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www.engage.org/journal

Say what you see

Claire Collison

Two years ago, teaching visual literacy for The Photographers' Gallery in London,¹ I took a group of thirteen year olds to the Taylor Wessing² exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, inviting them to each select their own winner and runner up, and to explain their choices. One girl had selected two very different portraits of women: a sexy Amy Winehouse lookalike in a black strapless bra, and *Sofia*, a seated woman, draped in a sari from the waist down, and naked from the waist up. She wore gold hoop earrings, and she stared directly out at the viewer. She had clearly had a mastectomy: next to her right breast was flatness, where her left breast had been smoothed into a faint scar that ran from her sternum to the shadow of her armpit.

'Why had she chosen these two?' I asked. 'The Amy' she'd liked 'Cos she's sexy'. 'OK, and the other?' 'I dunno, but aren't you supposed to get a false one if that happens? I like it cos she looks strong.' I'm paraphrasing, but this is what I remember: she admired the subject for not trying to hide what she had gone through.



Around this time, I had a routine mammogram, where I learned I had breast cancer. In the ensuing weeks, during the process of making decisions about my treatment, this chance conversation helped me decide not to have reconstructive surgery.

Whilst it was coincidental that I was teaching visual literacy when this conversation occurred, this event and its consequences are at the core of what I understand visual literacy to mean. They explain why I believe it is so critical, as an artist and an educator, and also as a woman – and I make no apology for criss-crossing between these frames of reference because they all inform how I read art, and how that art makes me feel.

Visual literacy begins with feeling (or not feeling) an emotion about an artwork: we feel first, and then we scrutinise, and eventually we understand what it is that has caused us to feel. It is like becoming intoxicated from a potion, and then learning what the ingredients are, only the ingredients are not simply what the artist has whisked up, they are also time and context – social, historical and cultural – and you, the beholder. The way we feel about the art can change, because we change. Meaning can accrue (a heartbreak song) or fall away (a film seen too often). I shall reflect on instances where ingredients have combined to shape how I feel and think.

Permission giving

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understood this, and when he created Kettle's Yard, he displayed artworks without any accompanying notes. He put found objects next to Picasso maquettes; craft alongside fine art alongside his grandchildren's drawings. He included sunlight and shadows. Visitors had to work out what they felt all for themselves. And they did – and still do. Working with Kettle's Yard and Year 3 schoolchildren, aged seven and eight, from North Cambridge, as a recipient of a Max Reinhardt Literacy Award,⁴ I was able to encourage children's innate ability to respond to art, and to help them use this to generate their own creative writing. These resources [<http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/learn/resources/>] are fundamentally about giving permission.

Say what you see

In the television game show, *Catchphrase*, an animation illustrating a well-known saying is hidden behind panels. As the panels are removed and the animation revealed, contestants have to guess what the well-known saying is. 'Say what you see', the game show host implores. Sometimes the animation is so awful, or the catchphrase so obscure, that the

contestant doesn't stand a chance, but generally, the premise of the game is to enjoy watching someone struggle with the blindingly obvious: say what you see. The relationship between the visual and the verbal is a cornerstone of visual literacy; talking about what we see unlocks a latent and often emotional level of understanding, helping us understand *why* an image makes us feel the way we do. As Visual Arts Editor for Disability Arts Magazine, (DAM)⁵ in the 1990s, part of my remit was to write an audio description for every image I had selected for the print edition. This would be recorded for inclusion on the cassette (cassette!) version of DAM, produced for subscribers with visual impairment. Radio journalists do this brilliantly, and it is worth listening to analyse how they make it seem so simple. There needs to be sufficient context (medium? Colour or black and white? Landscape or portrait?) and the level of detail has to be even handed: obsess on a corner of the page, and it skews the composition. And it has to be objective, allowing the listener space to create their opinion.

Occasionally, during this process of audio describing, I would realise what it was about that particular image that I had been attracted to, and why I had selected it above others. Something that, once I said it out loud, became obvious, but that had eluded the 'art editor' part of me.

