

'What you see is what I am'

TRACEY EMIN'S SELF-PORTRAITURE¹

Maura Reilly

While most artists these days wear their Derrida in their jacket pockets, I wear my art on my sleeve.

Tracey Emin, 1994²

FOR TRACEY EMIN, LIFE AND ART ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED. Childhood rape, pregnancies, abortions, depression, alcoholism, sex – these are her beloved autobiographical subjects to which she has obsessively returned since the early 1990s. Employing a broad range of media – embroidery, appliqué, neon, painting, installation, film, photography, printmaking, assemblage and writing – the artist produces disarmingly frank image-text works that utilise an autobiographical first-person narration combined with misspelled and awkward stream-of-consciousness phrasings, all of which results in a sense of unedited immediacy and 'authenticity'.

It was her seminal tent installation, *Everyone I have ever slept with 1963–1995*, 1995, in which she appliquéd the names of every person with whom she had ever shared a bed, platonically or otherwise (her Nan, boyfriends, her twin in the womb, for instance), followed a few years later by *My bed*, 1998, a readymade re-presentation of the artist's filthy semen-stained bed, that solidified her career on the contemporary art scene, labelling her the enfant terrible of the Young British Artists, or YBAs. Like these other self-styled 'sensationalists' (Damien Hirst, Marc Quinn and Chris Ofili, among others), Emin has pushed the limits of decorum and propriety by confessing her life's grittiest details in a direct and often graphically sexual manner. Where her YBA comrades have used highly unconventional materials to dismantle and extend the definition of art (such as elephant dung, frozen blood, sharks in formaldehyde), Emin's practice consistently 'talks back', revelling in histrionics and using her tragic life events as content to speak to audiences worldwide.

Emin's early works from the mid-1990s are shockingly candid portrayals of her childhood in Margate, the seaside town east of London. 'My Major Retrospective, 1963–93', Emin's first exhibition

at London's White Cube, is a case in point. It comprised more than a hundred objects that the artist had collected over the years in what for her constituted a continuing act of 'obsessive assemblage'.³ The ephemera included childhood toys and memorabilia, along with paintings, drawings and miniaturised photographic representations of works she had destroyed after experiencing what she has called an 'emotional suicide' in 1990.⁴ Text played an integral role in the show and provided the crux for Emin's storytelling. She laid herself bare to the viewer through letters to relatives and ex-boyfriends, journals that told of early sexual encounters and past traumas, including rape, and a newspaper clipping recording the death in a car crash of a favourite uncle. Rapidly executed line drawings revealed an admiration for Egon Schiele and Edvard Munch, and a patchwork quilt made from childhood linens featured the names of family members written alongside tender messages.

Emin's early prose-novel, *Exploration of the Soul* (1994), which details her childhood from conception to her rape at age thirteen, is another example of the artist's frank self-representation. A 1994 series of monoprints called 'Family Suite' illustrates these tales in child-like smudgy scrawls, including a haunting self-portrait at age ten, pornographic scenes of sex with older men, and images of her parents and twin brother Paul; while in another series of drawings, 'Margate Suite' (1995–97), works such as *Fucking down the alley* and *Sex in the back of his van* explore what she has called her 'shagging years', from ages thirteen to fifteen. From this series, *Harder*, 1995, is one of Emin's favourite drawings, with text that reads 'harder and better than all you fucking bastards':

What I find interesting about it is the memory of myself as a girl, yet I have drawn the body of a full-grown woman. Sometimes as a teenager, after I had sex, I felt very unloved and used. Often the men I slept with would taunt me, sometimes about my body. This is what provoked me into making this drawing.⁵



Adolescent dramas are also explored in early films that utilise first-person voice-overs and home-style video techniques. In one of her more famous, *Why I never became a dancer*, 1995, Emin tells us how a group of teenage boys (with whom she'd slept) verbally abused her during a disco dance competition by shouting 'slag, slag, slag'. *Tracey Emin c.v.: cunt vernacular*, 1997, takes us through Emin's student years, boyfriends, abortions and the self-destruction of her early work. *Top spot*, 2005, a feature film, draws heavily on her teenage experiences as well, and includes a controversial scene in which a teenage girl (a stand-in for Emin) commits suicide.

