

WHY PRINT WAS AN EXCELLENT CONCEPTUAL VEHICLE FOR MY PROJECT 'SPEAK UP'

Katy Drake

"I give away my power. In side-stepping, in not calling out the sexist remarks, I act as if they are in the right, I act as if women should not have voices, and I act as if I am not a feminist." (Pine, 2019. p.188)

Influenced by the continual sharing amongst my friends and colleagues of experiences of sexism, sexual harassment and assault happening to us in public where no one spoke up at the time, my MA major project, 'Speak Up', used a feminist methodology to research the reasons why we don't speak up when these incidents occur. It concluded by both representing these incidents and why they weren't called out in print-based artworks, with the intention of prompting dialogue.

This paper will explore the hypothesis that print was an excellent 'conceptual vehicle' (Harding, 2013. p.107) for this project.

SPEAK UP PROJECT

The Speak Up project utilised a survey to collect anonymous accounts from participants of incidents of sexism, sexual assault and harassment in which they felt unable to call this out at the time of the incident. As well as obtaining details of the incident, the survey questions were designed to explore why the respondent did not feel able to speak up at the time.

With the resultant data, I created several artworks: I culture jammed English Heritage blue plaques and created plaques that spoke up for incidents reported in the survey. These were installed at the incident's location and A1 prints were later produced from photographs of these plaques in situ. (Fig.1 & 2)

I also produced a risograph zine (Fig. 3), which by the placement, colour, and size of the text from accounts on the pages of the zine and other devices explored why we don't speak up about these incidents. A video of the zine is on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRsuBO4x6Ow>
In addition some pages of this zine were also expanded into A1 screenprints (Fig. 4).

CONCEPTUAL VEHICLE

'Conceptual vehicle' (2013. p.107) is a term conceived by Harding to describe the conscious choice to use print mediums in an artwork, not only as an instrument that delivers the concept but also to reiterate these ideas or as an additional element. Harding contends that deliberately using print sites his practice within a socio-political context. This term builds on Krauss' contention that the particularity of a medium differentiates it from others, not only in terms of

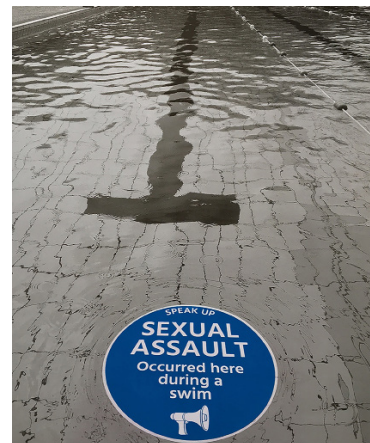


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 1: Katy Drake, 2021 Pool. [Inkjet and screen print] Photo: Author's own.

Figure 2: Katy Drake, 2021 Tube. [Inkjet and screen print] Photo: Author's own.

its physical attributes but also because of what has been codified in that medium (Harding, 2013, p.107).

In *Speak Up*, the deliberate choice of print reiterated both the ideas that were being explored in the project and the methodology used to research those ideas, making it an excellent conceptual vehicle.

WHY PRINT WAS AN EXCELLENT CONCEPTUAL VEHICLE

I used a feminist methodology for *Speak Up* because the incidents I was researching are symptomatic of societal inequality and cause immense suffering, and such methodologies “all contribute new ways of approaching long-standing inequities” and “deep commitment to achieving social justice – that is, a better world” (Brisolara, 2003. p.27).

Speak Up exemplified a feminist methodology by employing method of participation and collaboration in its research. For example, the project collected accounts from participants of their experiences. Such methods avoid asymmetric power arrangements which serve to reinforce the status quo evident in patriarchies. The project also promoted social change and activism (explored later in this paper) and by virtue of using print in its outcomes was also able to situate the research knowledge (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012, Brisolara, 2003. and Haraway, 2002), which are also aspects of feminist methodologies.

By using print in the project outcomes, I was able to situate the research knowledge as being from those who are subjugated, as characteristics of print being a marginalised art form still remain. Recent coverage of the record-breaking sale of Warhol’s “Shot Sage Blue Marilyn”, a 1964 artwork completed by screenprinting on top of a painting rarely refers to the use of printing in its description in the media. For example, the BBC refers to it as a painting (2022) and Artforum as a silkscreen portrait (2022).

Pelzer-Montada concurs with Reeves that, despite the introduction of methods such as limited editions and plate destruction to protect ideas of singularity and genuineness within print, the influence of traditional ideas of authenticity, i.e. uniqueness, which have historically consigned print to the margins are still being felt (Pelzer-Montada, 2001 & Reeves, 1999). Similarly, Harding comments that a historical hierarchy that preserves painting at its top (and printing below) is ingrained in art and art education (2013).