When teaching visual literacy, I ask students to describe a picture into a dictaphone (radio journalist) or, working in pairs, to take turns at audio describing to their blindfolded partner, then asking their

partner to feed back. This not only develops students' facility to articulate, it also legitimises *how* they notice what they notice – the language use, the context and references and associations – which brings them closer to what they feel.

Can you see me?

When I was told I had breast cancer, I was asked to decide whether to have reconstructive surgery during my mastectomy, or later. Not if, when. I find this extraordinary: I had a life-threatening illness, and yet I was being asked to make a decision about something that would make everyone else feel better – even, possibly, to the detriment of treating the cancer. But breast cancer treatment, I learned, is as much about the way women feel – about our breasts, and the way they are perceived – as it is about what we are experiencing in a medical sense. The only other time I had seen a woman with a mastectomy had been 30 years earlier, in the changing rooms at Hampstead Ladies' Pond. (I have even begun to wonder if she was a ghost from my future). I admit, I had not been looking then, but even when I began, the representation was scarce. I asked the hospital and was given access to a passworded site, where I could see anonymous examples (specimens) of women's scarred chests. On Facebook, tattooed *trompe l'oeil* celebratory survivor pictures – also anonymous and headless – might float unbidden into my newsfeed. Even now, when I have met scores of women who I know are like me, we remain invisible to each other. From the outset, treatments focus on disguise



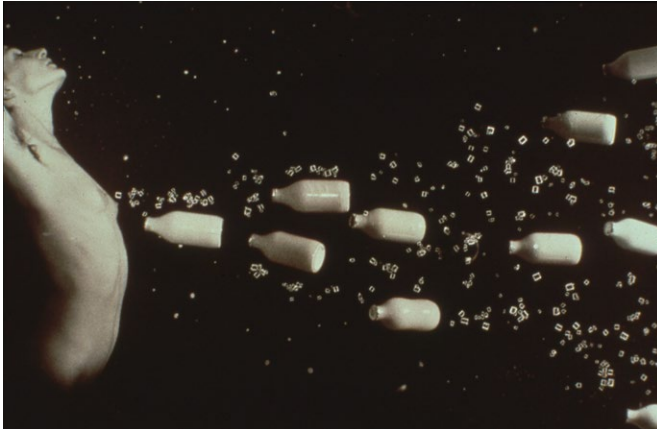
(wigs for chemotherapy hair loss and prostheses for mastectomy).

Why are we so hidden? What anxieties do we share as a society, where disguise is regarded as important as treatment? And what are the implications of such a lack of visibility? Audre Lorde wrote, 'When other one-breasted women hide behind the mask of prosthesis or reconstruction, I find little support in the broader female environment for my rejection for what feels like a cosmetic sham.'⁶ It takes courage to reject that 'cosmetic sham'. Most women just want to get back to 'normal', to how things were, even if that isn't really possible (in support groups, we talk of the 'new normal'). I understand and respect this but wonder how women can make an informed choice about what treatment they really want when there is so little representation of viable options within mainstream culture? Can I do anything to address this visual illiteracy?

Having used my body in my art practice, and made work around women, health and identity for the past thirty years, I am in a rare position to explore this. As Artist in Residence at the Women's Art Library (WAL)⁷ I am revisiting my own archive, as well as looking at the work of other women, to see what chimes and what I can learn in terms of how to represent my current experience. Are there models that I can develop (or reject)? I am searching for clues.

Meaning accrues

My early work drew on archetypes, exploding them to create new identities that I felt fitted me better.



Milky Way, commissioned for Camerawork's *Imaging the Future* in 1988, resonates now in a way I could not have known, half a lifetime ago. Some of my photos then were made through a process of play, and I would not really understand until I began to print them what it was I was trying to achieve. With *Milky Way*, I remember, I had a very definite idea: I drew the set and realised it (pre-Photoshop) exactly as planned. When I revisit this image now I am flabbergasted. My rationale then was to stage a treatise on the 'virgin and mother double standards' and the 'fiction of science'. Now this image speaks to me about how deeply rooted the mythologising of our flesh is, and the resulting pressures on women to conform. Breasts are the property of society; we transgress at our peril.

