

Sarah Lucas

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JERRY SALTZ

She Gives as Good as She Gets

Part I. An Eye for an Eye

Sarah Lucas gives as good as she gets. She's a code-breaker and a ball-buster, a saboteur and a spy. Elegantly in-your-face, Lucas is a smutty, salt-of-the-earth lout whose unequivocal work is raw and loud and startling. It is also efficient and concise. In her art, Lucas doesn't mince words and she doesn't waste them either. She gets quickly to the point—and the point usually has to do with the ways women are viewed in society. In a recent interview Lucas talked about “the continual innuendo,” the winks and nudges she gets from men when merely buying a cucumber at the market: essentially, she takes that objectification to the max, pushing it back in society's—and often art history's—face. What's startling about her work is its “maleness,” its assumption of the male gaze (or better yet, gawk); she shines an

unremitting light on it basically by magnifying the power of its lens. Like in *Apocalypse Now* when Martin Sheen asks a rogue sniper “Do you know who's in charge here?": Lucas is that sniper who, after a long, silent, steely look—as if to say “You're nothing”—simply says “Yeah.” Pure Lucas, the answer is artless, bigger than you are, more complicated than you thought, stronger than you, and has you completely sussed. She's an exterminating angel, but a funny one.

A wayzgoose, hootchy-kootchy carnival¹⁾ laughter permeates Lucas's work. If this were the eighties this laughter would be ironic, above-it-all, judgmental and deconstructive. But Lucas (along with a whole bunch of younger artists including Elizabeth Peyton, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Sam Taylor Woods, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jorge Pardo, and Wolfgang Tillmanns) represents a shift in the paradigm; and looking at laughter is a great way to get that shift. Although there's nothing especially ardent about her laughter

JERRY SALTZ is an art critic who lives in New York. His phone number is (212) 505 9004.

SARAH LUCAS, SOUP, 1989, photo collage, approx. 5 x 4" / SUPPE, Photo-Collage, ca. 13 x 10 cm.

because she takes a wonderfully contradictory, ambivalent stance: She is subject and object, actor and spectator. In her world I'm the object, you're the object, he's the object, she's the object. Because her art isn't simply oppositional she is able to finally step outside narrow definitions like "feminist" or "political" art—definitions that have kept art ineffective for so long. The degradation, hilarity and deprivation Lucas depicts is lived by everyone. Her laughter embraces the macabre, the grotesque, the scatological, and the reproductive.

BITCH (1995)—a table outfitted with giant hooter-like melons bulging out of a tight tee shirt and a packet of smoked fish hanging suggestively between the table's legs—objectifies man's crudest desires and woman's greatest fears. If you're a man, it's only the naughty bits, no personality to have to throw out of bed—but then *BITCH* turns the tables on you: a cold, hard, dead kind of blowup doll much bigger than you. "You want to fuck this thing?" Lucas seems to be asking. "Be my guest."

If you're a woman, your intimate odors and appearance transform into a rank, howling parody—but then *BITCH* suggests provocatively that perhaps you like your smells and your extrusions, perhaps they turn you on. It is obvious that Lucas is interested in the grotesque and the visceral: the exaggerated, the crude, the excessive; the material life of the body. She's Rabelaisian in this respect. At one point in *The Good Pantagruel*, Rabelais lists 337 words to describe a scrotum including "...musty, mouldy, mildewed, dangling, faded, foul, lumpy, dumpy, stumpy, plaited ball-bag."

For Lucas the body is not politically closed: There's no one right way to view it. She's not about victims and assailants, good guys and bad guys; not so Dickensian. Lucas knows a mask when she sees one—men's sexism, for example—but unlike her eighties counterparts, who view the mask as the image of everything false and inauthentic—of hypocrisy itself—she leapfrogs over this jaded position in order to view the mask (of sexism, say) as one that reveals as well as conceals—one that obviously distorts.

Lucas's works of art may often be jokes but they are never one-liners; they're layered and intersect with obsession, desire, society, and prior forms of art.

When Lucas collages photographs of nude women from newspapers into her work she is saying, "This is what it's really like"; hers is an undigested, close-to-the-bone, form of collage, unlike, say, Rosenquist or Wesselman (two obvious predecessors in this regard) who present dollied-up tits-and-ass, finished, formal and endlessly abstracted. Lucas pushes the whole pie back in Pop's face and has a good guffaw doing it. I know that as an American I always secretly wished for girlie pics in our newspapers—now I'm glad we never had them. They talk about the revolutionary power of laughter: This may be it.