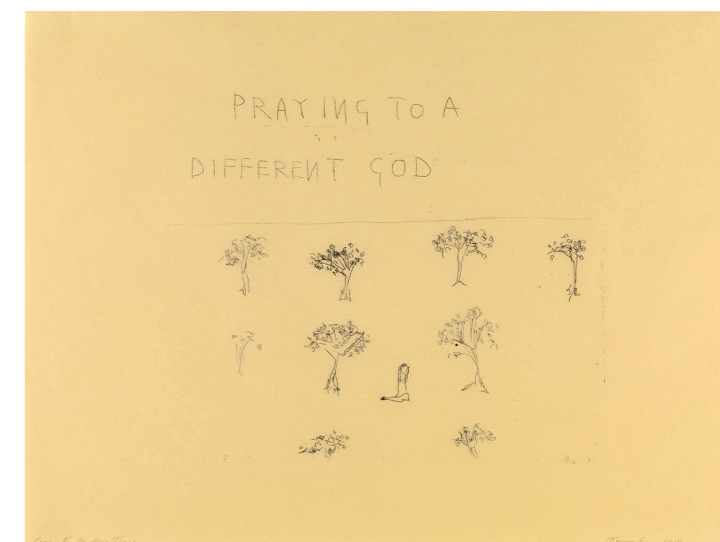
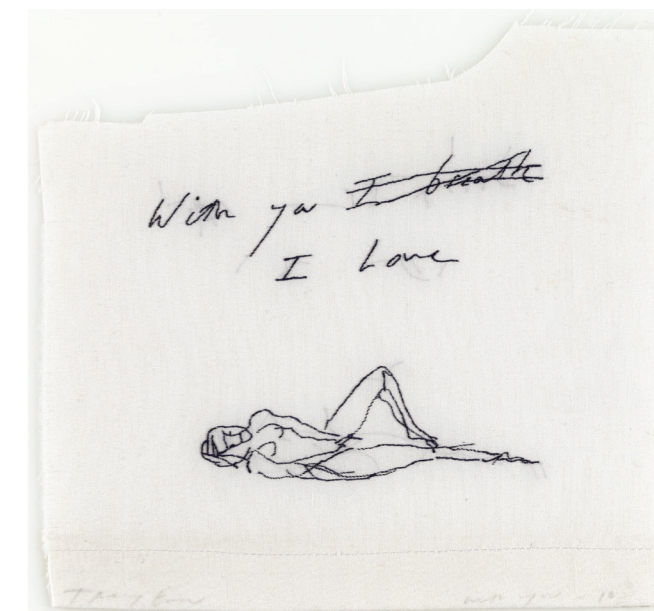
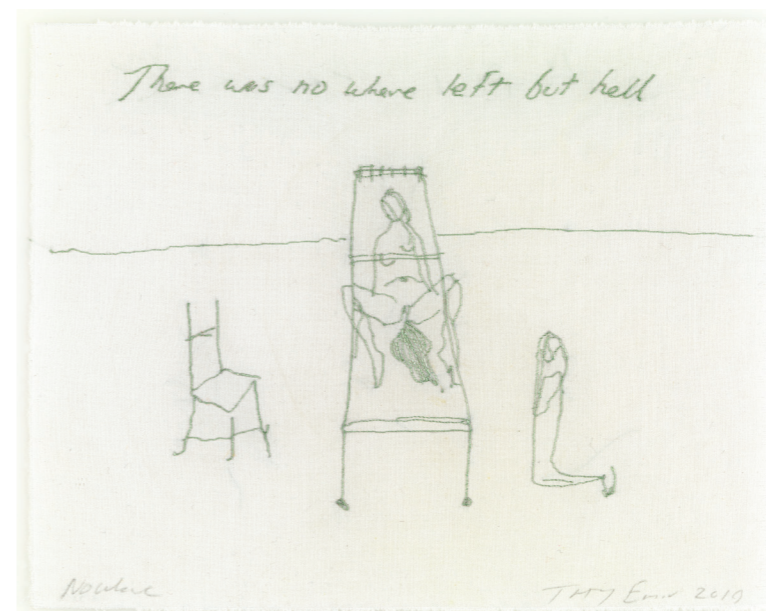
Indeed, the many self-portraits and autobiographical works in which the artist presents herself as an adolescent are the hardest to stomach, revealing as they do her history of molestation, rape, promiscuity and continual feelings of humiliation. In a 1994 series of monoprints titled 'Illustrations from Memory', Emin depicts herself as a pre-teen in shockingly sexual scenarios: in *Night mare* she is 'mounted' by a horse whose large penis enters her mouth; in *Hairy big penis*, she is a child, standing in knickers, who gazes upon a large hairy penis that dwarfs her in size. In another, *Scorfegea*, 1997, from the 'Margate' series, she depicts herself as 'a child of ten' in the act of having sex, while in *Big dick small girl*, 1994, from the 'Family Suite' series, a gigantic penis is touched gingerly by a tiny girl-child.

