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Four Portraits of Sarah Lucas as an Artist

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Four Self Portraits by Sarah Lucas: A discussion

I would like to introduce this discussion of some self-portraits by Sarah Lucas with an image (SLIDE) I first saw in 1994 in the June/July/ August issue of the international art magazine *Frieze*. That is to say not in the form it is now best known (SLIDE) as one of the series of twelve self-portrait photographs resized and digitally printed on quality heavyweight paper in 1999, titled *Self-Portraits 1990-1998*, but rather as an advertisement in *Frieze* (SLIDE) for an exhibition of the artist's work at White Cube in London in July and August of 1994.

The same issue of Frieze carried an interview with Sarah Lucas by Carl Feedman, titled ‘a nod’s as good as a wink’, which offers an early and quite complex account of the place of the self-portraiture in Lucas's work. Friedman ask the question:

C F  Is there a difference between the Sarah Lucas represented in the work and the Sarah Lucas who makes the work? Is it a pose?

To which Lucas answers:

S L  They’re not autobiographical really. They're things that are played upon me, which I turn around and send out again. Once you make an object then it has its own life. You could think that the person in the self-portraits is who I really am, but I don't think they are really like me. They are less like me that the sculpture. I don’t stand around the whole time with my hand on my chin looking tough and surly. So I don't think it’s a pose. Well it is a pose but it’s the kind of pose that I can actually make. So in that sense they are sincere as well. And I use myself in pictures because I’m a good candidate for what I’m after, and also it does seem to add something to it because it's me.
Are you creating an idealised image of yourself, how you’d really like to be?

It is a positive view of myself, and in that way it does become another kind of fiction.

There are a couple of important things to take up in this exchange. The first is that Lucas regards the self portrait photograph as material amongst other materials, like concrete, plaster, foodstuff to be worked with in making art: She compares them with the sculptures, which, she says are more like her than the photographic self portraits but, like the sculptures, they ‘have their own life’ including the quality central to Lucas’s practice as a whole, a ‘sense of truth to materials’ That she understands the ‘truth’ of self-portraiture - its fundamental ambiguity – is apparent when in the interview she tells Friedman ‘You could think that the person in the self-portraits is who I really am, but I don’t think they are really like me’, and again when in answer to his question ‘Are you creating an idealized image of yourself, how you’d really like to be? She answers, ‘It is a positive view of myself, and in that way it does become another kind of fiction.’

Most of the art critical focus of Lucas’s self portraits, whether mainstream or feminist has been on her strategy of returning with interest stereotypical projections of cultural and sexual identity on her physical appearance and comportment. That is to say the ‘things’ as she put it in the Friedman interview, ‘that are played upon me which I turn around and send out again.’ I cannot think of a better example of her strategy at work than in the conversation between Critic Gregor Muir and artist Cerith Wyn Evans about Divine (1991) recorded in Two Melons and a Stinking Fish, the TX documentary about Sarah Lucas made in 1996 by Vanessa Engles for the BBC and the Arts Council of England. This is how it goes:

Overlooked, however, in all the concentration on sexual identity in the critical discourse around the self portraits is the possibility suggested by the untitled
1994 Frieze advert version of Self-Portrait with Knickers: namely that some of the self portraits are also inscribed with Lucas's artistic subjectivity: that they bear traces of the history of her particular formation as a sculptor in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s.


Let’s start by stating the obvious: here is a photograph of a woman who is an artist reproduced in an international art magazine as an advert for a forthcoming exhibition of her work in a leading London gallery. As such it denotes a certain level of national professional success.¹ (Note about White Cube) For anyone with knowledge of the major developments in art and exhibition practices from 1960s onwards, however, the image has another connotations. For example let’s juxtapose it with other photograph of an artist used in conjunction with an exhibition of some of his artwork. (SLIDES x 2) This is an image of the sculptor Carl Andre reproduced in the catalogue of Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form: Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information, curated by the late Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle Bern in the spring of 1969, arguably the most influential exhibition of the second half of the twentieth century. As is evident from its subtitle: Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information it brought together work by sixty artists presenting various materializations of the main tendencies in new art from Europe and the United states, only three of whom were women: Eva Hesse, Hannah Darboven and Jo Ann Caplan.

Writing about the work of Harald Szeemann in Artforum International in 2005 curator Daniel Birbaum saw When Attitudes Become Form marking an important methodological shift for exhibition practice, in that artists were more or less free to contribute any work that they felt would be relevant.’