Part II. A Cock and Balls Story

Not only is Sarah Lucas the kind of artist who speaks only when she has something to say—she has no style, per se, only a context that she's created for herself—she makes her art in a medium that has a long tradition of subversion: collage (and assemblage). Collage hasn't exactly been ignored by her contemporaries either: in one way or another collage was the medium of choice in the eighties in the work of artists like Gilbert & George, Julian Schnabel, Sigmar Polke, and David Salle. Their work was, in effect, an amalgam of existing images and materials taken from the world and blended into a whole. Unlike these artists—and this is another one of those paradigm shifts—Lucas doesn't so much build on collage as tear it down. Her work returns collage to the conditions of its origins in Dada and Surrealism, from Hannah Höch, Kurt Schwitters, and John Heartfield to Francis Picabia, who in 1920 nailed a stuffed monkey to a board and titled it *PORTRAIT OF CÉZANNE*. She takes a little bit from all of them: Schwitters's formal rawness, Heartfield's emotional explicitness and rebus-like images, Höch's feminism "cut with the kitchen knife," the found objects of Duchamp and Man Ray and the devil-may-care attitude of Picabia. Her work is crude, obstreperous, it means to offend (not to blend), and it distorts formal etiquette and



SARAH LUCAS, *BITCH*, 1995, table, tee-shirt, melons, packet of smoked fish / *MISTSTÜCK*, Tisch, T-Shirt, Melonen, vakuumverpackter Fisch.

finish—for example, an old, funky-looking mattress, a green cucumber standing erect on it with two oranges resting below; next to this "man," two biggish yellow melons for breasts and an empty bucket for vagina; a sheet of paper is pinned to the mattress on which is scrawled the title of the piece: *AU NATUREL*.

What Lucas constantly pursues is a hybrid quality, a disjunctive whole where you can still see all the separate parts. She lacerates, and her knife cuts both ways; she positions herself inside—not outside—the work. Here, not there. This isn't an intellectual joke

or brainy critique of style or subject matter; her proximity to it is what makes her so much better than a lot of artists who attempt to critique the "male gaze." It's interesting to think of *AU NATUREL* (1994) in terms of some of Cindy Sherman's recent work involving comestibles or prosthetic body parts in explicit sexual or scatological poses; it gives you some idea of how good Lucas might be. At its best, Lucas's work contains the kind of omnivorous energy of Picasso—you might laugh reading this: Lucas is no Picasso, but some of her pieces play on the crude transforma-



SARAH LUCAS, *AU NATUREL*, 1994, mattress, water bucket, melons, oranges, cucumber, approx. 33 x 66 x 57" /
Matratze, Eimer, Melonen, Orangen, Gurke, ca. 84 x 168 x 145 cm.

tions and abbreviations of the female body that gave Picasso's work such mesmerizing, totemic power.

Once when Lucas was in New York City, she stayed with a friend of mine. The evening she left for London my friend found a marvelous sculpture—two sculptures, really—on her wooden table: a cock and balls. Made out of cardboard, the cock is eight and a half inches long and covered in tiny cut-outs of mouths; the balls, also made of cardboard, are similarly covered with eyes. The mouths on the penis are all lips and teeth and tongue, all smiling (and why wouldn't they be); the balls have eyes so that it seems that they have a life of their own, independent from the cock (a truth that ought to be better known). The cock-and-balls reveals Lucas as the down-to-earth maker of proverbs that she is, e.g. a penis fingered is a penis pleased. A cock covered with mouths is a hap-

py cock. Balls with eyes have a mind of their own... and so on. Here, an irresistible comparison arises to Louise Bourgeois's savagely humorous FILLETTE—a two-foot latex phallus that she called her "doll." FILLETTE, however, differs in a number of crucial ways from Lucas's playful offering: It is titled, therefore "serious"; it is a traditional piece of sculpture: it looks like sculpture, it acts like sculpture, it is weighty, clublike. Lucas's piece is a gift and therefore somewhat unnameable, less like art, more to do with a ritualistic potlatch logic. Compared to FILLETTE, Lucas's penis is small and delicate, fragile and toylike; it's more like a rattle or a piñata than a battle axe. You hold Lucas's lovingly handmade dick in your hands and you are enamored of it, you finger it and think about Lucas fingering it, fashioning it just so—and suddenly an erotic void opens up before you.

Postscript. A Portrait of Love

Courtney Love's advice to her young daughter Frances Bean was, "You are the first of your generation; forget everything that came before you."² Lucas seems to be following that advice. Instead of stepping outside the world in order to show you how wrong everything is, how pictures lie, how smart she is, she isn't asking permission from the generation before, she's not trying to find a place; she banks on love, burns with it, really: love, laughter, anger, and ambivalence. In a touchingly honest portrait, Lucas

depicts her pal Tracey Emin (*TRACEY EMIN*, 1994). Picturing a fellow practitioner of her own generation and gender; someone who looks straight at you, who laughs in the portrait the way Lucas laughs in her art: openly and without shame; who is herself (a hero, maybe) in spite of it all; who aspires to greatness, and who, like Lucas and the other artists of her generation, is "the first of her generation."

1) For a rich explanation of the carnivalesque, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. First published 1965. English translation by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

2) Courtney Love is the lead singer of the grunge-punk group "Hole."

SARAH LUCAS, *TWO FRIED EGGS AND A KEBAB*, 1992, fried eggs, large doner kebab, table, and photograph on cardboard /
ZWEI SPIEGELEIER UND EIN KEBAB, Spiegeleier, grosses Döner Kebab, Tisch und eine auf Karton ausgezogene Photographie.



