

RELOCATION
AT
THE PANKHURST CENTRE

In partnership with
WHITWORTH ART GALLERY



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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE RELOCATION PROJECT

Whitworth Gallery contacted the centre with information about 'Relocation' and we were immediately taken with the idea of 'housing' an artwork from their collections by 'relocating' them out in the community. The Galleries were emptied to host "Marina Abramovic Presents..." a live performance for Manchester International Festival. A member of the Public Engagement team visited the Pankhurst Centre and further explained the process to us. We were given the choice of several artists to look at and selected to explore female artists work as The Pankhurst Centre is a women's centre. Postcards were provided by the gallery for the women at the centre to make a final choice from.

The Drop in Group is a culturally diverse, intergenerational group of women, who meet on a Thursday for lunch, discussion, workshops and signposting services. They gathered around a table and passed round the postcards. Artist Charlotte Newson facilitated the discussion.

The group decided that a contemporary artist would be more appropriate and would reflect contemporary images of women; with the final choice being between Lynn Hershman and Tracey Ermin. A series of Tracey's Ermin's life drawings interested the group with their simplicity and emotive use of line and materials. The tiny figures that sprawled across an expanse of paper emphasized a sense of vulnerability and insignificance which resonated with some women in the group; opening up discussions around individual experiences and issues.

The final choice however was Lynn Hershman Leeson's piece "Roberta Breitmore - "Roberta Construction Chart No.1". There were several reasons for this: the artwork itself reflected a strong bold image of a woman's face; a disturbing portrait with demarcation lines drawn onto areas of the face, almost as though this woman had been stitched together; which immediately drew women over to the portrait to ask questions.

The content of the piece also posed questions: about women's identity within social and cultural constructs with the use of make-up emphasizing the falseness and pliability of women's identity. The whole notion of forming another identity fired the imagination of the women and they began to explore the many ways in which they modified themselves to cope with, survive and flourish in the multiple roles they all had. The discussion widened into a debate that focused on the moral code women felt they were under pressure to adhere to, that this code is devised by a paternal hierarchy and creates roles for women that would seem to be at odds with other; e.g. a mother and a person with sexual needs, a carer with a career, an independent ambitious woman : a person who must conform to ideas of beauty and worth that are applied to them, a sense of worthlessness with age and overall a sense of judgment and disempowerment whilst continuing to perform all these roles.

RELOCATION PROJECT

WHITWORTH ART GALLERY

Lynn Hershman Leeson

“Roberta Construction Chart No.1”
(1975)

During the Nineteen Seventies, the San Francisco based artist Lynn Hershman Leeson created ‘Roberta Breitmore’ a persona which Hershman would ‘become’ through a series of rituals. Hershman documented Roberta Breitmore and recorded her through film, photography and sound. This thought provoking body of work raises issues and questions about the complexities of identity within social and cultural structures

July - September 2009

Author: Charlotte Newson

Workshops facilitated by Charlotte Newson Professional Artist

RELOCATION PROJECT AT THE PANKHURST CENTRE

Introduction:

The workshop sessions developed from discussions over lunch with the drop in group, talking about Lynn Hershman Leeson and the persona she developed, Roberta Breitmore. The discussions were led by Charlotte Newson (artist) who introduced the notion of being more than one person, or having different facets to an individual's personality depending on the situation and emotional field they are in. This was opened out to discuss the many roles that women take on in their lives and the complexities of being all these 'people'. The discussion then widened into an exploration of social environments and cultural structures; how they can impact on a woman and control her self expression, self esteem and well being.

The group decided at this point that they wanted to explore more of their own personas. The artist suggested looking at make-up, costume, creative writing and visual arts to develop 'someone else'. It was agreed that once this identity had been constructed over the coming month that the final step would be for the group to go out to visit Whitworth Gallery, walking around and exploring the collections as 'someone else'. The artist would film this intervention as part of their creative process and the journey they had taken exploring Lynn Hershman Leeson's work.

The workshop sessions grew out of these initial discussions. They were not previously booked into the centre's programme; however the manager and management committee supported the drop in groups request because of their level of excitement and commitment. Engaging with the Relocation project had inspired this group of women to explore and challenge their perceptions, their perceived barriers to interaction and given them confidence in their creative ability, facilitated by the artist.

