on in this talk), we need to brace ourselves for a long road and I hope we can all stand together for freedom of expression, whether we agree with each other or not on gender politics.

The first thing I'd like to say is that I'm not a huge fan of doing talks per se. Since 400 premiered in 2010 I've had to become accustomed to standing up in front of different audiences and try to explain what's in my head and how the work has come about.

I ummed and ahed over taking part in this symposium when asked and no doubt you will find I'll um and ah some more during the panel.

As I said to Eliza and Lucy when we met before Christmas, whilst I am a feminist and I have made gender political work, I would not refer to myself as a 'feminist artist'. I think people like Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneeman and Mary Kelly making seminal 'feminist art' in the 70s and 80s are better placed for that title. Others have given me that label and I don't really mind having various labels attributed to me, but it's an important distinction that I wouldn't describe myself as such.

When I'm making work for example, I find myself to be gender-less. It's actually one of my great joys in life, to be in a space mentally where I turn off from that ever present question of gender

and consider myself as nothing specific. I suppose it might go a little way to explain why I'm reluctant to engage in the debate. I don't want to reveal myself particularly, as woman, as anything gendered, rather as a mind - raising wider questions - and then an animal - creating. I do find too that there is a lot of chat around the subjects of both art and feminism with no action and very little resolve. I'm firmly in the camp of less talk, more read and more do, but you can wrestle with me on that later and I'll um and ah a bit, if you like.

I'm terribly hidden as an individual but I'm hoping to be able to express to you how I make work, which broadly speaking is from the inside with wrought concept first and then out and complete. The last gallery I worked intensively with (in residence), the brilliantly politicised space Beaconsfield in Vauxhall, were not perhaps fully aware of what I was trying to say until they saw the glut of work I'd made alone in the studio in Cornwall post the residency. That's largely due to my inability to communicate with any clarity what is in my head. Well that, and hardly anyone knew the term Selfie in 2012, but I'll touch on that when I briefly mention Monoculture. And of course, this is why I'm reading this to you as opposed to freewheeling.

I'm not someone that constructs an object gradually or even really considers the commercial look of something. Which might make me a fool, but I'm peddling ideas as an artist and that's really what I see as my main function. In fact with my project 400, I was completely terrified that it would never work due to a key element being that I smooshed together extremely variant sectors of the art world to re-personalise the dead and the missing.

I don't know how many of you know about '400 Women' or have seen it, but if you did in London, Edinburgh or Holland, you may know that the idea crystallised in me after an encounter in Mexico City in 2006 with a woman named Consuelo Valenzuela. Her daughter Juliette went missing in 2001. What you are unlikely to have read is that I was in Mexico to investigate the issues and make a short piece for Woman's Hour, and that whilst the concept as an art work leapt from that encounter, I was already heavily engaged in doing something around it. This may not have taken the form of art.

And you see, it was my shame that spurred me to it. I have described the encounter pretty often and I make much of my desire to get away from Consuelo and her insistence, her heat, her smell and the desperation she had to somehow press the image of Juliette's unrecognisable face into my palm so that I could raise more noise and attention from the international community. However, the shame I had of wanting to get away from the intensity of this person and her pleading with me to do something was exacerbated later when I returned home. I realised I had been standing and witnessing all of these women whose daughters had been raped and murdered and just recording their voices for an audience hungry for information. This inertia or voyeurism is a galvanising force in me. One of the most rewarding moments I've had to date with 400 was when a young woman working with Avaaz contacted me and let me know that she began a career in human rights after the impact seeing 400 had on her. Whilst I believe that she herself was the reason for her choices, I can't really ask for more than that result.

Similarly, with my most recent work 'Monoculture', the best I can ask for is that people go away after seeing it and question. In this case, their online choices and the influence of social media and the possible homogeneity therein. I was asked this question recently for an article on the work and I thought it might be relevant here. The question was -

How did the idea (Monoculture) formulate? Perhaps you could explain a little about 400 Women and how those ideas fed into this show?

This was how I answered -

I first started to become aware of a culture for mass objectification of the self when I needed to administer the 400 Women facebook page that a previous curator had set up for me. Pre the 400 installation opening in 2010, I wasn't what you'd call online savvy. Actually I'm still not, I would say I've dipped my toe in to the knee and found it a bit nippy! In the two years that I had my own profile on Facebook I became increasingly uncomfortable about the prevalence of what's considered to be the 'digital face'. I started to notice the same submissive image largely, but not exclusively, taken by young women. This image was an almost blanching of features, often making sure body parts were exposed; eyes popped and the face becoming triangular or as narrow as is possible. Conversely, with 400 Women I was attempting to bring back the faces and individuality from gender trauma, here, online, it seemed to me that despite the overwhelming desire to be seen and leave a mark behind, everyone was attempting to erase themselves.

I must say, though, that I don't see 'Monoculture' as particularly gender political. In an article I read in the Oxford Student last year, the journalist cited the teenager Danny Bowman's obsessional selfie taking and the destruction wrought by trying to obtain his most perfect self-portrait; when I was making the work I was making it as a socio political cross-over environmental work as opposed to a gender specific dialogue.

I would say though that Monoculture is unabashedly political.

Anyway, I hope I've managed to answer some of the questions posed around art, women, political art and feminism from my perspective... However, it's like my belief that Caitlin Moran's pop-feminist book should have been called 'How to be Caitlin Moran', this is just how I do it. And this, like the church, is Feminism's great failure; an ideology that has such fractured factions as a school suggesting that to be truly 'empowered' (I loathe this word by the way, sorry for its use here) you should wear what you want, reveal more flesh, it's freeing and we should be at liberty to do this without ramifications, and another camp that sees the over sexualisation of women and girls as destructive and destabilising to equality, is hard, or again, like religion, potentially impossible to unify.

My answer, as an individual, is to let my politics bleed into my work in the vainglorious hope it'll effect some small change.

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Image: Ducking stool, 2004, Tamsyn Challenger

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