JERRY SALTZ

Sie zahlt kräftig heim

Teil I. Auge um Auge

Sarah Lucas zahlt kräftig heim. Sie ist eine Code-Brecherin, eine Spielverderberin, eine Saboteurin und eine Spionin; Lucas ist eine dreckige Göre ersten Ranges, deren unzweideutiges Werk roh, laut und schockierend ist. Es ist aber auch aussagekräftig und prägnant. In ihrer Kunst nimmt Lucas kein Blatt vor den Mund, sie macht aber auch nicht viele Worte. Sie kommt schnell auf den Punkt – und der hat in der Regel mit der Art und Weise zu tun, wie Frauen in der Gesellschaft gesehen und gezeigt werden. In einem kürzlich geführten Interview sprach sie von «den ständigen Anspielungen», der heimlichen Anmache durch Männer, wenn sie bloss auf dem Markt eine Gurke einkauft. Im Grunde greift sie dieses «Zum-Objekt-degradiert-Werden» auf, treibt es auf die Spitze und schleudert es der Gesellschaft – und oft auch der Kunstgeschichte – wieder ins Gesicht. Das Überraschende an ihrem Werk ist das «Männliche», das Annehmen des männlichen Blicks (besser noch: Gaffens). Sie wirft ein unbarmherziges Licht

JERRY SALTZ ist Kunstkritiker und lebt in New York. Seine Telefonnummer ist 212-505 90 04.

auf diesen Blick, indem sie einfach noch genauer hinschaut und noch näher rangeht. Es ist wie in *Apocalypse Now*, als Martin Sheen einen streunenden Heckenschützen fragt «Wissen Sie, wer hier zuständig ist?» Lucas ist wie dieser Heckenschütze, der nach einem langen, stillen und stahlharten Blick – als wolle er sagen: «Wer bist du überhaupt?» – schlicht sagt: «Ja». Das ist ganz Lucas – die Antwort ist schlicht überfordernd, komplizierter als erwartet, einfach überwältigend und hat uns vollkommen durchschaut. Sarah Lucas ist ein vernichtender Engel, aber einer mit Humor.

Ein schallendes, markerschütterndes Karnevals-lachen¹⁾ durchdringt das Werk von Sarah Lucas. Wären wir in den 80er Jahren, wäre dieses Lachen vor allem ironisch, es stünde über allem, wäre verurteilend und dekonstruktiv. Aber Lucas (zusammen mit einer ganzen Gruppe junger Künstler wie Elizabeth Peyton, Jake und Dinos Chapman, Sam Taylor Woods, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jorge Pardo und Wolfgang Tillmans) steht für einen Paradigmenwechsel; und die Betrachtung des Lachens ist eine ausgezeichnete Möglichkeit, diesen Wechsel zu verstehen. Dennoch

ist keine besondere Heftigkeit in ihrem Lachen, weil sie eine wunderbar widersprüchliche, ambivalente Haltung einnimmt. Sie ist Subjekt und Objekt, Schauspielerin und Zuschauerin zugleich. In ihrer Welt bin ich das Objekt, bist du das Objekt, ist er das Objekt, ist sie das Objekt. Da ihre Kunst nicht einfach oppositionell ist, kann sie aus engen Definitionen wie «feministisch» oder «politisch» heraustreten – Definitionen, die die Kunst so lange in ihrer Wirkung stumpf gemacht haben. Die Erniedrigung, Heiterkeit und Entbehrung, die Lucas schildert, wird von jedem erlebt. Ihr Lachen umfasst das Makabre, das Grotteske, das Skatologische und das Reproduktive der menschlichen Existenz.

BITCH (Miststück, 1995) – ein Tisch, garniert mit aus einem engen T-Shirt quellenden Melonen und einem suggestiv zwischen zwei Tischbeinen hängenden, geräucherten Fisch – führt uns krudeste Männerphantasien und elementare Frauenängste vor Augen. Einem Mann erscheint das zunächst nur etwas dreist, es geht ihm nicht bis unter die Haut oder die Bettdecke – bis BITCH plötzlich den Spiess umdreht und ihm ihr anderes Gesicht zeigt: kalt, hart, tot, eine Art aufblasbare Gummipuppe und viel grösser als er. «Du willst dieses scheussliche Ding ficken?» scheint Lucas zu fragen. «Nur zu, tu dir keinen Zwang an!» Eine Frau dagegen erkennt sofort die vulgäre, grelle Parodie auf das Aussehen und den Geruch ihres Geschlechts – auf den zweiten Blick legt BITCH der Betrachterin dann aber den provokativen Gedanken nahe, dass ihr diese Gerüche und Rundungen vielleicht ganz lieb sein könnten, vielleicht bringen sie sie sogar ins Schwelgen und machen sie scharf? Offensichtlich hat Lucas es auf das Grotteske und Viszerale abgesehen: das auf die Spitze Getriebene, Primitive, Exzessive; das betont Körperliche des Leibes. In dieser Hinsicht ist sie Rabelais durchaus verwandt. An einer Stelle in *Gargantua und Pantagruel* reiht Rabelais 337 Wörter aneinander, um einen Hodensack zu beschreiben, unter anderen: «... muffiger, schimmlicher, verpilzter, baumelnder, verblühter, stinkiger, plumper, pummeliger, stummeliger, faltiger Eiersack».