The subject of abortion and motherhood is a recurring one. Several of Emin's films, including *Homage to Edvard Munch and all my dead children*, 1998, and *Conversation with my Mum*, 2000, deal frankly with lost motherhood, as do a series of ink drawings from 1995 titled 'Abortion: How It Feels'. An early assemblage work, *My abortion*, from 1993, comprises a vial of blood-soaked tissue, some pills and a hospital wristband. In other, more graphic works, including the misspelled *Terrebly wrong*, 1997, and *Nowhere*, 2010, the artist bleeds profusely from

the womb (which reminds one instantly of Frida Kahlo's many depictions of herself during a miscarriage).

And yet, notwithstanding her harrowing personal history, the litany of abuses she has suffered, and her often scatological and sexual subject matter, Emin has a charming way with language, marrying romantic and at times humorous handwritten phrases with delicate embroidery on fabric, in soft neon, or onto the tenuous celluloid surface of home-style movies. *Reincarnation*, a 16-mm film from 2005, portrays a German shepherd on the beach, waves rolling, with overlaid text: 'To know your smile / The touch of your skin / I love your smile / I love you inside of me /... I never stopped loving you.' *A cunt is a rose is a cunt*, 2000, *You forgot to kiss my soul*, 2001, and *Is anal sex legal?*, 1998, are just a few other examples. It is this contradiction between fragility of form and over-the-top explicit content that Emin seeks and masters. She is especially successful when her rapacious rant-and-rave combines with one of the most treasured of feminist art icons, the handmade quilt. In 1999 Emin produced a blanket with the misspelled words 'Pysco Slut' in bold black lettering, in which she replaced the flowery phrases found in ladies' heirloom handiwork with anguished ones: 'I didn't know I had to ask to share your life'; 'You see I'm one of the best'; 'You know how much I love you'.

Emin's self-portraits in embroidery, appliqué, neon, paint or on paper are most often sexually graphic, with scrawled texts that could have been lifted from porn magazines, the explicit poetry of Anaïs Nin or from the lyrics of 'bad girl' recording and performance artists such as Karen Finley, Marianne Faithfull, Peaches and Madonna. The 1997 monoprint *All I wanted was your spunk dry on my face* and the 1998 neon *My cunt is wet with fear* are prime examples. Many of them are depictions of pornographic acts in which the artist is shown performing 'missionary style' sex, oral sex, sex with dogs and anal sex: *No you were a dog but thing is I was less*, 2009; *Having sex while he watched*, 1995; *If I had to*

