

Making A Show Of Herself: Tracey Emin at Modern Art Oxford

Julian Stallabrass



Tracey Emin's final words in a surprisingly gentle radio interview with John Humphreys took the form of a statement yet somehow sounded like a plea: 'I'm genuine'. It is on our judgement of the truth of those words that so much of her art rests. If she is believed, as she is by so many fans whose relationship to her is passionate and adoring (and very far from the cool appreciation of most contemporary art-goers), then Emin courageously displays female, but also more generally human, desires, emotions and weaknesses directly and passionately. Her drawing may be crude, and her language cruder, but this is because they carry the marks of authenticity, being explosive expressions of pain. If her work is viewed sceptically, Emin mines and perhaps even invents a traumatic past, creating a persona whose predilections, particularly her obsession with sex, play well in the media, and out of which she is able to generate large numbers of prettily saleable works, each stamped with the 'Tracey' brand (in the majority of cases, this being an image of her crotch).

In her works, including the infamous tent on the inside of which she had sewn the names of everyone she had ever slept with, and in the equally controversial unmade bed shown in her Turner Prize exhibition, Emin presents herself as a young woman haunted by past traumas—rape, abortion and bereavement—that continually erupt into the present, driving her to excess and self-abuse, and making of her once again a scared and lonely adolescent who pours out her emotions in writing and drawing. There were always complications to this narrative, not least because the resulting works are exhibited to her wide public but are designed to sell to a very different set. What these people made of the work—a familiar use of clichés about the underclass consumed as entertainment, and a comforting assurance by contrast of their own social position—was altogether less savoury.

Nevertheless, even the sympathetic and straightforward reading of Emin's work has appeared less plausible lately. The most striking aspect of her show at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford is how busy the artist and her assistants have been in making new commodities that recycle elements of the brand. Emblems from the monoprints end up sewn into blankets or even—though Emin has long assured her public that she can't paint—

in acrylic on canvas. Words rendered in neon revamp old themes. There are even surprising forays into sculpture and installation.

Aside from the suspicion that this constant repetition may be due more to the demands of commerce than the operation of trauma, another difficulty is the conflict between the artist's brand and persona. It is difficult and hazardous to rebrand the Tracey image, the girl in pain, which marks each work. Yet, for those who believe that they gain access to Emin through her work, it is increasingly hard to believe that she is still what she once seemed to be. The dissonance was there in one of her TV appearances for Matthew Collings in which she floated on a lilo in a beautiful indoor swimming pool, tanned, healthy and beautiful herself, assuring her viewers through that crooked smile that she was still really fucked up. It is there, too, in another plea, the title to the neon works shown at Oxford: 'Negative Neon: Doesn't matter how good life gets, some things never change.' Emin is now older, much wealthier, a model for Vivienne Westwood, and living a life far removed from those of her fans: if her art is really a reflection of her life, some growth and change should be expected. There is indeed one striking work, *I've Got It All*, a photograph in which Emin is seen either stuffing money into her crotch or attempting to staunch the flow, which does comment on her new condition, and on her use of sexual confession to earn cash. It is weakly recycled in a blanket work, *Something's Wrong*, shown at Oxford using coins sewn to the fabric, but otherwise has not been pursued.

Staying still is almost as hazardous as rebranding, however, for the value of Emin's work in the art market feeds off her notoriety in the media, and while the appetite for celebrity and confession remains unabated, the publicity machine consumes most of its fodder rapidly.

That Emin realises this herself is indicated by her involvement in a project she would once have run a mile from—a book of academic essays devoted to her work. Now this is a lofty form of promotional literature, and the editors themselves note that Emin's participation will boost her current status and her chances of gaining a place in art history. It is based upon a proposition that has a whiff of desperation about it, that behind Emin's apparent directness, expressionism and media manipulation is secreted a sophisticated meditation on all these things, and on the place of art in the media and the market. If the claim has any plausibility, it is because any successful intervention in the mass media—an advertisement, for instance—must implicitly carry with it some such thinking. It is quite another matter, though, to use this truism as a licence to apply the full apparatus of aesthetic theory, media theory and psychobabble to Emin's oeuvre, as some of the contributors do to inadvertently humorous effect, as if all this were inherent to the work itself. One essayist, Lorna Healey, does focus on the obvious, how Emin's work inspires devotion, perceptively arguing that much of the controversy that surrounds her work is produced by it being seen within an art world frame: if only Emin could escape art, and fly fully into the world of the mass media—making films, for instance, not as limited edition, highly priced collectors' items but for TV. It is an appealing thought but, of course, the umbilical cord of gold holds her right where she is, a trapped and fading star.

Tracey Emin: This is Another Place, at MOMA, Oxford until 19 January 2003.

Mandy Merck/ Chris Townsend, eds., *The Art of Tracey Emin*, Thames and Hudson, London 2002.