Since the artists, in Szeemann's words, "took over the institution," they also did their best to redefine the physical conditions for the show: Lawrence Weiner removed three square feet of wall space; Michael Heizer demolished

¹ Note about White Cube
the sidewalk with a metal ball; Richard Serra contributed one of his "Splash Pieces" involving molten lead. Richard Long, on the other hand, left the institutional framework behind and went on a three-day hike in the Swiss mountains. As the title suggested, this was not an exhibition of artworks but of "attitudes," the implication being that the artists themselves, as creative subjects and eccentric personalities, were as much on display as the often ephemeral works resulting from their activities. In fact, in the introduction to the show's catalogue, Szeemann mentions that some of the Conceptual and Earth artists who appear in the catalogue had no works in the show.²

Writing in 2005 Birnbaum’s reviews Szeemann’s 1969 exhibition from the perspective of the explosion of celebrity culture since the late 1980s. In 2002 Matthew Collins devoted a chapter of his Sarah Lucas volume of the Tate Modern Artists series to the self-portraits, in which he argued that their celebrity theme cannot be ignored ‘in favour of a more intellectually respectable notion of identity, because they’re seen in a social context where celebrity is identity (it’s enough of an identity to be a celebrity.’³ While this is true enough (and far be it from me to argue intellectual respectability) I think there is something more to be said about Self Portrait with Knickers in the form it appeared in Frieze that has to do with Lucas’s sense of herself as a sculptor in the summer of 1994.

Frieze magazine, set up in 1991, is an invaluable resource for excavating the history of British art in the 1990s. For example the March/April issue in 1993 (only number 9) carried an article by David Batchelor called ‘The Wonder Years’ about three large-scale exhibitions in London devoted to art of the 1960s: Gravity & Grace: The Changing Condition of Sculpture 1965 – 1975, Out of Sight, Out of Mind, an exhibition of work by over 50 artists from more or less the same period at the Lisson Gallery and The Sixties: Art Scene in London. Batchelor writes that it is not accidental that the achievements of this decade of radical experiments in culture we now know in art as 'Pop, Minimalism, Conceptual art, Arte Povera, Anti-Form, Earthworks, Performance and more', should ‘cast their

² P. 66
shadow over the 1990s and be represented as history in museums and galleries since many of the 1960s generation were by the 1990s well established in English cultural management.

A case in point - and important for my argument about *Self Portrait With Knickers*, is Jon Thompson, curator of *Gravity and Grace: The Changing Condition of Sculpture 1965-1975*, shown at the Hayward Gallery in London from 21 January to 14 March 1993.

Thompson had a long and influential career as an art educator at Goldsmiths, University of London from 1968 to 1989, and was Dean of the School of Art when Lucas began her studies there in 1984. The Foreword to the exhibition catalogue for *Gravity and Grace* provides an account the evolution of the exhibition:

The idea for this exhibition arose out of discussion with Jon Thompson about the possibility of organizing an exhibition devoted to Arte Povera. From the outset Jon Thompson suggested broadening the concept to include work made in the United States as well as in Europe during the late 60s and early 70s, but with a specific focus on sculpture. Arte Povera was only one of several important artistic tendencies at the time – Post-minimalism and Process Art being two of the others, not to mention the work of artists who defied easy categorization. The period was one of unprecedented interaction between artists on both sides of the Atlantic and the present exhibition attempts to recapture something of the questioning spirit which affected not only the arts, but all areas of social, political and philosophical enquiry. For this reason, we have brought together the most provocative and influential works made during those years.

The Foreword evokes *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* without mentioning it.\(^4\) Indeed of the twenty artists whose work was exhibited in *Gravity and Grace* all but three (Broodthaers, Paolini, Penone) were involved in

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\(^4\) Given a typically British establishment cultural twist with is ‘specific focus on Sculpture’.
Szeemann's 1969 exhibition. In 1993 Thompson showed work by even fewer women than had Szeemann, only Eva Hesse was represented, and notably work by Carl Andre was entirely absent.

In June of the following year, 1994, just one month before Lucas’s self-portrait in Frieze Lynn Zelevansky’s exhibition Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties, (SLIDE) opened in New York at The Museum of Modern Art and included work by Lucas’s close contemporary Rachel Whiteread who was represented by Untitled, 1991 (SLIDE) and Untitled (Amber Floor), 1993. (SLIDE)

Against the backdrop of these two notable survey exhibitions the advert for Lucas’s upcoming solo exhibition at White Cube in London (SLIDE) looks like a wry statement of her position as an artist in the summer of 1994, redolent as it is of the photographs of Carl Andre in the catalogue of When Attitudes Become Form, an artist absent from Thompson’s show but with whose approach to life and art-making Lucas’s own coincides in important ways. The line of knickers running into the distance behind Lucas’s head is a spatial inversion of Log Piece (1968) the sculpture in the form of a line of wooden blocks running towards the viewer from Carl Andre’s feet in the Live in Your Head catalogue photograph. Thus an historically informed reading of the advert for the artist’s 1994 solo exhibition at White Cube suggests that we ought to include Self Portrait with Knickers, with it’s domestication of minimalist serialism, in the conversation about minimalism and its legacy in art made by women in the 1990s initiated in June of that year by Lynn Zelavansky’s group exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

5 Lucas was born 1962, Whiteread in 1963.
6 Footnote Phyllis Tuchman’s ArtForum interview with Andre.
7 In Lucas’s commentary on the twelve Self-Portraits 1990-1998 in Matthew Collings’s Tate book in the Tate Modern Artist series, this is what she said about Self Portrait with Knickers:

The one where the line of knickers is behind me – the fact is, I forgot they were there. They weren't part of the idea necessarily, but now they seem to make the picture.