Für Lucas ist der Körper nicht politisch eingegrenzt: Es gibt nicht die eine, richtige Art, ihn zu betrachten. Ihr geht es nicht um Opfer und Täter,



SARAH LUCAS, NOT TITLED, 1993, papier mâché, approx. 8" high / NICHT BETITELT, Papiermaché, ca. 20 cm hoch.

gute und böse Typen, sie hat nicht dieses Dickensche. Lucas erkennt eine Maske, wenn sie eine sieht – männlichen Sexismus zum Beispiel; aber anders als ihre Kollegen aus den 80er Jahren, die die Maske als das Bild alles Falschen, Unauthentischen – ja der Heuchelei selbst – sehen, macht sie einen Bocksprung über diese stumpf gewordene Auffassung hinweg, um die Maske (des Sexismus) als eine zu betrachten, die sowohl enthüllt als auch verbirgt, jedenfalls aber eindeutig verzerrt.

Die Kunstwerke von Sarah Lucas sind oft witzig, aber es sind niemals reine Pointen. Sie sind vielschichtig und haben mit Dingen wie Besessenheit, Sehnsucht, Gesellschaft und früheren Formen der Kunst zu tun. Wenn Lucas Photos nackter Frauen aus Zeitungen in ihren Collagen verarbeitet, sagt sie: «Genauso ist es wirklich.» Ihre Form der Collage ist unverdaut, unanständig, anders als etwa bei Rosenquist oder Wesselman (zwei offensichtlichen Vorgängern in dieser Hinsicht), die herausgeputzte Titten und Ärsche darstellen – vollendet, formal und unendlich abstrahiert. Lucas schleudert dem Pop seinen ganzen Zuckerguss ins Gesicht und lacht sich

dabei kaputt. Ich weiss, dass ich mir als Amerikaner insgeheim immer Photos von nackten Mädchen in unseren Zeitungen gewünscht habe. Jetzt bin ich froh, dass es nie welche gab. Man spricht von der revolutionären Kraft des Lachens – dies könnte sie sein.

Teil II. Eine Schwanz-und-Eier-Geschichte

Sarah Lucas ist die Art Künstlerin, die nur redet, wenn sie etwas zu sagen hat. Sie hat keinen Stil per se, nur einen Kontext, den sie sich selbst geschaffen hat. Sie macht Kunst mit einem Medium, das eine lange subversive Tradition hat – Collage (und Assemblage). Die Collage wurde auch von ihren Zeitgenossen nicht gerade ignoriert. Auf die eine oder andere Weise war die Collage in den 80er Jahren auch das bevorzugte Medium von Künstlern wie Gilbert & George, Julian Schnabel, Sigmar Polke und David Salle. Ihre Arbeit war in der Tat ein Gemisch aus existierenden Bildern und Materialien, die der Welt entnommen und zu einem Ganzen verschmolzen wurden. Anders als diese Künstler – und das ist ein weiterer Paradigmenwechsel – baut Lucas weniger auf der Collage auf, als dass sie sie demontiert. Ihre Arbeit führt die Collage zu den Bedingungen ihrer Ursprünge zurück – im Dada und Surrealismus von Hannah Höch, Kurt Schwitters und John Heartfield bis hin zu Francis Picabia, der 1920 einen Stoffaffen auf ein Brett nagelte und ihm den Titel PORTRÄT VON CÉZANNE gab. Lucas nimmt von allen etwas: die formale Roheit von Schwitters, die emotionale Deutlichkeit und Rebus-artigen Bilder von Heartfield, den Feminismus von Höch «mit dem Küchenmesser geschnitten», das *objet trouvé* von Duchamp und Man Ray und die Hol's-der-Teufel-Einstellung von Picabia. Ihre Arbeit ist derb und aufmüpfig, sie will vor den Kopf stossen (nicht harmonisieren), und sie verhöhnt jede formale Etikette

und Perfektion. So zum Beispiel mit einer alten, muffig aussehenden Matratze, auf der erigiert eine grüne Gurke steht, mit zwei daneben liegenden Apfelsinen. Neben diesem «Mann» zwei grosse gelbe Melonen für die Brüste und ein leerer Eimer für die Vagina. Auf die Matratze ist ein Blatt Papier geheftet, auf das der Titel des Werkes gekritzelt ist: AU NATUREL.