Meaning is fluid

'I make no bones about having cancer (unlike millions of others who are whispered about), which has empowered me to run the gauntlet of the medical orthodoxy, using my camera to campaign

against their inadequacies.' Jo Spence, *Woman in Secret, What Can A Woman Do With A Camera?*⁸

When I first saw the iconic image of Jo Spence with a cross over her breast I felt sick. Jo and I were friends. We admired each other's work. I understood how to 'read' the image; Jo was using tropes I recognised and identified with – direct gaze, artful staging of a scene re-enacted from an experienced moment. Like anyone else who had not been through that experience, it seemed to me an immensely brutal act. It made me feel outrage on Jo's behalf and, as she intended, it provoked me to question the power dynamic that existed between patient and the medical profession. Whose body was this? These readings and their accompanying feelings remain, but then on the morning of my mastectomy the surgeon came and marked me up. He drew a series of lines on my breast, marking where he was to cut, and then he drew a cross – the 'X-marks-the-spot' iconic cross – and I felt relief. They would be getting rid of the cancer, there would be no mistakes. Now, when I see Jo's photo, I understand what she was feeling, but there is an overlay of my own very different experience, that superimposes itself onto the image and my understanding of it.

Policing art

Does it matter what an artist's intentions are? Can an artist control how their work is received, and should they try? Néstor Díaz, the photographer of the Taylor Wessing portrait, *Sofia*, is delighted his photograph helped me, as this had been his hope. 'And in that train of thought, many of the women



felt a positive change of attitude in regard of their own bodies, only by the fact of letting themselves be portrayed’.

Díaz had very specific intentions: ‘the idea was for the public to get to a state of deep emotion and reflection, attained by the uncomfortableness of being face to face to a reality they usually don’t want to see.’⁹

He employed strategies to that end, photographing the women (this is a series of 24) in their own

environments, directing them to look directly at the camera, and adopt a neutral expression – ‘without any pose, no smiles nor distracting “masks”’ in order to reveal the ‘authenticity and honesty on each face.’

Did this work? I think so, even though it was not the photograph itself that helped me so much as the effect that it had on that girl. That was achieved through the strategies Díaz describes, and then by the opportunity to select and the permission to feel and articulate.

The photographs were not shown as Díaz originally intended, and there is a very different reading when encountering a portrait in isolation that began life as part of a series: how does this shift our understanding? Díaz also provided testimonies from each of the women, telling their own stories, and intended to be displayed with the photographs. I have now seen Sofia’s testimonial, and I find it incredibly moving. It enriches my appreciation of the portrait, but the girl who liked it didn’t have that statement.

Spirited bodies

Whilst the girl at the Taylor Wessing had no formal feminist learning and was blissfully able to straddle what might be perceived as conflicting theory, I am steeped in it, and in the implication of the gaze. I spent years working as a life model, which shaped how I went on to make work myself, and so was interested in revisiting this as part of my WAL residency. Esther Bunting created *Spirited Bodies*, a space where models are encouraged to speak (and even sing) and where participation is fluid –

artists can model and models can draw.¹⁰ I have life modelled at two sessions – most recently as part of the Women of the World festival at The Southbank. Both sessions were women-only, and included a variety of women models who were not classically proportioned. And so I exposed myself to this process of being looked at, that I knew was also a way of understanding, and when I saw the work that they had produced I saw myself reflected back and it was healing. I saw that they had not drawn a woman with a breast missing; they had drawn a woman complete and whole, made up of all kinds of planes and surfaces, muscle and skin.

