

Branks and Bras – a perspective.

Tamsyn Challenger: Monoculture
Beaconsfield
22 February – 13 April 2013

I don't even think about being a feminist. A teen in 70's Britain, it's embedded in my cultural DNA. With a couple of mates at 6th form college I co-founded a Women's Group. Our publications of choice were *Spare Rib*¹ and *Cosmo*² – which in those days might be feasibly purchased from the same paper shop. It simply would not have been hip not to be a feminist. We read *Fat is a Feminist Issue*³ and *Your Erroneous Zones*⁴ in the same week without batting an eyelid, and tried to teach our mothers the error of their ways.

Womens Group meetings at University in the 80's became rather more burdensome. Missing the weekly meeting was like skipping church – you'd have to avoid running into other women in dungarees the following week – and missing the bus for Greenham Common was obviously a serious breach of sisterhood. The greatest disappointment of the era was that so much female energy needed to be directed against the greatest beneficiary of second-wave feminism – Margaret Thatcher.

By the early nineties Thatcher had overreached herself and Demi Moore had been featured on the front cover of *Vanity Fair* naked, in her third trimester.⁵ *MAKE Magazine*, the publication for women's art⁶ was still flourishing but perhaps we didn't fully appreciate its presence until it went. Playing devils advocate, I'm quoted in one issue as saying I'd rather work with men than women because they were less complicated. What a false sense of security – *MAKE* ran out of funds in 2002 and the Women's Art Library faded from view⁷.

I produce a daughter in 2002 and discover that by the age of three, she is expected to sport a mini-me wardrobe – or at least a mini Victoria Beckham – tiny versions of adult fashion. I was initially flabbergasted by the sexualisation of children's clothes but

¹ **Spare Rib** was a second-wave feminist magazine in the United Kingdom that emerged out of the counter culture of the late 1960s as a consequence of meetings involving, amongst others, Rosie Boycott and Marsha Rowe. Its first edition was published in June 1972 and some newsagents, including W H Smith, refused to stock it at the time. It sold around 20,000 copies per month but was circulated more widely through women's groups and networks. Its purpose, as described in its editorial, was to investigate and present alternatives to the traditional gender roles for women of virgin, wife mother. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spare_Rib

² **Cosmopolitan** is an international magazine for women targeted primarily at a white audience. It was first published in 1886 in the United States as a family magazine, was later transformed into a literary magazine and eventually became a women's magazine in the late 1960s. Also known as **Cosmo**, its content as of 2011 included articles on women's issues, relationships, sex, health, careers, self-improvement, celebrities, as well as fashion and beauty. Published by Hearst Magazines.

³ Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, 1978

⁴ Wayne Dyer, *Your Erroneous Zones* 1976.

⁵ More Demi Moore, *Vanity Fair*, August 1991.

⁶ <http://eprints-gojo.gold.ac.uk/make.html>

⁷ The Women's Art Library is now looked after by Goldsmiths, University of London. <http://www.gold.ac.uk/make/>

now I'm used to it. By the age of ten there is little left in the children's sections that fits her anyway and we have to progress to size 8 Ladies fashion. Game set and match.

Now I have the dilemma of whether to let her keep up with peer pressure to own a smart phone (a basic Nokia is dismissed as a 'brick' and won't do). When I succumb to phone pressure I will have to face the horrific possibility that she might be sexted⁸: receive explicit texts from known or unknown boys perhaps demanding that she strip naked and send a 'selfie' (a self-taken digital picture) and should she have managed to grow pubic hair – remove it.

In 2012, when tutoring a student purportedly making work about female identity, I enquired whether she'd read *The Female Eunuch*⁹ and met with a blank when I suggested that it might be essential reading. She, like the rest of us, was confused by "Girl Power", a self-defeating trope that persuaded us that it was all right, after all, to work hard at becoming objects of desire. It paid off perhaps for the Spice Girls but not so well for their imitators on the streets. Of Girl Power, Amy McClure of North Carolina State University says "An ideology based on consumerism can never be a revolutionary social movement. The fact that it appears to be a revolutionary movement is a dangerous lie that not only marketers sell to us but that we often happily sell to ourselves."¹⁰

Girl Power in conjunction with the availability of online pornography appears to be a toxic mix. Cab rape in London has been such a problem, that in 2005 the Mayor of London launched Cabwise, a practical campaign to keep women safer getting home at night.¹¹ In 2012 Taxileaks reported a 53% rise in recorded rape in London¹² but it is difficult to know whether this reflects greater confidence that reports will be taken seriously – 80% of rape still goes unreported – or a higher incidence of assaults.

Why did we let our guard down? Are we reverting to a bygone age when any unmarried (or even married) woman over the age of forty might be considered a witch and perhaps sentenced to the ducking stool? An age when husbands locked their wives into chastity belts, or, if too free with opinion, into a 'scold's bridle' – an iron mask also known as a 'brank'¹³ (this practice went on as late as Victorian times). How can we manage the upsurges of violence against women as they surface again and again?