As well as asserting that printmaking has been described as a servant to the fine arts or as a minor art form because of its ability to reproduce, Reeves explains that there are other reasons why printmaking has a feminine gender code: the original definition of ‘matrix’, a key component of printmaking, is ‘womb’. In addition, even though printmaking is a highly technological process, i.e. processes which are commonly coded as masculine and assigned the highest rank, it does not occupy this tier, which suggests it has been coded differently. Lastly, even though the term ‘master printer’ can at first



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 3: Katy Drake, 2021 *Why We Don't Speak Up*.

[Risograph Zine] Photo courtesy of Andrzej Zofka

Figure 4: Screenprints and zine at Future Now

exhibition, 2021. Photo: Author's own.

Figure 5: Katy Drake, 2021 *It's Not Ok!* [Zine] Photo:

Author's own.

seem offensive and a symbol of a patriarchal world, the master s subjugated in the collaborative printmaking relationship by being the servant to the artist; thereby the term ‘master printer’ serves to reinforce the gendered code of printmaking as feminine (1999).

This feminine gender coding serves to further underline print’s marginal status and accentuates the appropriateness of the project’s conceptual as well as physical siting in print, as the aim of a researcher that uses a feminist methodology is to expose as many of the influences on the research as possible (Presser, 2005). It is by revealing the constraints or site of the research that we can obtain a ‘feminist objectivity’ (Haraway, 2002. p.677). When these are not disclosed, we do not know what factors have shaped or constrained the knowledge and therefore the lens with which the research should be viewed.

Feminist researchers ask questions that place the lives of women and other marginalised groups at the heart of the enquiry. This confronts and disrupts conventional methods of obtaining knowledge that traditionally advantage dominant groups, and instead centres knowledge from those at the margins (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012).

That traditional ideas of authenticity have contributed to the relegation of print to the margins of fine art also accords with the project concepts, as a reason why those subject to sexism, sexual assault and harassment don’t speak up is the fear that they won’t be believed and will even be blamed for causing the incident (1999).

What the project did not do, primarily because of COVID, was to obtain responses from a variety of different women’s perspectives. I had intended to distribute a zine that advertised the survey in London Transport map holders (Fig. 5) but, because of COVID, I distributed the survey electronically using my networks. The survey did not collect data on respondents (an error in retrospect) but, as most of my friends and colleagues are a similar age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status as me, it is likely that my respondents were white, middle-aged and middle-class, which increased the prospect that the project was not able to reduce or eliminate the possibility of “leaving out differences of race, class and cultural context” (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012. p.8), a key aspect of feminist methodology.

However, this weakness in the project further underscores the fact that print is an excellent conceptual vehicle for a feminist project that contains a multitude of perspectives, as print is a medium that contains a multitude of processes.

Feminist work is activist but, if an artist-researcher is to utilise a feminist methodology throughout a project, is it only possible to collaborate in the service of a good cause and produce ‘artistic protest’? If they wish to instead privilege their decisions and viewpoint and be “an agent provocateur of his or her own – in a context ... that he or she would like to change” in the production of work (Hedinger



Figure 6

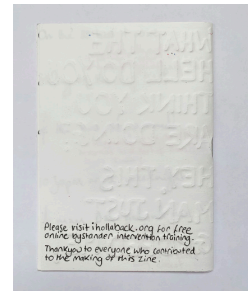


Figure 7

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 6: Screenprinted plaques and holder at Future Now exhibition, 2021. Photo: Author’s own.

Figure 7: Katy Drake, 2021. Back page of Why We Don’t Speak Up. [Risograph Zine] Photo: Author’s own

and Rogger, 2018. p.120) then it can be “art for protest” (Hedinger and Rogger, 2018. p.120), but it won’t be wholly feminist as it utilised an asymmetric power arrangement.

This project has highlighted a tension between feminist methodology and artistic (print) projects. During this project, I sought opinion and counsel in the print studio, a regular site of informal and formal collaboration, but I still privileged my decisions and artistic voice in the outcome and chose how accounts submitted were represented in the artwork, which is emblematic of an asymmetric power arrangement and dampens its feminist credentials.

Even with the presence of mono-printing techniques in printmaking, print is very much associated with the multiple. For instance, Balfour describes print as having an intrinsic reproducibility which gives rise to its multiplicity and reach. It has already been discussed how this characteristic contributed to print being regarded as a subsidiary art form, but Balfour posits that this reproductive aspect can be a compelling by-product of the print process and/or an essential component of an artwork, (2016) an idea that bears similarities to Harding’s notion of a conceptual vehicle.

Printmaking’s inherent association with the multiple practically led to the production of multiple copies of the zine and plaques for audience members to take, but also added a further dimension to print being a conceptual vehicle as the incidents being researched by the project are not singular and continue to repeat. That one print is not identical to another, as even with the most precise digital printing methods the paper and ink are different, also underpinned that these incidents are also singular and unique to the persons they affect. “To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique and singular which has no equal or equivalent” (Deleuze, 1994. pp.1).

