

John Beagles

Make me wanna holler, throw up both my hands

I WANTED TO ENJOY Tracy Emin's performance on the Tate gallery after dinner 'round table chat', but I couldn't. Despite my satisfaction at Roger Scruton's inability to disguise his misogynist contempt for the worthless piece of seaside flotsam he took Tracy Emin to be, it was impossible to suppress the thought that she had been set up. Sure it was enjoyable to see the tedium of television's professionalism ripped apart, to marvel at the drunken pomposity of David Sylvester, but once Tracy Emin had staggered off, I couldn't help feeling her irritation, frustration and anger had been expected and engineered.

The ensuring media/art world frenzy over Emin's 'outrageous remarks and behavior' seemed indicative of an increasingly dominant attitude towards her. Rapidly she is being maneuvered into the role of official young British Art's bad girl. In much of the patronising discussion surrounding her personae (rarely her work), there is more than a whiff of her being labeled as representative of a new breed of noble savage/idiot savant. While a lot of what Tracy Emin said on the Tate gallery discussion and Will Self's Saturday night chit chat was drunken rubbish, some of her objections to the misrepresentations of British Art rang true. However as they were articulated illegitimately (i.e. they didn't observe the dominant protocols of art discussion) they were either passed over or blantly ignored!

Instead of considering why her remarks aren't deemed worthy of 'serious discussion' what becomes valuable and prized about Emin is her commitment to "getting everything out in the open" in her "naive, intense, raw, honest, direct, powerful, true stories"². As the noble savage from the exotic hinterland of Margate, Emin is attractive to those who find themselves simultaneously emotionally neutered, consumed with a voyeuristic appetite for a bit of 'rough' and harboring a romantic belief in the naturalness and truth of the "ordinary people". That her experiences as one of "the ordinary people"³, a not too atypically screwed up South coast misfit, who spent her formative years butting her head against the oppressive conservatism and misogyny of a seaside town the Germans forgot to bomb, is all well and good for a London art world plagued by guilt about its privileges and accusations of elitism⁴.

The roots of the privileging of Emin the artist, as solely a survivor, are multidimensional. As the embodiment of one kind of nineties female artist, her qualities of resilience and strength are highly valuable and important. By not giving a fuck about the petty, polite protocols of small minded Britain, the insipid machismo of the art world and particularly in setting up her own 'museum' she has, to use the talk show jargon, set a positive role model. Similarly her "rude aesthetic"⁵ detailing her experiences of abortion, sexual violence and her various relationships may have undoubtedly gone some way towards legitimising (again) areas of female experience previously stigmatised and marginalised.

However it's also possible to see the marketing and discussion of her as indicative of the return of an old spectre, albeit in new clothes.

The art world was very fond of its tortured, heroic male geniuses. Modernism's church was after all built with the supernova life-force of its worshipped deities. Struggling away in the garret, tortured by the likelihood of misunderstanding, such biographical details of male artists' victories provided the grist to the mill of the mythology of modernism. Artists had to be out of control, possibly slightly insane; insanity was a trademark, a byword for authenticity, originality and quality. A juicy life sold the monographs.

Then wave after wave of criticism landed on modernism; feminism exposed the phallocentrism (exposure is always the best method of ensuring deflation), post structuralism peeled back the myth of originality and the conceptualists blew apart the lazy easy going role of language in relation to art. Even the attempt in the 1980s to claw back some of modernism's lost power, under the guise of the neo-expressionists' oh so ironic and clever strategy of —'we make big paintings, with big brushes, but we don't really mean it. Please make the cheque payable to...'—failed. Even Saatchi had trouble selling their stuff!

Much of the discussion about Tracy Emin highlights that for many she represents the return of the kind of classic modernist artist neo-expressionism had tried to resurrect. It is perverse that this incarnation of the artist as an "uncreated creator"⁶, a primitive expressionist bestowed with a unique, special gift operating in a sacred, separate space is exactly the kind the conceptualists and feminists thought they had seen off. Except of course, this is the twist, the point. This time the artist in question comes with the added bonus of being a guilt free incarnation everyone can enjoy. After all she's a woman. How could any of those old critiques of originality, authenticity etc. apply to her?