Was Sarah Lucas ständig anstrebt, ist eine hybride Qualität, ein loses Ganzes, in dem alle einzelnen Teile noch erkennbar sind. Sie schlitzt auf, und ihr Messer schneidet in beide Richtungen. Sie sieht sich selbst innerhalb des Werks – nicht ausserhalb. Hier, nicht dort. Das ist kein intellektueller Scherz oder eine gescheite Kritik von Stil oder Inhalt. Und diese Nähe zum Werk ist genau das, was sie so viel besser macht als viele Künstler, die versuchen, den «männlichen Blick» zu kritisieren. Es ist interessant, AU NATUREL (1994) auf dem Hintergrund einiger jüngerer Werke von Cindy Sherman zu betrachten, in denen Nahrungsmittel oder prothetische Körperteile in explizit sexuellen oder skatologischen Posen verwendet werden. Das vermittelt eine Vorstellung davon, wie gut Lucas sein könnte. In den besten Arbeiten hat das Werk von Lucas die alles verschlingende Energie eines Picasso. Man mag über eine solche Aussage lachen; Lucas ist kein Picasso, aber einige ihrer Arbeiten spielen mit den rohen Transformationen und Reduktionen des weiblichen Körpers, die Picassos Werk seine hypnotisierende, totemistische Kraft verliehen.

Als Sarah Lucas einmal in New York City war, wohnte sie bei einer Freundin von mir. An dem Abend, als sie nach London abreiste, fand meine Freundin eine wunderbare Skulptur – eigentlich zwei Skulpturen – auf ihrem Holztisch: einen Schwanz und Eier. Der Schwanz, aus Karton, ist rund 22 Zentimeter lang und mit lauter kleinen, aus Papier ausgeschnittenen Mündern übersät; die Hoden, ebenfalls aus Karton, sind in der gleichen Art mit Augen versehen. Die Münder auf dem Penis bestehen aus Lippen, Zähnen und Zunge, und sie lächeln alle (warum sollten sie auch nicht); die Hoden haben Augen, so dass es scheint, als hätten sie ein vom Schwanz unabhängiges Eigenleben (eine Wahrheit, die weiter verbreitet werden sollte). Diese

Schwanz-und-Eier-Geschichte zeigt Lucas' nüchterne Sprichwörtlichkeit, man denke etwa an englische Ausdrücke wie: *a penis fingered is a penis pleased; a cock covered in mouths is a happy cock; balls with eyes have a mind of their own* (ein befühlter Penis ist ein erfreuter Penis, ein in Mündern versteckter Schwanz ist ein glücklicher Schwanz, Eier mit Augen sind eigenwillig) usw. Unwiderstehlich drängt sich hier der Vergleich zum drastischen Humor von Louise Bourgeois' FILLETTE auf – eines 60 Zentimeter langen Latex-Phallus, den sie ihre «Puppe» nannte. FILLETTE unterscheidet sich jedoch in einigen wesentlichen Punkten von Lucas' spielerischem Angebot. Es hat einen Werktitel, ist also «seriös». Es ist eine traditionelle Skulptur: es schaut aus wie eine Skulptur, es wirkt wie eine Skulptur, es ist schwer und knüppelartig. Lucas' Arbeit ist ein Geschenk und daher nicht eigentlich benennbar, es untersteht weniger der Logik der Kunst als jener einer rituellen Gabenverteilung. Verglichen mit FILLETTE ist Lucas' Penis klein, fein, verletzlich und hat etwas von einem Spielzeug; er gleicht eher einer Rassel oder einem Tannzapfen als einer Streitaxt. Man hält Lucas' liebevoll gefertigten Schwanz in Händen und ist bezaubert, man befühlt ihn und stellt sich vor, wie Lucas ihn gehalten haben muss, um ihn gerade so herzurichten – und plötzlich tut sich ein erotischer Abgrund auf.

Nachtrag. Ein Porträt

Ein Rat von Courtney Love²⁾ an ihre junge Tochter Frances Bean lautete: «Du bist die erste deiner Generation. Vergiss alles, was vor dir war.» Lucas scheint diesem Rat zu folgen. Statt aus der Welt hervorzutreten, um uns zu zeigen, wie falsch alles ist, wie die Bilder lügen, wie schlau sie ist, fragt sie die frühere Generation gar nicht um Erlaubnis bzw. versucht gar nicht, sich in ein Verhältnis zu ihr zu setzen, sondern sie baut auf Liebe, brennt mit ihr, wirklich – in Liebe, Lachen, Zorn und Ambivalenz. In einem bestechend