Structure

In terms of structure it was agreed that workshop formats would be on the following basis: 1 workshop that was deeper and more probing, followed up by a more physical active session using costume, props, wigs etc as a format for delivery. It was also agreed that the workshops would last 2 hours and that individuals could decide whether they wanted to participate in all the exercises the artist had prepared. The group drew attention to issues that individual women might find difficult and it was agreed that people could sit out for some parts of the workshops. Permissions for photographs would be gained and images from the workshops would be displayed throughout the centre for staff, volunteers and visitors to comment on. Workshops sessions were supported by the Drop in Group Co-coordinator.

The image of Roberta Breitmore by Lynn Hershman Leeson was taken into the workshop for each session as her presence was felt to be inspirational!

'Each workshop aimed to build layers of a new identity for the women, planning and exploring their ideas around restrictions, disempowerment and empowerment; with the support of a professional artist with extensive experience of working with vulnerable women.'

WORKSHOP 1

This session was focused on changing and exploring the identities of woman faces which had been photocopied onto acetate from magazines. The group was given make-up to use for this exercise. On the final artworks the women included the adverts that appeared next to the faces in the magazines.







Dialogue continued during this session as the artist introduced subjects for discussion such as:

- How do you feel about ageing? What would this alter, what are the positive and negative impacts of this process?
- What negative messages have you heard about yourself or other women? Who do they come from?
- Body image – what shape should women be? Who says so? How do you feel about yourself?
- Should women have hair on their bodies or not?
- What happens when a women goes bald compared to when a man goes bald?
- How do feel about being scarred?
- Does the way you look affect the way you are treated, the level of service you receive and the level of respect?
- Who makes the moral code for women? Is it different to the moral code for men?
- Why do women receive harsher prison sentences than men for similar crimes (i.e. petty theft)
- What about women and violence?
- Do you like being a woman?

The group discussed the portrait of Roberta Breitmore in relation to the marked zones of her face, the use of make up and the names of the make up such as 'Date Mate' a very red lipstick. The name suggests that the lipstick will achieve 'what it says on the tin'; that it alters the wearer in a significant way and that by wearing the lipstick a woman can achieve/become something else. There is also an implication that it is not achievable without it.

The notion of gender and changing gender was also discussed in terms of how much understanding individuals had, what their level of empathy was, admiration and levels of discomfort.

The response was:

- An agreement that to change gender must be an extremely hard life choice to make, possibly resulting in loss of family, friends and hatred.
- That it was also not a choice but the only way for an individual to feel 'right' in their own bodies
- That many vulnerable women who have experienced rape and abuse would find it hard to accept a male to female change of gender in the group - because there would still be a perception of a sense of maleness and therefore threat.
- The group saw transgender as something other than being a woman, for many reasons: socialization of women, women as carers, sexuality, hormones, menstruation, menopause, childbirth, attitude to other women, life experience, and relationship to their bodies and with men.

Transvestism

- The group felt that they had less understanding of this
- The group recognized that women have access to all forms of clothes whereas men have not found a comfortable way to access dresses in the main stream and a discussion around transgender and transvestites took place exploring their knowledge and lack of knowledge.
- There was some discussion around 'dragging up' which was accepted as an exploration of 'maleness' by women.

The artist had opened up a dialogue with the group and created an awareness of issues that they had not previously engaged with (as a group) The artist asked each woman to describe the exact opposite of who they felt they were; the responses were insightful and varied.

Example responses:

- 'The opposite of me is glamorous in a Marilyn Monroe sort of way'
- ' I suppose someone who likes being on their own wouldn't be me'
- 'I don't know if I do like being a woman I've never thought about it before'
- ' Don't get me wrong – the person I'm not is a confident type '
- ' I think it would be some one who make judgments about people – wouldn't be me'

The artist took photographs of the women's faces during the session which were put onto acetates for them to work on over the following weeks. The images the women created were shown to the group who made comments on each one and were then displayed in window spaces in the main training room.

WORKSHOP 2

This session was based around costume and wigs. Additional props (jeweled eye patch, hats, eyelashes, moustaches etc) were also supplied and make up for the women to apply themselves. This was a high energy session and the women all took part in changing their identities to varying degrees. Interestingly some of the women selected to use a very bright red lipstick the artist had provided and to use it in unusual ways, smudging it around their mouths rather than applying it to their lips. The lipstick had several functions, masking, revealing, changing and blurring who they were. Some of the women explored male identities/characters. The workshops increased everyone's visibility.