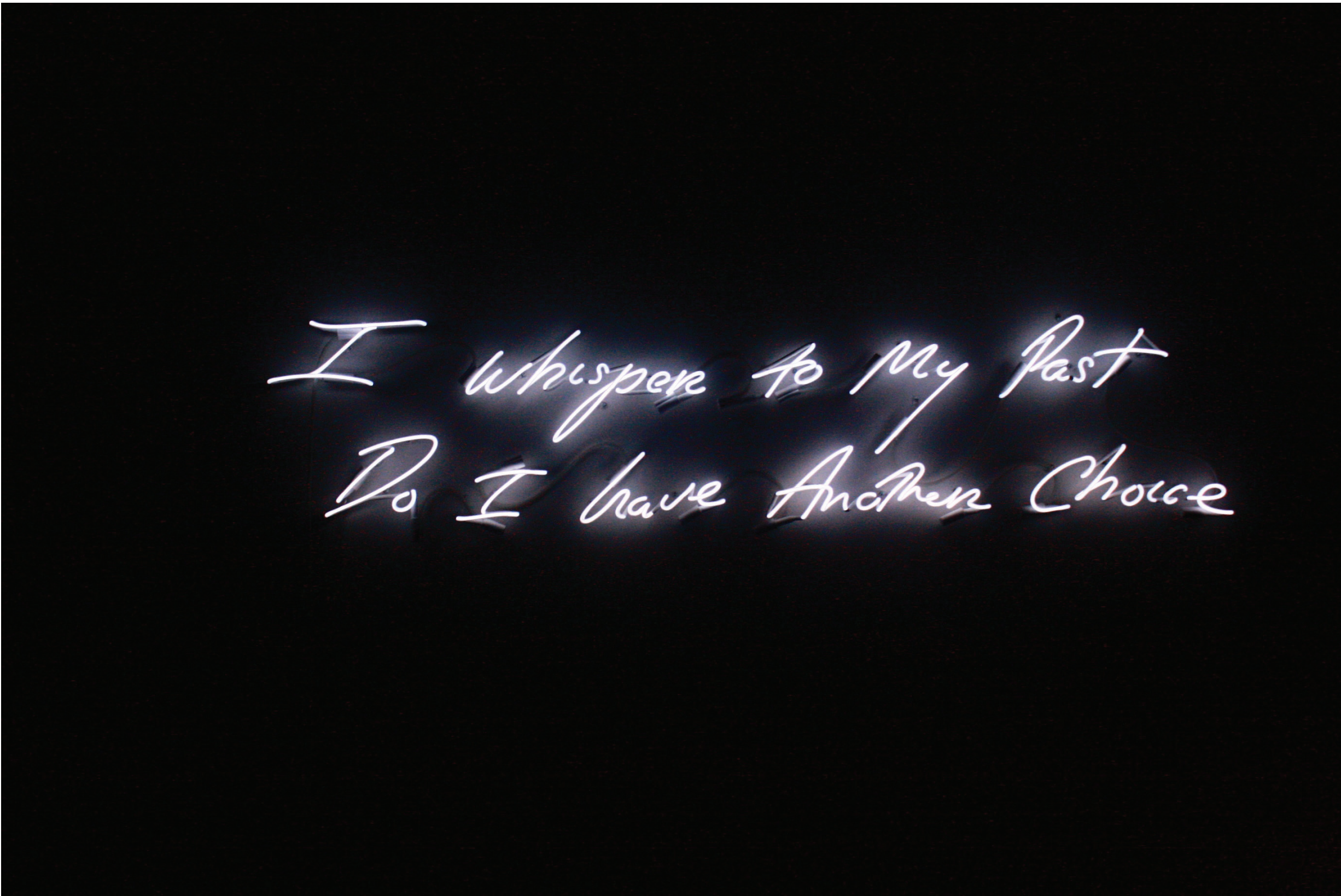


be honest I'd rather not be painting, 1996.

'Cunt shots' are prevalent. In these, the artist represents herself reclining naked with legs open, often masturbating. Emin is most renowned for these rapidly sketched images which have become her 'signature' – for instance, *No more mirror*, 2009, *I didn't do anything wrong*, 1998, *Masturbating in the bath, from memory*, 2005 – all of which demonstrate the longstanding influence of Schiele, whose *Woman masturbating*, 1912, was highly influential on Emin's work from the age of fourteen.⁶

These works, and others like them with the explicit erotic content, are among her most memorable. With them, the artist has turned the age-old paradigm of woman as silent, passive object on its head, replacing it with that of an active female subject who is the possessor of her own sexuality. By usurping the role of the 'woman on top', she thumbs her nose at sexist art-historical and popular images that objectify women – most spectacularly Courbet's *The origin of the world*, 1866. Like her feminist foremothers and equally irreverent contemporaries – Hannah Wilke, Valie Export, Carolee Schneemann, Ghada Amer – she celebrates sexuality without shame and reclaims her body for herself. Emin's 2009 animation *Those who suffer love* is perhaps her most powerfully transgressive work in this vein. In it we watch a woman masturbating energetically in 'real time' as dozens of rapidly rendered drawings morph into a narrative based on a series of vintage photographs Emin found at a flea market. As testimony to the work's already iconic status, a recent review enthusiastically declared that: 'no museum exhibition about feminist art, art about the body or sexual identity in art will be complete without this work.'⁷