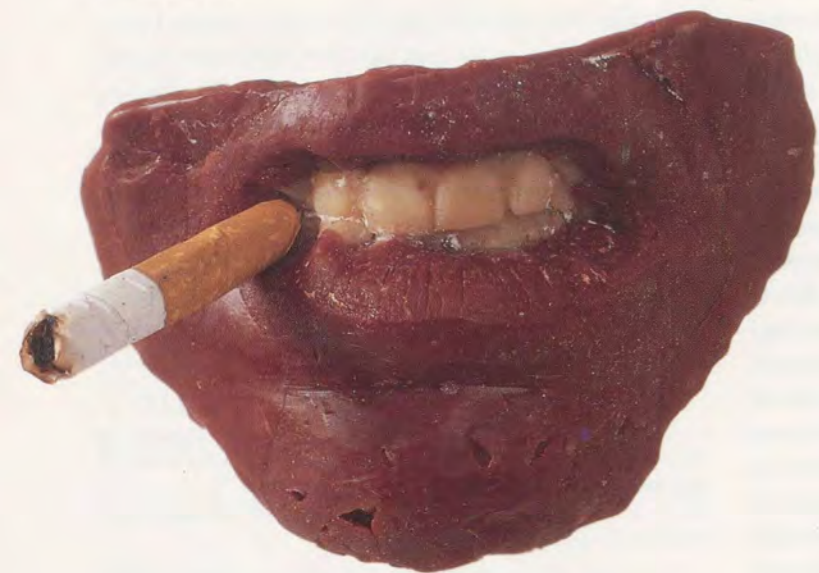
ehrlichen Porträt, TRACEY EMIN (1994), stellt Lucas ihre Freundin dar. Sie zeichnet das Bild einer Künstlerkollegin ihrer eigenen Generation und ihres Geschlechts, einen Menschen, der einem gerade in die Augen schaut, der in dem Porträt so lacht, wie Sarah Lucas in ihrer Kunst lacht: offen und ohne Scham, eine Frau, die trotz allem sie selbst ist (vielleicht sogar eine Heldin), die nach Grosseem strebt und die – wie Sarah Lucas und die anderen Künstler ihrer Generation – «die erste ihrer Generation ist».

(Übersetzung: Gerhard Frechen)

- 1) Eine aufschlussreiche Untersuchung des Karnevalesken liefert Michail Bachtin in *Rabelais und seine Welt: Volkskultur als Gegenkultur*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1987.
- 2) Courtney Love ist die Leadsängerin der Grunge-Punk-Gruppe «Hole».

SARAH LUCAS, TRACEY EMIN, 1994, acrylic on board, 20 x 16" / Acryl auf Malkarton, 51 x 41 cm.





SARAH LUCAS,
 WHERE DOES IT ALL END?, 1994–95,
 wax and a cigarette butt /
 WOHN SOLL DAS ALLES FÜHREN?,
 Wachs und ein Zigarettensammel.

JAN VAN ADRICHEM

Where Does It All End?

SARAH LUCAS interviewed

by JAN VAN ADRICHEM

JAN VAN ADRICHEM: The sculpture WHERE DOES IT ALL END? (1994–95) deals with many aspects of your work up to now. It is a play on visual and linguistic expressions of anger and aggression. It is the mould of your own mouth, so it has a very direct autobiographical aspect in the sense that you reproduce yourself. And the cigarette is a concrete object from everyday life. So the work is a double track between

JAN VAN ADRICHEM is lecturer in the department of art history at Utrecht University.

reality and art and, as such, it shows your interest in a direct and life-imbued art, both in formal and emotional terms.

SARAH LUCAS: I cast my mouth with a cigarette in it, so that there would be a place for it. At the time I was making a whole figure, a kind of self-portrait wearing my clothes. The important thing about the head was that it could smoke, and one of the hands was going to be holding a can of beer. It was supposed to be me on a bad day. I made the mouth separately from the rest of the head, which was a papier

maché balloon. In the end, I couldn't incorporate the mouth into the head because the materials were too incongruous. Recognizing that the mouth was working more successfully on its own, I had to get rid of the rest of it.

JA: What about the colour of the wax? The redness has a certain degree of naturalism, but it also represents aggressivity.

SL: Yes, it's like a face without skin, really. That's why I chose the colour. It was going to be the colour of the whole figure from the outset. It was supposed to be a vulnerable moment, not without aggression but also naked, raw. Not really angry—more something of a grimace, a sharp intake of breath, which is what you do when you smoke.

JA: What is the significance of the title, WHERE DOES IT ALL END?

SL: It's an exasperated title, really. Not too hopeful, but not absolutely hopeless either.

JA: Why did you think that the mouth was enough? Did it have to do with its immediacy?

SL: As soon as I put the cigarette in the mouth, it just struck me as being funny, vivid.

JA: Is vividness important?

SL: I want to make things that are clear and accessible. In the first place, somebody's interest has to be aroused. But it's not necessarily the only way to seduce somebody.

JA: If you opt for this vividness, does that explain why you use so many different media? You also do photo works, video works, drawings, text pieces...

SL: I'll use anything I can. I depend on the idea that art can't be taken away from me by financial or material limitations. Take the list piece: I could have written it with my finger in the sand if necessary. I can sit and eat dinner and move the food around on my plate to mean something. On the other hand, the choice of materials is crucial to what the final piece is. For example, if I had used something other than real melons in BITCH—say, a rough plaster shape with nipples on it that I'd made myself—it would have been something completely different. The fact that the melons are real is important. They really are it. It's not me, not an illustration.

JA: It's an expression of mental energy. Could you express yourself in any medium, then?