However a quick glance at some of her most prominent coverage highlights that for many she represents exactly this kind of artist. Ranging from David Barrett's universalising: "We are swept into acceptance by the sheer force of the personality", to his revealing remark "it's not always what she says, but how she says it that is so powerful"⁷ and onwards to Stuart Morgan's impersonation of Claire Rayner "the first time you had sex, was it against your

will [lurve]"⁸ it's impossible to escape the feeling that we are again in the presence of the "charismatic power of the creator"⁹.

Such a collapsing of the distinction between the artist and the work has powerful and worrying precedents. The monolithic power Picasso wielded via the fusion of his personality and art was so potent it was frequently impossible to get any critical perspective on his work. Likewise I can't help but remember the tyranny of much 'critical postmodernist' work. Frequently the work was so private in its mapping of the symbolic and real violence handed out to those perceived as existing on the margins, that any attempt to critique it was seen as a personal attack. The free fall into all out subjectivity that resulted nullified discussion, created a climate of intimidation and ultimately lead to the stagnation of the work.

Now Tracy may not give a fuck, and she may gen-

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(continued)

uinely be telling the truth (whatever that means) but investing in her personal biography as the best route to understanding is and always has been only a partial truth in the casual construction of a piece of work (it doesn't matter if she doesn't think of it as art, it's still exposed to the same myriad of influences). For example whether she's conscious of it or not, the role of the art world is impossible to shake. It doesn't really matter if no one tells her not to make a text piece detailing an abusive encounter with Jay Jopling, the inference will hover in the air, subtle intonations towards making the drawings will float her way.

The truth of Emin's narratives, their authenticity does not just explode supernova like from within; such a perception of the sovereign autonomy of the self smothered any of the conflicts, paradoxes and pressures that she finds herself in, making the kind of work she does, in a particular artistic, cultural and social space.

Such an obsession with the utterances of the artist is also deeply problematic. Are only those artists who give good copy, worthy of attention?

While not wishing to position artists as mute bystanders, inarticulate grunts who simply produce, there does seem to be a need for mediation between their ideas about their work and writers, curators and the public's responses. Reading a book about Martin Scorsese recently I couldn't get past the point that my perception of Taxi Driver and his, are completely at loggerheads with each other. I don't see the film he thinks he made. But that doesn't invalidate the work or our mutually incommensurable opinions.

While the "in yer face" persona of Tracy Emin represents for many the good old fashioned, straight up and down, uncomplicated pleasures of expressionist fervor, she also has become the embodiment of a new culture of meritocracy, increasingly obsessed with the cult of survivors.

Natural fact is I can't pay my taxes

Tracy is a top class survivor, who as David Barrett says is "a great story" because while "Andy [Warhol] never recovered from his wounds, Tracy just gets stronger". The popular hook of her work is that by sharing in her experiences via her cathartic outpourings of pain and suffering, we too become spiritually, socially and emotionally liberated. Emancipation through empathy. Tracy becomes a kind of Ricki Lake guest for those who would never admit to watching TV.

Now pulling yer socks up, getting on yer bike, doing it your way etc. have always been popular old chestnuts in Britain. Rallying together woz wot saw us threw the war, weren't it? Mmm. For the salt of the earth, the tarts with hearts and the all singing all dancing miner's daughter, pulling yourself together and taking whatever life threw at yer, was the best way of up and out. However in them days the possibility of embarking on this route was at least mediated somewhat by the simultaneous belief in a welfare state and some level of support for those deemed at the bottom of the pile.

Then came Thatcher, who in the space of a couple of years instigated the germs of a new meritocracy, which in its brutal push to absolute self reliance did away with such "nursing". Mortally wounding the traditional aristocracy, its previously unchallenged power of natural and hereditary rights, Thatcher spawned a generation stamped with the ethos of competitive go getting (at any costs) who were free to plunder a massively deregulated and inflated private sector. Later Nick Leeson revealed himself as her devil child; "the gentleman banker destroyed by the crudest of yuppies, subverting old class with new money"¹⁰. Leeson learnt fast and didn't stop in his hunger to make "shagloads of cash"¹¹.

If Leeson is one side of the legacy of Thatcherism then the concentration and obsession with only those who display the credentials of being survivors, of batlers, is the other. In making a fetish of Tracy Emin as an ex-victim, there is the real danger of forgetting and punishing the failure of those unable to pull themselves together, for whom "the natural fact is they can't pay their taxes"¹². To paraphrase Spock: the success of the one outweighs the misery of the many. Models of hope and resilience are one thing, but a hierarchy of suffering, with only those who have really been through it being valued, is something else entirely. That this attitude is not unique to life under Thatcher is glaringly obvious, when Blair's bubble bath version of self reliance and moral responsibility is looked at. Under New Labour there persists the notion that the marker of a healthy society is one which provides ladders of opportunity for minorities to climb. But as Andrew Adonis and Stephen Pollard remark "the capability of individuals to climb the ladder at all depends on them not being more than a ladder length from their destination"¹³.