However, not all critics have been as generous. During the course of Emin's twenty-year career she has taken quite a battering. The anti-Emin brigade, which is (unsurprisingly) led by conservative middle-aged men, have continually hurled insults at



I whisper to my past
Do I have another choice

the artist, calling her ‘loutish’, ‘inarticulate’, ‘boring’, ‘vacuous’, ‘talentless’, ‘solipsistic’, ‘self-indulgent’, ‘narcissistically self-absorbed’.⁸ Clearly many of these responses speak of a disdain for the emotional in favour of the intellectual, and contempt for frank representations of ‘real life’ over more abstract or theory-based work. Such responses also speak volumes about a scornful disregard for powerful women – or ‘women on top’ – who are considered threatening, as well as for ‘bad girls’ who dare to speak uproariously. In other words, there is an inherently sexist component embedded in much of the anti-Emin criticism, as Jeanette Winterson has pointed out:

*It is assumed that women deal in the personal, the confessional, the small, the intimate, and that larger and loftier concerns still belong to male ambition. Women are judged by different rules ... Antony Gormley is taken seriously when he talks about the body, in particular, his own body, as the centre of everything. When Tracey does it, it is often reinterpreted as publicity-seeking display, or self-obsession.*⁹

The artist insists that her use of her own biography is more about a desire to share than it is about narcissism. The purpose of her work, Emin admits, is to show others what she has experienced and it is this confrontation that can be both ‘uncomfortable and exhilarating’ for the spectator.¹⁰ By forcing viewers to face her traumas and sexual escapades, Emin places them into the position of voyeur, confidante or witness – positions that some critics do not like to occupy.

Ironically, it is precisely the personal and confrontational nature of the work that is most appealing to Emin’s fans. It is her stories of small-town life and her candid way of conveying its pleasures and pains that speak to many of us. We relate to the vulnerability on display; we empathise with her pain. And why

not? ‘There are millions of people with unmade beds and obsessive notebooks filled with sketches and jottings’, Winterson noted.¹¹ These are the people who flock to her openings by the thousands, who have read her weekly column for the British newspaper *The Independent*, and who enjoy the nitty-gritty details of her private life that are almost daily published in gossip columns and tabloids.

Emin’s success and broad appeal are linked to a certain socio-cultural element as well. We now live in an age of confession in which the boundary between private and public has collapsed: people share their most private, spontaneous thoughts on Facebook and Twitter; families publish home videos on YouTube; and first-person narrative blogs, which now number in the millions, are filled with mostly inane tales, ranging from travelogues to favourite recipes; while others ‘perform’ for webcams in situations that are more often than not meant to be private, but are then broadcast globally and in ‘real time’. As a culture, we feed on private lives splayed open for all to see. This is perhaps no more evident than in the phenomenon of reality TV and talk shows in which individuals relentlessly disclose their most intimate mundane thoughts to eager viewers. They publicly humiliate themselves before live audiences, confessing to sins or those committed against them; they live together on desert islands like dysfunctional teens; they disclose tales of abuse, overeating, alcoholism, the intimacies of everyday life.

This is the climate of reception for Emin’s work, and her art is perfectly suited for it. She tells stories about an abused and sex-crazed girl named Tracey, who ultimately finds herself in art, taking the ‘talking cure’ before live audiences or in luridly confessional videos. While she admits that these continual disclosures have made her feel that ‘I’ve raped myself’, for Emin this process also has had cathartic benefits.¹² Now older and wiser, she believes that there has been a recent shift in her work. After a career in making herself the centre of every picture, she is now concentrating on putting the figure into the ‘landscape of the dream, so I’m not

important, but rather the whole thing is important’.¹³ In *The whole room moved*, *It was all outside* and *Crying for the olive trees* (all 2010), Emin has portrayed herself as a tiny figure in a plaintive pose amid a much larger landscape. Yet while she may no longer be the centre of each image, she nonetheless continues to explore autobiographical subjects, such as her father’s olive garden, kissing a frog who will become her handsome prince, motherhood, dreams, airplanes as romantic symbols, and birds as ‘angels of this earth’. In others, the tiny figure is dwarfed by the images’ textual component or she is absent altogether, as in the 2010 text piece *With you I breathe*.