SL: Every time I make an object, that object has found its way, and the materials I have used have found their way within that process. These things should come about simultaneously, but of course they don't. So there's a kind of push-pull between what I'm doing and another possibility. Things come around again and again. One day there is enough in front of me to think, "Yes, I can do something with this." That means making something that can be perceived all at once, although you may have to walk around it. The idea and the materials all have to come together in a good relationship. It comes around in my head like that: things I have been thinking about for years; bits and pieces of an idea. I have half an idea all the time and it might be quite a good half an idea. But half an idea doesn't make an object. Nor can it be contrived. It must be lived out and the materials must be allowed to live it out. So I'm in an odd relationship of mutual respect with these things. You can't simply ram your ideas into these materials or you would end up with a tight-arsed, mediocre artwork.

JA: In BITCH you present two melons and they function paradoxically, remaining recognizable as melons but at the same time becoming breasts in an analogy you invent. It is something that is not there by itself, but it is your associative capability, your inventiveness to think of the possibility in this sort of construction.

SL: Yes, and almost everybody does see it that way. It's like pushing buttons.

JA: Do you think that this capacity is uniquely yours, or is it a more general one?

SL: Everybody does it, but most people don't bother to make the kind of things I make. They do it in their heads. This idea of uniqueness is strange because everything is connected to everything else. So what is unique about anybody is kind of residual, like style. You don't have to intend a style, it will just be there. I do things in a certain way which is partly of the moment, what happens to be there at a given time. But I try to avoid being too stylish.

JA: So you have a preference for a lack of style.

SL: I have a preference for an exemplary lack of style.

JA: Your work does have an immediate impact. You try to make it as dense as possible. It seems to be the

result of an economical attitude. It has a clear structure and its form is sober. Because it is without redundant aspects, it is visually very direct. But next to these formal and structural aspects there are also the issues you focus on. They are comments on how women are stereotyped. Is feminism very important to you?

SL: Certain feminist literature, like Andrea Dworkin, opened up the idea for me of having more subject matter. It's not so much whether you agree or disagree with her, but more the idea that it is possible to look at things radically differently. That really grabbed me. I particularly liked Dworkin's titles—*Pornography*, *Intercourse*, and so on. I loved the idea that you could call a book *Pornography*, and everyone gets it down off the shelf. Hilarious. At the time, due to my extremely limited resources, I was trying to keep my work as cheap as possible. I'd chosen tabloid newspapers as my material. When I made the posters by blowing up centrefolds from the *Sunday Sport*, it was very much with that attitude, a kind of bloody-mindedness.

JA: So one could say that your technique, the way you manipulate the stuff, was influenced by feminism: that looking through the lens of feminism you were able to completely transform your work. Is that also a metaphor for what artistic activity might be in your case?

SL: Yes, it was a huge turnaround for me. But on the other hand I never wanted to be an artist on a soapbox. In a way I'm romantic about art. I want it to be really refined. I don't want it to be ringing in my ears and be sick up to the back teeth of it.

JA: There are works, photographs, in which you present yourself as a very masculine person...

SL: That's how it appears, depending on the stance I adopt. A lot of it is just observation. For instance, on a bus, two women will sit together on one seat whereas two men will sit on separate seats, legs wide apart, preferably with some seats in between them, and they'll have a conversation across the whole bus. When the bus suddenly fills up they get stranded. I went for a drink one night with a friend of mine who's a bit of a sexist, and we were arguing about something and I said, "Well, OK, I'm gonna sit like this!" I spread my legs and I could see it made him

uncomfortable. I like that kind of thing. Nobody thinks of it in words and nobody bothers to work it out literally, but everybody reacts to it. It's very subtle. It's something very casual, which I think is important to art and to what I do. It's not laboured. Also, at one point I asked myself what I wanted art to be. I thought that dressing was fairly near the mark in that it has an intention and there is something important at stake. But it's free-flowing, it has nuances that make you think, "Yes, those shoes are great today," and they are great that day but not the next. In a way, art is smaller than life because it takes so long to actually get it done and meanwhile life is going on continuously. And some days it's difficult enough putting on a pair of jeans in the morning.

JA: Most of the time, text or titles and images in your work are interrelated and together point to a social and sexual content. Does language direct your work as a strategy or does the image come first?

SL: Usually I don't work from a title and if I do, the title has always changed by the time I'm finished. But I do have a lot of phrases floating around in my head that are part of what I'm after. But the object doesn't simply illustrate an idea or phrase; that would make it redundant. It has its own potential. The two just help each other.

I tend to overuse words and phrases that I like a lot. Take slang, for example. You use the same words over and over again, your vocabulary doesn't get any bigger. I've always enjoyed people talking that way and swearing. Like someone saying "fuck" ten times in the space of three sentences and each time it means something slightly different.

JA: This relates to a series of drawings which are lists of words, each referring to one action or object. Does it have a title?

SL: No. Well, yes. That is the title—the whole thing.

JA: Is that comparable to your treatment and use of forms and objects too? I mean, that you apply them to represent a specific notion?

