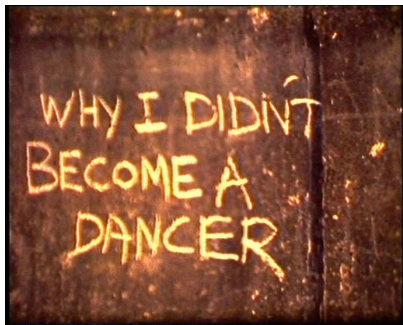


Tracey Emin (b.1963)

Why I Never Became A Dancer 1995



Key facts:

- **Medium:** Film (Emin's first), single screen projection, colour and sound, shot on super 8 mm, transferred to DVD
- **Duration:** 6 minutes, 40 seconds
- **Collection:** Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

Emin's large output encompasses many media: performance, film and video, as well as sculpture and installation, painting, drawing, print, collage and assemblage, and works in fabric and neon. The artist's own emotional life and lived experiences are the stimulus and subject matter of her art, which often becomes a means of catharsis. Her narratives of private and personal revelation are displayed with sincerity and have been categorised as a form of 'confessional art'.

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: Emin has made several short films exploring themes from her own life. Set in the late 1970s, Why I Never Became a Dancer tells of her early teenage years in her hometown of Margate, a seaside resort east of London, before she left to seek her fortune in the capital. Running just under seven minutes, the short autobiographical film recalls an anguished episode: at a talent contest for dancing in a Margate club, Emin was humiliated and heckled publicly by past lovers who harassed her off the floor during her dance routine.

Beginning with a slightly amended version of the title words written large on a wall, the first part of the film features a spoken narrative – the artist recounting her story – that overlays faded views of rundown Margate localities significant to Emin's past. Emin is first heard speaking over an image of her old school and then over more footage of Margate: images of the sea front, shopping arcades, coffee parlours and chippies, and a dramatic clock tower. This voiceover tracks the artist's experiences with sex after having left school permanently at the age of thirteen: 'There was always sex,' she says, 'It was something you could just do, and it was for free.' She goes on to explain how she later replaced sex with dancing as a form of bodily pleasure that made her feel free and alive: 'That's where I got my real kick, on the dance floor. It felt like I could defy gravity, as though my soul were truly free.'

Emin's story moves on to the British Disco Dance Championship of 1978, where after performing her routine she was taunted loudly by a host of men with whom she had had casual sex and who repeatedly chanted 'slag'. Mortified, she ran off the dance floor and down to the seashore where, as the voiceover recalls, she vowed to leave Margate forever. In the finale, Emin dedicates the film to the men involved, identifying them by name: 'Shane, Eddy, Tony, Doug, Richard – this one's for you.' In a brightly lit studio room we see the artist for the first time, dancing with abandon to 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)' by Sylvester (one of the biggest disco records of 1978) and smiling into the camera as '*a token of her transformation*' (Kieran, 2009). At the very end, the film cuts from her dancing to a gull flying away towards the sun, symbolising the liberating metamorphosis that she has undergone.

Visual analysis: Film techniques: Unlike Emin's installation art, which offers spectators the freedom to choose their own perspective and viewing timescale, the camera 'eye' in Why I Never is predetermined and viewers are offered one dominant perspective.

In the early part of the film, shots of Margate – the Lido, Mario's, ice-cream parlours, night-club billboards – are trailed one after the other, rather than sutured seamlessly together. With its sudden shifts, jolts and blanks, the film's first section is characterised by continual camera movement and a visual restlessness. As we join Emin dancing in the film's finale, the camera is positioned '*as if it is held by someone dancing with her*', circling in a way that connects this scene to the earlier part of the film (Johnson, 2013).

The voiceover: Throughout Why I Never, Emin maintains a detached, non-judgemental tone of voice, narrating her tales of sexual victimhood with a sense of

ambiguity. Her delivery is free of sentiment, despite her story's personal content — she does not prejudice the episodes exposed by colouring them with emotion, nor does she prescribe a moral attitude from which the content of her work is to be viewed. As Cashell Kieran explains: *'Emin's work aspires to a forensic, factually descriptive status'* (2009).