I really feel I'm in mortal danger of coming over all Elton John and Candle in the Wind about Tracy Emin. Seeing her pissed on TV, being patronised and condescended to, I found it hard to shake the memory of so many wild child's who've been before. Only allowed to be one thing, defined by a caricature of themselves set up by others to satisfy their own needs, there are a limited number of moves they are permitted to make.

Lets face it once she's exhausted her biography of all its really succulent cuts, once she finds that the next batch of biography to be ploughed involves her relationship with Maureen Paley, getting

pissed on TV etc. then just how wonderful will her anecdotes, her painful narratives, appear. *What will she have survived then? What will she be emancipating herself from then?*

Critics, curators and many artists like to perpetuate the notion that the art world is a special space freed from the vicissitudes of the everyday, that it's a clean place, empty of the abuses of power that ravage life outside. Enlightened, leading a moral vanguard, artists, critics and curators are above racial and sexual discrimination, sexual violence, class snobbery etc. Unfortunately the way Tracy Emin finds herself being represented highlight that such behaviour is not the preserve of others.

"The class which has dominated Cambridge is given to describing itself as well mannered, polite, sensitive. It continually contrasts itself favourably with the rougher and coarser others. When it turns to the arts, it congratulates itself, overtly, on its taste and its sensibility; speaks of its pose and tone. If I then say that what I found was an extraordinary, coarse, pushing, name ridden group, I shall be told that I am showing class feeling, class envy, class resentment. That I showed class feeling is not in any doubt. All I would insist on is that nobody fortunate enough to grow up in a good home, in a genuinely well mannered and sensitive community, could for a moment envy these loud, competitive and deprived people. All I did not know then was how cold that class is. That came with experience."¹⁴

notes

- I know it could be argued her drunkenness insured she wasn't taken seriously, but I think it's worth asking what was it about both situations which prompted her to getting pissed. As Pierre Bourdieu remarks in his essay "The Linguistic Market" (Sociology in Question pub. Sage), the truth of plain talking is that, "when it is confronted with an official market, it breaks down".
- All adjectives come from David Barret's review of Tracy Emin's one person show at the South London Art gallery in May 1997, in the May edition of Art Monthly.
- The lumpen catchphrase, much used by the BBC's Jenny Bond and ITV's John Suchet in the aftermath of Diana Spencer's death, which has propelled them to the top of the hit list.
- Gillian Wearing got rewarded for providing some defence against such accusations of elitism with her pseudo documentaries. However Gillian Wearing has always been smart enough to jump camps when it suits. In one interview she's speaking the language of an old fashioned documentary filmmaker, one who believes the camera is a benign presence which objectively records the thoughts emotions of its subjects, the next, well it's all just a big con, they're actors playing a part and I wrote the text on the signs.
- Paula Smithard "There's a tenuous line between sincerity and sensationalism" Make June/ July 1997.
- This is Pierre Bourdieu's phrase from the essay "But Who Created the 'Creators'?" in Sociology in Question pub. Sage.
- David Barret review of Tracy Emin's one person show South London Art Gallery in the June edition of Art Monthly.
- Stuart Morgan's interview with Tracy Emin in Frieze makes entertaining reading. It's hard to imagine anyone else being asked the question "in your work you talk about anal sex a lot, does it have to be pictured so violently?". Perhaps of course that is the point; Tracy is unique and therefore deserves such treatment.
- Pierre Bourdieu "Who created the creators?" in *Sociology in Question* published Sage.
- A Class Act—The Myth of Britain's Classless Society* Andrew Adonis and Stephen Pollard
- Ibid. Pag 45
- Marvin Gaye *Inner City Blues* from the album *Whats Going On*. In many ways the fetish made of Tracy Emin's suffering, and the incumbent problems, isn't a million miles away from that afforded to many singers/ songwriters, artists such as Marvin Gaye and Bob Dylan.
- Ibid. page 15.
- A Class Act—The Myth of Britain's Classless Society* Andrew Adonis and Stephen Pollard