Some of the group deciding on their persona



New personas









The next stage of the workshop was to discuss how the women felt before they started the workshop and how they felt after they had 'dressed up': this was achieved with word lists.

BEFORE	AFTER THEY BECAME 'SOME ONE ELSE'	
Silent	Listened to	Brave
Hung up	Don't give a toss	Prudent
Full up	Unshaven	Caring
Invisible	Liberated	Strong
Agitated	Powerful	Sassy
Sad	Happy	Sparkly
Childish	Effective	Daring
Apprehensive	Shocked	Smiley
Undressed	Flamboyant	Energetic
Not confident	Exhibitionist	
Shit	Proud	
Rushed	Tarty	
Confrontation	Empowered	

The artist had asked them to begin their own personal identity sheets with words and images, smears of make up, colour and textures, anything visual that explored another persona that they would like to develop.

WORKSHOP 3

This session began with some physical activity, a dance session to encourage the group to have fun and 'play' with the notion of identity. The group chose belly dancing and worked with veils and coin lined part-costumes to great effect. Their tutor was Sharon Edwards a qualified 'Family Tutor', (Salford City Council & Adult Learning).

The second half of the session was focused on restrictions - to being who you are or who you want to be. Initially the artist asked each person to write down on their design sheets some examples they could think of and to then discuss them in terms of textures and the places on their bodies that these restriction applied to. The artist suggested using 'binding' as a visual metaphor. A variety of materials were provided. This session was quite exhausting for the participants and no photographs were taken of the second half of the workshop at the group's request. Individuals were encouraged to make comments throughout the session:

"...I have explored things that make me uncomfortable, that I don't want to remember or think about BUT in a new positive way that makes me feel stronger if that makes sense?"

The creative process involved in this workshop was complex and required a level of trust; which the artists experience and communication skills enabled.

The group commented that the artist:

".... came up with some strange and wonderful ideas"

To draw the workshop to a close the group spent time with the photos of themselves from the previous workshop. Their comments were as follows:

Individual	They took control of the lipstick and made a different statement, a brave statement.
(group shot)	Everyone is smiling but all with different expressions and different posture.
Individual	Happy, confident, brave, outgoing, the extra mile
Individual	Man in drag,
Individual	Really believable, comfortable , used to wearing different faces
Individual	Looking directly into the camera, empowered young woman
Individual	Older women smiling confident – usually hear negative things about older women
Individual	Overriding sense of release
Individual	Sad eyes, smudged lipstick, no matter what you do you still yourself
Individual	Buccaneer, mischievous, masculine