SL: It's certainly comparable at some level. Things are "handy." I might have an idea knocking around and I only have to see something else and suddenly I've got a bit more of the idea than I've had for a couple of years. It might be a case of getting a table: to an extent you take what you can find. You might

SARAH LUCAS, LAID IN JAPAN,
1991, photocopies, paper cuttings, collage,
88 x 56½ x 2" / Collage mit
Zeitungsausschnitten und Photokopien,
223,5 x 143,5 x 5 cm.

look around everywhere, but you don't have a lifetime to look for a perfect table. You have to accept something about it.

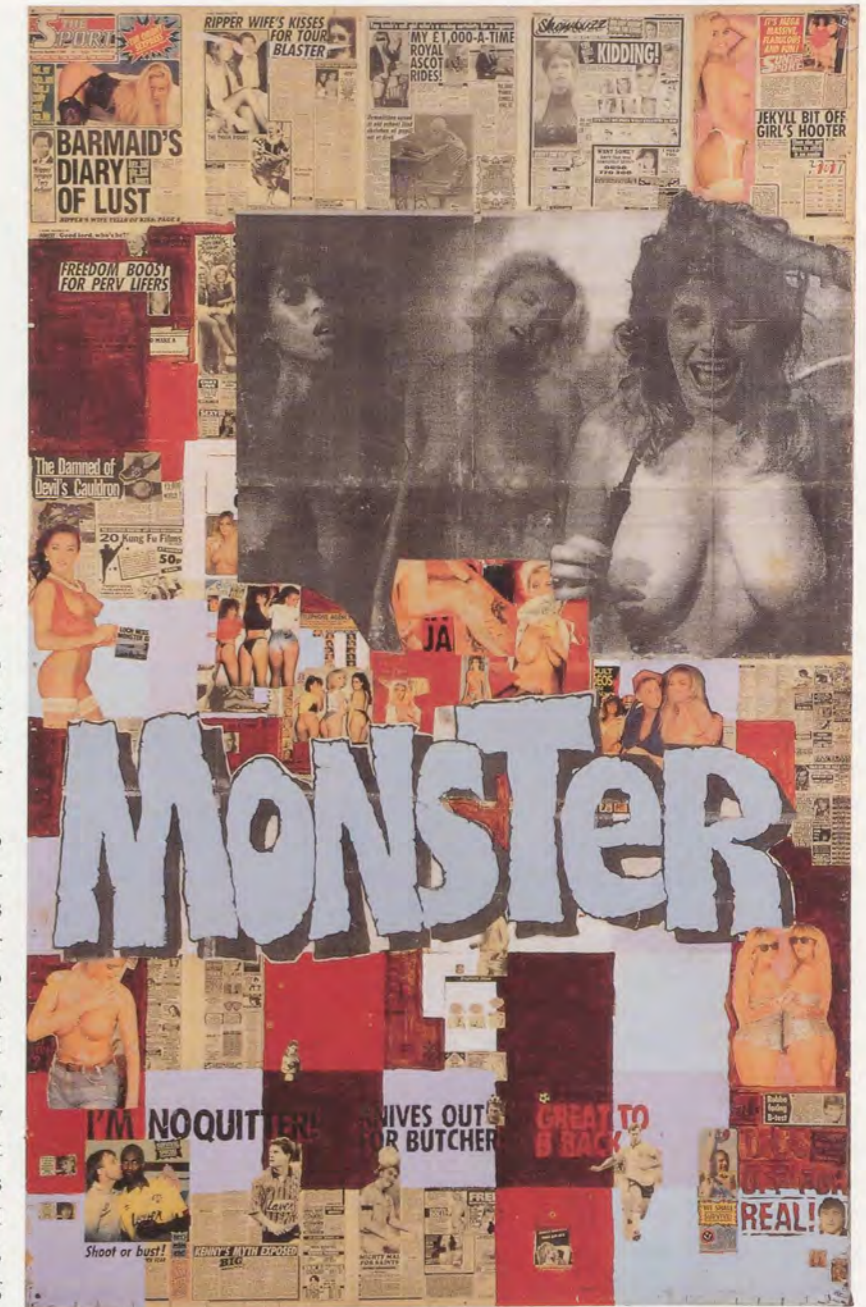
JA: In WHERE DOES IT ALL END? there is a notion of making work which is visually very direct and expressed very strongly. How important is that?

SL: I grew up around people who had no particular interest in modern art. Either they thought it was a con or somehow beyond their understanding. It is important to me that people can get into it on some level, even if they don't. But I also think my work is complex. People don't always think so. They get it on a certain level and don't look any further. You can't always win. Having said that, sometimes I think it looks pretty crude myself, so I can understand others having that reaction.

JA: Your invitation to a recent exhibition shows Sarah Lucas sitting on a heap of old furniture out on the street somewhere in east London...

SL: It's where I live, and it's also where I grew up.

JA: Did you choose the image to suggest that you feed on a sense of social difference and lower class culture?



SL: I chose it partly because I always think it's funny to see indoor furniture out on the street. But I am a local and that's a bonus for me. I enjoy the vernacular. But it's a bit of a red herring because most of the locals aren't really interested in art. So it's like doing the splits with no one watching.

Amsterdam, May 1995