While erotic images are still prevalent (for instance, *With you*, 2010, shows the artist masturbating), they are far less so, which begs the question: Is Emin no longer screaming at her past but rather ‘whispering’ to it (as she asserts in the 2010 neon, *I whisper to my past, do I have another choice*)? Has she really come full circle, returning to some of the less painful imagery of the mid-1990s, in which she dealt with more mundane subjects such as her relationship with her beloved Nan, father and brother? Will she no longer refer to herself as ‘a fucked, crazy, anorexic-alcoholic-childless woman’, as she did in *Strangeland*?¹⁴ If the artist’s recent statements are true – ‘I’m more content just to go to bed, read a book and feel cosy ... I’m really quite boring now. The convent beckons.’ – then perhaps this new shift in content will persist after all.¹⁵ And, since Emin’s recent figures have started to live in the ‘real world’, perhaps that means that maybe she has too.¹⁶



- 1 Tracey Emin in a 1997 interview published in Neal Brown, *Tracey Emin*, Tate Publishing, London, 2006.
- 2 Emin as quoted in the press release for her 1994 exhibition at London’s White Cube, ‘My Major Retrospective, 1963–93’.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Emin, ‘Ghosts of my past’, *The Guardian*, 25 May 2009.
- 6 In *If I have to be honest, I’d rather not be painting*, Emin pays homage to Schiele quite directly, producing an erotic drawing reminiscent of his signature sinewy frenetic lines,

- and accompanied by a text that reads: ‘I fell in love with you and your drawings when I was fourteen and you know, I still do love the way you draw.’
- 7 Ben Lewis, ‘Tracey Emin’s really done it this time’, *Evening Standard*, 28 May 2009.
- 8 See, for instance, Brian Sewell’s 2000 review of the Saatchi Gallery’s ‘Ant Noises’ in the *Evening Standard*, Michael Glover’s review in *The Independent* of Emin’s 2001 exhibition at White Cube, and Adrian Searle in *The Guardian*.
- 9 Jeanette Winterson, ‘Like her art, Tracey Emin’s book turns the personal into the public’, *The Times*, 22 October 2005, p. 3.
- 10 Jennifer Doyle, ‘The effect of intimacy: Tracey Emin’s bad-sex aesthetics’, in Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (eds), *The Art of Tracey Emin*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2002, p. 117.
- 11 Winterson, *op cit.*
- 12 Emin as quoted in a 2006 televised interview with BBC4, ‘Tracey Emin talks to Kirsty Wark’.
- 13 Emin as quoted in Rosalie Higson, ‘Tracey Emin at ease under brighter southern skies’, *The Australian*, 5 November 2010.
- 14 Emin, *Strangeland*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2005, p. 3.
- 15 Emin as quoted in an interview with the author, 30 November 2010.
- 16 Emin as quoted in the image catalogue for an exhibition at LoveArt in Sydney, ‘Praying to a Different God’, 5 November 2010 – 31 March 2011.

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Me at 10 from the ‘Family Suite’, 1994
 Monoprint, 11.6 x 10.8 cm
 Courtesy the artist and White Cube, London
 © The artist. Licensed by VISCOPY
 Photograph Gareth Winters

page 517, clockwise from top left
Nowhere, 2010
 Embroidered cotton, 18.6 x 23 cm
 Courtesy the artist and LoveArt, Sydney

With you, 2010
 Embroidered cotton, 22 x 22.7 cm
 Courtesy the artist and LoveArt, Sydney

Crying for the olive trees, 2010
 Monoprint on paper, 49 x 65 cm
 Courtesy the artist and LoveArt, Sydney

The whole room moved, 2010
 Monoprint on paper, 49 x 65 cm
 Courtesy the artist and LoveArt, Sydney

pages 518–9
I whisper to my past, do I have another choice, 2010
 Warm white neon, 47.5 x 183.6 cm
 Courtesy the artist and LoveArt, Sydney