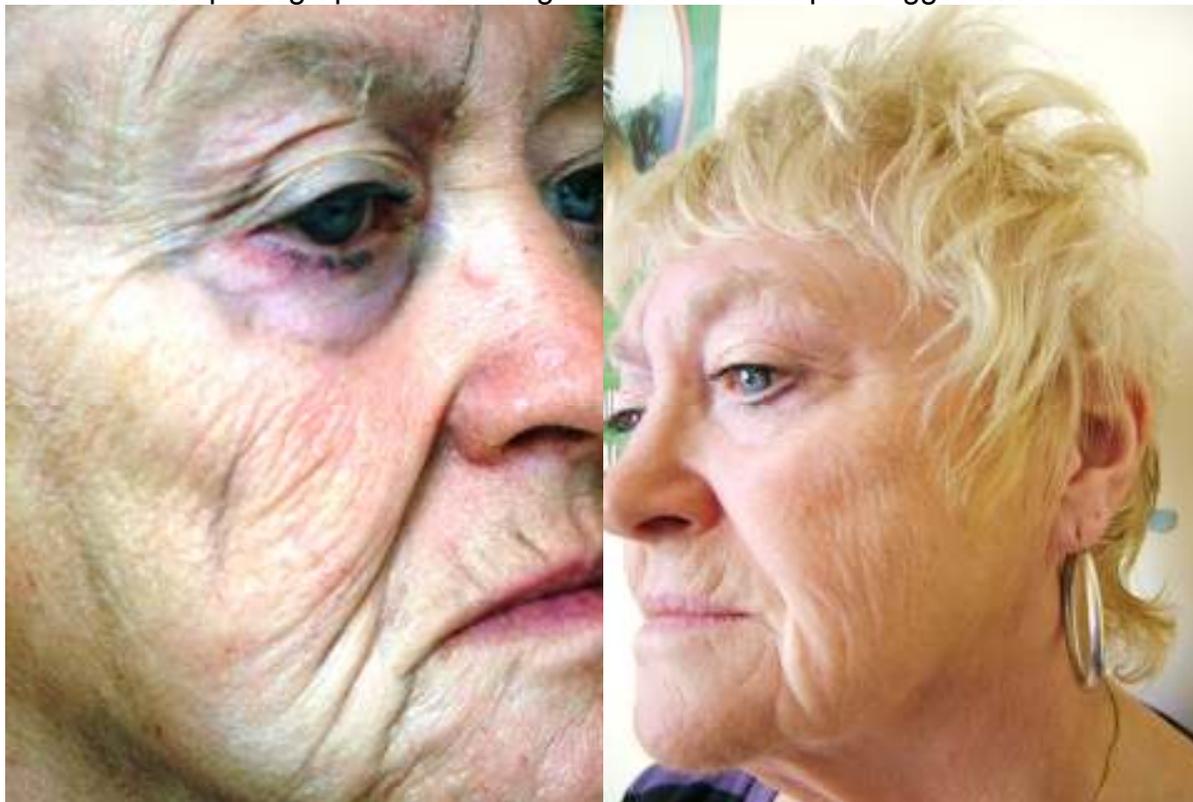
WORKSHOP 4 & 5

These workshops were focused on changing the face of each woman significantly. 'Wigs up North' who specialize in make-up/prosthetics facilitated these sessions; working from individuals design sheets the make-up artists were able to re-create each person in the way they specified.

Individuals explored a variety of issues:

- Ageing
- Changing Gender
- Fantasy
- Imitating celebrities
- Scarring

The artist then photographed the changed faces. Close ups exaggerated the effect.



AGED SIDE

UNAGED SIDE



GENDER CHANGE/FANATASY



GENDER CHANGE



SELF CONFIDENCE



IMITATING CELEBRITIES



SCARRING



FANTASY

The artist carried out an evaluation at the end of this workshop; some of the comments are included below:

"It felt very strange it was almost like seeing myself inside out"

"I really enjoyed the art classes, made me feel empowered and have felt more confident than I have felt in a long time. I do wish we could have had a few more weeks..."

"Thank you Charlotte for a very interesting few weeks"

"I found the actual theme challenging as I have issues with my body"

"I have never been in an art class and I have never had the confidence.....Charlotte is excellent with the women, you don't feel a failure in anything you do..."

"Looking at my photos looking older is sad. I will live life to the full. I can see women gaining confidence in many ways including myself"

"The whole art sessions have been fab, from first feeling anxious to becoming relaxed & empowered"

"What a difference in my persona, stance, mind, confidence..... until it came to doing the freehand (drawing) it totally stressed me out, it shows how controlled my life actually is."

"Wow!! What a fantastic journey, hardest session...looking at identity, who we are what controls us.....learning about myself & society, the politics of identity."

"LOVED it all I want more"

"..Although it is hard and challenging I still challenge this with the help of Carlet (Charlotte)"

"I felt rather strange as an alien; it really was stepping into a completely different role"

"A brilliant safe space to explore identity, I felt able to go that extra mile which charlotte was fully supportive with"

"The character that I became will be part of an ongoing project for me...."



The group requested that an additional workshop be added to the project – so that they could re-explore the binding workshop.

BINDING WORKSHOP

This session took place after a gap of 2 weeks and there were some new women in the group. The artist considered how this might affect the dynamics of the workshop and gave an overview of the project at the start of the session to introduce the project to the women who had not taken part previously and to assess their levels of comfort/discomfort with the notion of 'binding'/restriction and relating this to their personal experience and their bodies.

Surprisingly most of the 'new' women were already familiar with the project and had discussed the images on display in the centre at the group drop-in or other meeting points. They were prepared to work with the artist and had already developed some ideas. Their enthusiasm energized the session and once the materials had been sorted through the women worked together to achieve their creative process. The artist facilitated their processes and took photographs. These images are in some cases intense, disturbing and charged with emotion – there was no verbal assessment at the end of the session – the women felt there was no need; that the images speak for themselves.