The association of the multiple with printmaking segues into the conception that there is no one feminist theory of knowledge or methodology. “Instead, multiple feminist lenses wake us up to layers of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist points of view” (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012. pp.5). The idea of there being one feminism is contradictory, as feminism does not privilege one point of view over another, in opposition to the status quo.

Print has a long heritage of being used as a political tool, which begins with Goya in the nineteenth century (Triantafillou, 2009). Its reproducibility, together with its low cost and capacity for graphic fluency, have historically made it an excellent medium for activism; even today we see printed signs and posters at protests because of these reasons.

Speak Up’s aim was to raise awareness of the multitudes of silence around these types of incidents to provoke dialogue on these issues, and was a project that had activism at its core. As well as the prints, multiple copies of the zine and screenprinted plaques were made

available for visitors to take (Fig. 6 & 7). On the back of the zine was also a link to free bystander intervention training. My aim with these was to facilitate further distribution of the artworks, thereby raising the potential for dialogue and activism. Like Harding, I deliberately sited the project in print to place it within this socio-political context.

Indeed, that details from the survey accounts were arranged in a printed zine was a deliberate choice as zines are heavily associated with feminism, because this format sits outside of, and carries ideas not found in, dominant media (Hays, 2017). That a zine can be easily and cheaply reproduced makes it an ideal format for activism.

This association of print and the zine with activism also parallels an important aspect of feminism: that it is not just theory; it is also a practice of actions and activism, a movement to abolish the present state of things (Finlayson, 2018. p.2).

CONCLUSION

Print was an ideal conceptual vehicle for my project, adding further dimensions to its ability to be a physical repository for the ideas I wished to convey. By using print, I was able to bring together the theory and practice of the project and demonstrate that it is possible to heed Reeves' warning and withstand the idea that theory and practice are binary opposites (1999).

I think that this idea can be developed further and encompass both the practice and conceptual understanding of the print studio. For example, formal and informal collaboration is an important aspect of the print studio to see a way through problems, a method that is an important aspect of feminist methodology as collaboration avoids the use of hierarchies and systems which reinforce the status quo. How can the print studio conceptually and practically contain the "spaces of dialogue and public commons" that Triantafillou asks us to realise? (2010. p.294) That could serve to give print the ability to do more, push beyond the margins and be the engine of change in a socially engaged feminist project.

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Katy Drake

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IMAGE GALLERY

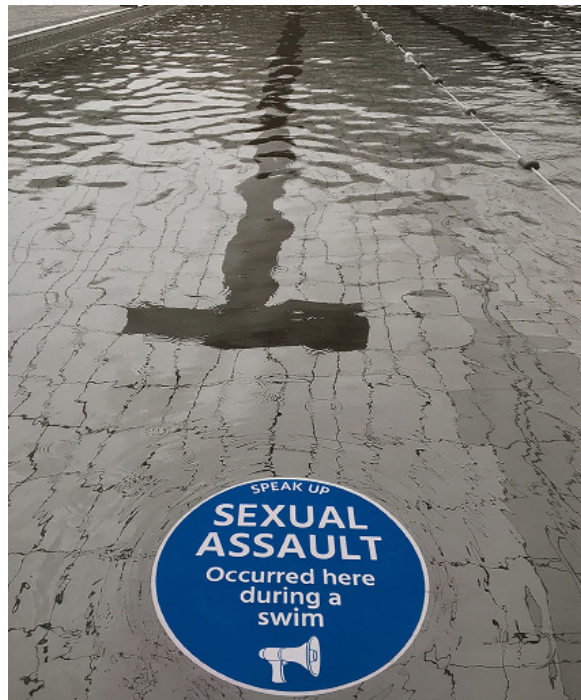


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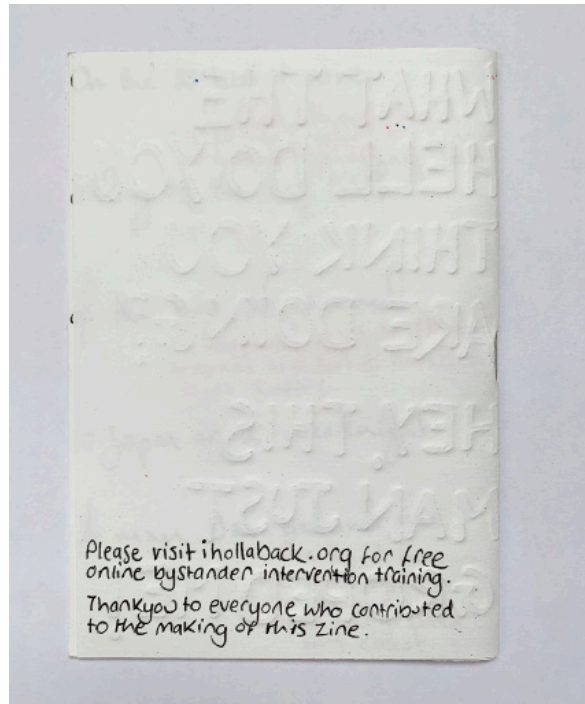


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