Despite the documentary style used to disclose its confidences, the film is still characterised by an *'affective rhythm and intensity of feeling'*, heightened by the nostalgic feel of the imagery in its first section (Johnson, 2013). It has been described as a *'video-poem'* that stimulates an emotionally expressive and ethical response in the spectator (Kieran, 2009; Smith, 2011). For Kieran, this is precisely because of Emin's disengaged mode of address, which *'calls upon viewers to become responsible for their attitude towards the behaviour she documents'* (2009).

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

This film explores what Emin herself describes as her *'shagging years'*, a period of sexual promiscuity that resulted in the judgemental reaction at the dance contest by her close community. A teenage Emin roamed Margate's *'Golden Mile'* and experimented with casual sex after absenting herself from school to kick against the boredom of the seaside town. At fourteen, Emin was given the contraceptive pill by her mother, demonstrative of increasingly permissive attitudes towards sex in the 1970s after the social revolution of the 1960s. Her address of sex and sexuality in the work is refreshingly direct, as she admits to finding sex to be a source of power and release in her youth.

While expressing a straightforward appreciation of sex, which was uncommon in the art world at the time of the film's making, Why I Never also addresses explicitly the verbal abuse and social humiliation that Emin endured after this period of sexual experimentation. Underpinning our viewing of the work is the knowledge of the very serious issues of her sexual assault aged eleven and her rape by a Margate boy when she was thirteen (the location of the talent contest, the tawdry dance hall Top Spot, was also the site of her rape). Beneath the surface glamour of *'dreamland'* Margate, a popular holiday destination for more than two hundred years and the location of the UK's original Pleasure Park, is a more sordid and troubling reality, as a young teenager experiences a sexual awakening with predatory men more than ten years her senior. The film reveals the sexual hypocrisy and double standards of the small holiday town, where a damaged young girl's liberated sexuality — a restorative phase of sexual precocity that could be understood as a reaction to the traumatic incident of her rape — is derogated and stigmatised.

Nonetheless, Emin's work is not a social critique; instead, it functions as an exorcism of a very personal emotional trauma. As Johnson explains: *'Emin's film is about herself rather than about the collective position of working-class women struggling to survive with dignity'* (2013). Throughout the film, from her initial cataloguing of the abuse she endured on the dance floor to her exultant, ecstatic solo dance at its climax, Emin undergoes an empowering transformation *'from victim to victor'*, finally exacting retribution for the wrongdoing (Brown, 2006). In fact, after seeing Why I Never, one

of those named in the film made the effort to contact Emin in order to apologise personally.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUE AND PROCESSES

Why I Never Became A Dancer was shot on Super 8, an analogue film-making format that took off with both independent and fine art film-makers, and the public when it was first introduced by Kodak in 1965. At 8 millimetres wide, the smallest size (or gauge) of motion-picture film, Super 8 was originally designed for use in the home, rather than for the production of feature films or television shows. Though commercial demand for Super 8 film decreased as it was superseded first by video in the 1970s, and later by digital, it continues to be used widely by artists and experimental film-makers today.

The filmic format of Why I Never suits both its subject and setting, as a revisiting of the folklore of Emin's past. With their darkly fringed margins, the shots of Margate that accompany Emin's voiceover have an intimate, home-movie quality that befits the explicitly personal narrative. Gritty, shaky and unashamedly handmade, this distinctly un-glossy patchwork of images matches also the unapologetic frankness of Emin's storytelling.

On the other hand, the grainy and amateur character of the Super 8 footage '*calls attention to it as mediated image rather than transparent truth because it makes no attempt to hide its filmic quality*' (Johnson, 2013). Though her work is frequently assumed to be an unmediated reflection of her experiences, Emin's art is undeniably mediated and constructed.

Why I Never Became A Dancer went on to win the International Award for Video Art, Baden-Baden Video Art Prize, Südwest Bank, Stuttgart, in 1997.

4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

The personal content of Emin's work has pushed the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in art in Britain. Her exploration of taboo subjects – female promiscuity, rape, relationship breakups, abortions, depression, menstruation and alcoholism – has regularly been met with criticism and complaints of exhibitionism (most infamously, with the media furore surrounding the London exhibition of My Bed as part of her Turner Prize entry in 1999). With her creative output assumed to be an unmediated reflection of her experiences, the focus of critical and public attention often falls on the artist herself, rather than her artworks. Ali Smith explains: '*Her uncodedness, her frankness, her direct use of her own life in her work, have made her a repository in the media and to some extent in the general public's eye, for all that's contentious in contemporary art*' (2015).