I hope to use my residency at the WAL exploring my ‘new normal’, and expanding the range of ways that I see myself reflected back in the world. I’m not ruling anything out: sometimes an ordinary activity such as using public changing rooms can feel like an artwork. I have just delivered *An Intimate Tour of Breasts*, as part of the Walking Women festival.¹¹ A guided tour through central London, taking in Tintoretto at the National Gallery, and the lap dancing clubs of Soho, along with all the ubiquitous bare-breasted statuary *en route*, unravels how the mythologising and commodification of breasts through history impacts on the way we feel about our own breasts. As a strategy for addressing our visual literacy around representations of breasts, this was extremely effective, with participants volunteering intimate testimony of their own. I am really excited about this as a model for future work. Walking and talking and responding to art, with



prompts providing opportunities to interact, shifts the focus onto the participant’s response. It is a way of making art that has a solid history within feminist art practice that I can riff on – and one that could engage with an audience from both sides of the healthcare experience, opening up a dialogue that I believe is critical and timely.

Notes

1. *Seeing More Things* is a visual literacy programme involving, and learning from, young people studying at four secondary schools in Barnet, Brent, Camden and Westminster over a three-year period. During a series of photography-focused gallery visits and in-class work, pupils will work with a photographer or writer to measure, develop and extend their

visual literacy skills – stretching their ability to read, understand and analyse images.’

<http://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/seeingmorethings>

2. Taylor Wessing 13 Annual Photographic Portrait Prize at the National Portrait Gallery, London <http://www.npg.org.uk/photoprize1/site13/>

3. Between 1958 and 1973 Kettle’s Yard was the home of Jim and Helen Ede. In the 1920s and 1930s Jim had been a curator at the Tate Gallery in London. Thanks to his friendships with artists and other like-minded people, over the years he gathered a remarkable collection. At Kettle’s Yard Jim carefully positioned these artworks alongside furniture, glass, ceramics and natural objects, with the aim of creating a harmonic whole. His vision was of a place that should not be:

‘...an art gallery or museum, nor ... simply a collection of works of art reflecting my taste or the taste of a given period. It is, rather, a continuing way of life from these last fifty years, in which stray objects, stones, glass, pictures, sculpture, in light and in space, have been used to make manifest the underlying stability’.

<http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk>

4. The Max Reinhardt Literacy Award (MRLA) is an initiative funded by the Max Reinhardt Charitable Trust, run in partnership by the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) and engage (National Association for Gallery Education).

It first ran in 2014-15 as a pilot programme.

Three awards were made – to Falmouth Art Gallery, Kettle’s Yard and Manchester Art Gallery. Claire Collison worked with Kettle’s Yard and Year 3 pupils from The Grove Primary School, developing a series of gallery workshops and classroom sessions, which would provide the basis for a digital and physical resource, now available as a download.

<http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/learn/resources/>

5. Disability Arts Magazine, (DAM) This quarterly magazine was published from 1990 until 1995. Claire Collison was Visual Arts Editor from 1992.

6. Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco (30 January 2007)

7. Claire Collison is Artist in Residence at the Women’s Art Library (WAL) Goldsmiths College, University of London, **<http://www.gold.ac.uk/make/>**

8. Spence, J. (1995) *Woman in Secret, What Can A Woman Do With A Camera?* Scarlet Press

9. Email correspondence between Néstor Díaz and Claire Collison, May 2016

10 Spirited Bodies **<http://www.spiritedbodies.com/>**

11. Walking Women **<http://www.walkingartistsnetwork.org/walking-women-at-somerset-house/>**

Images

1. Néstor Díaz, *Sofía*. Buenos Aires, Argentina 2013

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2. Claire Collison, *Reading Audre Lorde: not easy, but necessary*, 2015. Colour photograph with Instagram caption.

3. Claire Collison, *Negative Spaces: Handling prostheses in Golden Square*, July 2016.

Documentation from *An Intimate Tour of Breasts*; Claire Collison's walk as part of the Walking Women festival at Somerset House, London. Photo credit: Amy Sharrocks.

4. Claire Collison, *Milky Way*, 1988. Photogram combined with black and white photograph, commissioned for Camerawork's *Imaging the Future* exhibition.

5. *Gabriela*, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2014

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6. Dorothea Bohlius, photographs of sketches made as part of Spirited Bodies' *Women's Life Modelling and Drawing* at The Bargehouse, Southbank, London, November 2015.