Endemic sexual violence in India peaked with a recent death by public gang rape in 2012, causing the women of India to rise up in public protest. Supported by the international community through online networks such as Avaaz¹⁴ the protest has resulted in stringent new rape laws and the raising of the age of consent from sixteen to eighteen.¹⁵ People power still has legs when whole communities can be activated. And some young women are taking steps to raise awareness about the dangers of complacency through initiatives such as the Everyday Sexism Project (ESP)¹⁶, an online forum where women upload accounts of their experiences of sexism. The idea

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexting> <http://www.childline.org.uk/explore/onlinesafety/pages/sexting.aspx>

⁹ Greer, Germaine, *The Female Eunuch*, 1970

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girl_power#cite_note-16

¹¹ The Evening Standard of 3 October 2002 reported that at least four women a month are raped and around 18 sexually assaulted by unlicensed minicab drivers in London. Only one in five victims report such assaults. The Daily Mail reported 11 sexual assaults per month on 22 March 2013.

¹² Taxileaks, Dec 3, 2012

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scold's_bridle

¹⁴ <http://www.avaaz.org/en/>

¹⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-21826247>

¹⁶ <http://www.everydaysexism.com/>

is that the sheer volume of information accumulated can be used as evidence of the current state of play.

Surfing social networks, Tamsyn Challenger noticed the predominance of scantily clad young women posing for their own selfies – narcissistic and available at the same time. The artist found these ‘selfie’ avatars disturbing for their emulation of a certain submissive ‘beauty’. She discovered that some scientific forecasting of physiognomy suggests that we are knowingly or unknowingly highly influenced by the ‘digital face’ and will even use medical intervention to attain it. Paradoxically, in the course of our efforts to assert our specialness, we are stepping away from individuality and becoming more like each other.

In 2011 F.S. Michaels published a book under the title *Monoculture: How one story is changing everything*¹⁷. She argues that the dominant story of our time is economic: that by bringing everything into the market, even fundamental concepts such as education or nature, we reduce all our experiences to services and understand all our relationships as transactional. In this market-led world, with individualism at its core, we are eroding our communities and losing the diversity of our values. Encountering these ideas through a School of Life¹⁸ lecture, Challenger was excited by their relevance to her own preoccupations with mass cultural blanching and has worked over the past year on developing visual equivalents.

An earlier art project by Tamsyn Challenger, *400 Women*, was concerned with similar issues. Assisted by Casa Amiga Rape Crisis Centre in Ciudad Juarez and Amnesty Mexico team the artist collected hundreds of images of women who had been brutalised and murdered at the Mexican border – dispensable women, remembered only by their loved ones and often commemorated by a single image. Though repeated reproduction, the original likenesses had been almost totally eroded. She invited nearly two hundred artists to re-personalise these women in paint, working from the existing evidence, each artist standing in for each woman – making only one portrait herself¹⁹. Comparing the two projects, the tragic observation is that whilst these desperate and impoverished women had no intention of disappearing forever, more privileged women elsewhere are willingly bleaching themselves out.

Through *400 Women*, Challenger was approached to contribute to a book called *Lets Start a Pussy Riot* – a fundraising venture in support of the three women jailed for their roles in the Russian feminist collective of the same name, who have famously asserted their independence through music.²⁰ Her idea was to create a pop-up page in the book, depicting a ducking stool. When this concept proved to be prohibitive in terms of cost, the artist built a life-sized, sculptural version to photograph. This art object has been the spark for a body of new sculptures that take a range of ancient instruments of pseudo-sexual torture as their inspiration. Painted in the distinctive branding blues of Facebook and Twitter, these quasi-Modern pieces evoke associations ranging at once from municipal playground to classical bust to the apparatus of S&M club culture.

Challenger’s *Monoculture* draws a parallel with the agricultural practice of cultivating a single cash crop, and its outcomes in the so-called Colony Collapse Disorder that is

¹⁷, F. S. Michaels, *Monoculture: How one story is changing everything*, Winner of the 2011 NCTE George Orwell Award for outstanding contributions to the critical analysis of public discourse

¹⁸ <http://www.theschooloflife.com/>

¹⁹ <http://www.tamsynchallenger.co.uk/work/400-women/>

²⁰ http://action.amnesty.org.uk/ea-action/action?ea.client.id=1194&ea.campaign.id=16482&gclid=CNj0qcykLYCFRDkAod_WUAHQ

decimating sections of the eco-system. She links social networking with cultural homogenisation on a global scale and asks her audience to join her in questioning the level of control being wielded through a supposedly 'free' environment like the Internet.

Negotiating sexuality has and always will be fraught with danger. Camille Paglia holds that "Sexuality is like nature's red flag to a bull"²¹ and there are good arguments to rebut the notion that rape is an expression of violence rather than of sexuality, as discussed in *A Natural History of Rape*²² Whatever the truth of the matter, we still have to deal with the consequences. For me, Tamsyn Challenger's new works suggest that allowing our identities as individual women to slip away is an act of irresponsibility that may be having far greater consequences than we can imagine.

Naomi Siderfin, March 2013

Co-Director/Curator, Beaconsfield

This text was written as a provocation for the Beaconsfield event on Saturday 23 March at 3pm programmed as part of Monoculture:

How far do contemporary women artists identify with feminism?

Tamsyn Challenger in conversation with Fran Cottell, Rebecca Fortnum and Hannah Philp, chaired by Naomi Siderfin.

²¹ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, ISBN 0-679-73579-8, 1990,

²² Randy Thornhill, Craig T Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion*, MIT Press, 2001.