Even if it’s god-awful

In *Persona* journal [1], writer Eva Kenny builds a connection between embarrassment and capitalism. While the emergence of the service economy began to produce performance instead of things, performance also crept increasingly into social relations. The changing mode of work made people into aesthetic objects, also making interactions between people into “professional or highly stylised encounters”. Kenny ponders whether the connection between embarrassment and performance is not a result of interiority or identity, but is produced from the outside, from “the social system inhabited by the subject” – capitalism internalised. We began to see ourselves increasingly as “performing creatures observed from the outside”. Technological progress intensified the constant monitoring of ourselves as well as others, and introduced the omnipresent possibility of embarrassment. This hyper self-awareness demands us to produce ‘best versions of ourselves’ presentable. Sociologist Erving Goffman made and analogy between our social interaction and theatre and used the language of art in his 1950s studies to define embarrassment: Embarrassment occurs when the performance of self-presentation “is unsuccessfully separated from the backstage”. *Embarrassment was an aesthetic before it was an emotion*. [Kenny]

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I’m digging into a box of printed matter picked from a shelf at the Glasgow Women’s Library. Xeroxed A4 pamphlets on a variety of coloured papers containing drawings, cartoons and statements that are provoking, inflamed and funny. I’m pulled in by the humour and urgency. The ephemera is definitely historical, yet it still speaks in the present. It is sincere – it has *feelings*. While browsing, I feel elated by the documents I’m handling. But I also feel something else which is not sentimentality, not nostalgia – something I can’t quite determine. More like a smell – difficult to describe. Kenny asks, “In what way can embarrassment be read as an allergy to the immediate past, or to that which is otherwise somehow too close?” The closeness to the present makes contemporaneity to cross it out in an attempt to cancel the past and start anew. Like getting rid of your old diaries.

A confessional VHS tape; art that looks like a cunt; fertility imagery; a performance with your body on display. Overly expressive (“an excess of presence”) yet hard to argue against. The forward-pushing energy of embarrassment.

In a 1979 interview [2] the writer and activist Lucy Lippard recalls how she felt embarrassment for the feminist activists around her in the 1970s. This changed after an intense period of writing, away from the New York art world in Spain (“a horrible place to be for a seventies radical”), where Lippard came to the realisation that in fact, she was ashamed of her gender. [*And what is the difference between shame and embarrassment?*]

“I did nothing but write fiction for the first time in my life. It was just three and a half months, and all these things came out. I realised it was a shame to be a woman. That was just very peculiar: to be ashamed of something you were, irrevocably [laughs]. It didn’t look like a good place to be. I started thinking about all that, and it turned me into a feminist, and I came back and just fell into the movement…Whatever women do interests me, tremendously. Even if it’s god-awful.”

When chancing the possibility of unease, embarrassment can turn into persuasion. It prevents stagnation by resonating and carrying the momentum forward. A threshold has been crossed and the rest of us can step over it. It is possible for awkwardness to win you over and convince, in the same way humour does. But while witty humour keeps you at a distance, embarrassment warms you up and pulls you close. Embarrassment gives permission; its kitsch is a release.

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I’m watching a video tape. [3] Medieval choral music. The protagonist is contemplating a painting of the Virgin Mary with a flower – a metaphor for the way Mary’s sex has been fragmented and detached from her body. The protagonist, too, feels removed from her genitals, while her gender is always on display: “In the course of my daily life, my sex feels separated from me. From the me with the brain, from the me with a history.” Sex and embarrassment – the gender and its aesthetic rendered inferior. Sex and gender – blended together historically, one equating the other to justify abuse. The way one’s body is extracted from the self and put on display, like a witch at the stake. To categorise one, to frame one in order to induce embarrassment so that one will abandon ideas about themself.

But historical feminist activism managed to turn embarrassment into a resource. Abandoning the good taste of modernism, it was do-it-yourself and intervene on a shoestring budget. Feminist campaigning deconstructed the idea of the political poster being sober and earnest. Women’s presses and publishing houses were set up, and video as a new art form was deployed: a medium without the baggage of male art history. Through various forms of design and art, activists applied the ideal of collective production to develop processes and aesthetics specific to their politics and interests in order to communicate on their own terms. The collective production rejected the idea of the lone genius artist, focussing instead on inclusiveness and interaction, and dissolving the division between the private and public realm. As the personal was political, so was the embarrassing. Sheila Rowbotham has pointed out some of the questions faced by 1970s and ’80s activism: “How to develop resistance on the basis of personal experience when that experience could eclipse the subjectivities of others? How to jolt consciousness while maintaining communication with people who were not necessarily sympathetic towards experimentation with form?” Since then, the movement has opened up, expanded and morphed into numerous operations that share ends. It has been cracked open into political clusters with aesthetics that carry that faint, indeterminate and exhilarating whiff from the past that is too close.

(1) Eva Kenny, ‘32 Things You Need to Know About Embarrassment’, *Persona*, Eds. Melissa Gordon and Marina Vishmidt, 2012.

(2) Lucy Lippard, ‘Lucy Lippard 1979: An Interview’, Video Data Bank, 1979

(3) Vanalyne Green, ‘A Spy in the House that Ruth Built’, WMM, 1989.