In the 1990s, Emin's messy celebrity was amplified by notorious episodes, such as her drunkenly storming out of a live television debate about the status of contemporary art, the night of the Turner Prize ceremony, on Channel 4 in 1997. Twenty years later, however, she is no longer the heavy-smoking party girl of the British art scene. Like other Young British Artists (Gillian Wearing, Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and so forth) she has moved from the margins to the centre of the British art establishment – with

her election to the Royal Academy in 2007, for example. She is accepted today as a doyenne of the contemporary art scene and enjoys considerable market success.

Clare Johnson has described how Why I Never's '*mediated memories of pain, pleasure, disappointment humiliation and trauma construct a sense of fragility that beckons the experiences of the women who are drawn to the work*' (2013). Emin's articulation of the sexual and social inequities that she faced as a young woman, followed by her euphoric reclaiming of the site of this discrimination – the dancefloor – would appear to place her work in the tradition of feminist art. While her provocative expressions of desire, trauma and memory link her with feminist art practice, her oeuvre has not been universally accepted into feminist art history. Emin herself has repeatedly distanced her work from feminist art in the press, with critics and art historians also dissociating her output from this line of practice, often on account on her politics which appear to be '*at odds with the trajectory of left-wing thought that informs dominant narratives of feminist art*' (Johnson, 2013). As Johnson later explains: '*The film undoubtedly speaks of personal damage and success and it is fair to say that it does not allude to the broader context of women's liberation from sexually demeaning behaviour that gained momentum in the 1970s*' (2013).

Today, Emin's confessional film outlining multiple instances of misogynistic behaviour gains potency in a post-Weinstein era when many women are speaking up to denounce publicly sexual misconduct. In fact, Yxta Maya Murray has interpreted the film as developing an imaginary justice system for Emin, in which she operates simultaneously '*as a witness, a prosecutor, a judge, and a punisher of her abusers and her society, as well as a prosecutor and defender of herself*' (2012). Though the abuses she suffered at a young age were unreported, in Why I Never she stages her own trial, narrating finally her painful experiences in a court of her own. The confessional mode of Why I Never and other works by Emin would also appear to have found greater prominence at the current time, with the predilection for (sexual) confession in today's media representation and the contemporary popularity of first-person media.

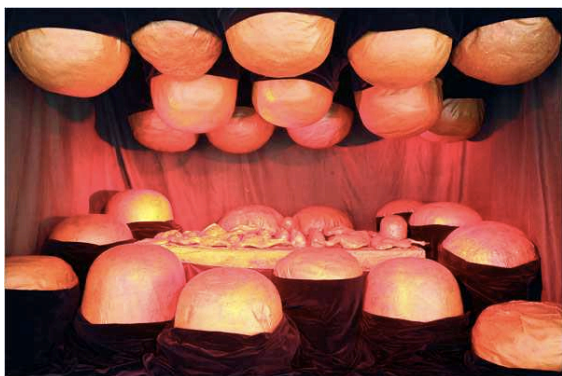
Related works:



Tracey Emin Mad Tracey from Margate. Everyone's Been There 1997



Tracey Emin Top Spot 2012



Louise Bourgeois The Destruction of the Father 1974



Gillian Wearing Dancing in Peckham 1994

Further reading:

Brown, Neal (2006). TE: Tracey Emin. London: Tate Publishing.

Emin, Tracey (2006). Strangeland. London: Sceptre.

Johnson, Clare (2013) 'Fantasies of Adventure, Escape and Return: Tracey Emin's Why I Never Became a Dancer' in Femininity, Time and Feminist Art. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jones, Jonathan (2017). Tracey Emin: Works 2007–2017. New York: Rizzoli.

Kieran, Cashell (2009). Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art. London: I. B. Tauris.

Murray, Yxta Maya (2012). 'Rape Trauma, the State, and the Art of Tracey Emin', California Law Review, 100:6, December 2012, pp.1631–1707, 1709–1710.

Smith, Ali (2011). 'Emin's Emendations' in Tracey Emin: Love is What You Want. London: Hayward Publishing.

Links:

- Why I Never Became A Dancer on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhCa_7ILWhg