There are two things worth noting, the first is that there was an idea about what Lucas wanted the self-portrait to do ahead of the photograph being taken, and secondly that the line of knickers, unnoticed at the point of image capture, on reflection ‘made the picture’. When in 2002 Lucas tells Collings that ‘now’ the knickers seem to ‘make the picture’ it is a belated recognition of an identification with Andre.
There are other suggestions of the presence of Andre in Lucas’s formal vocabulary in that decade. Compare, for example, her Five Lists of 1991 (SLIDE) with Andre’s Essay on Sculpture from 1964. (SLIDE) Andre used words as base material to name objects and qualities with sculptural properties and potential in a practice aligned with concrete poetry. Lucas’s lists are likewise acts of naming but of sexual subjectivities, practices, bodily parts and functions in base, colloquial language. It’s worth reading (or re-reading) Phylis Tuchman’s Artforum interview with Carl Andre in 1970 to understand the presence of his approach to art in the formation of Lucas’s practice: Tuchman asks. ‘You don’t consider yourself a conceptual artist, do you? Andre replies:

I am certainly no kind of conceptual artist because the physical existence of my work cannot be separated from the idea of it. That’s why I said I had no art ideas, I only have art desires...My art springs from my desire to have things in the world which would never be there. By nature, I am a materialist.... (p. 308).

We know that Andre’s materialism also characterized his politics: he read Marx’s Grudrisse in the 1970s and opposed the Vietnam War from the beginning. Lucas’s engagement with Britain’s more recent involvement with the legacies of colonial power in the war in Iraq echoed through her contributions to the group show In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida at Tate Modern in 2004: indeed the formal arrangement of spam tins in Spamageddon (SLIDE) could be read as a tongue in cheek allusion to Andre’s work with metal plates. From the British perspective we must not forget Andre’s spectacular arrival in the tabloid press when in February 1976 it was revealed that the then Tate Gallery had purchased, Equivalent VIII, the artist’s arrangement of 120 sand lime bricks for a sum, never actually disclosed, but that ranged in the media from £400 to £4,000. ‘The great new art movement known as low sculpture spread to Britain’s more discerning building sites yesterday’, announced the Daily Mirror with photographs of ‘four

not fully conscious in 1994 but emerging in tune with the curatorial interest in American and European conceptual and minimal art of the 1960s.
bricklayers from Edmonton kneeling beside their newly constructed ‘low’ brick sculptures’. A joke Lucas might appreciate.

**Self Portrait with Fried Eggs (1996)** (SLIDE)

Lucas’s now iconic *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* dates from 1996, but there is evidence that the idea, like *Self Portrait with Knickers* also originates in the early 1990s. The earliest version, (SLIDE) reproduced in *Sarah Lucas: Exhibitions and Catalogue Raisonné* 1989-2005, is a small untitled gouache and collage on board, dated 1993, measuring 18 x 17cm. At the time of the publication of *Sarah Lucas: Exhibitions and Catalogue Raisonné* in 2005 it was still in the collection of the artist, often a sign of the importance of a work to the development of an idea. A variation of the image appears again twice in 1994, in acrylic and collage on card (45 X 42cms) named *Excellent, Ebullient and a Real Radical*, (SLIDE) and in acrylic and collage on wood this time titled *Supersensible*. (SLIDE)

The photographic versions of *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* are dated 1996 - as it happens the year Tate acquired Andre’s, *Steel Zinc Plain* (1969). (SLIDE) In addition to the C-print, that is to say the colour version of *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs*, there exists as well *Composition with Fried Eggs*, comprising four black and white photographs arranged like tiles echoing the pattern of the floor covering in the photographs.

Taken at face value *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996) is at once a provocation and defensive anticipation of demeaning, vernacular derision of small breasts. The ‘go on then say it’ gesture consigns the insult to instant redundancy. The photograph does its job with enviable economy. There is though, something to be noted about the checkered kitchen floor: it doesn’t reach to the edges of the room, and what is not listed in the technical information for the C-print is noted in the list of materials accompanying an installation shot of *Smoking Room (Wolfsburg)* also from 1996, namely the inclusion of a lino floor. The juxtaposition of the actual piece of lino in the installation, with the checkered

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8 Rider p. 53. The
floor in the photograph *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* hanging there suggest the possibility that the lino in the self portrait was as much a prop - to make a kitchen of whatever room the photograph was taken in - as it was in the installation. What can be said for sure is that it is impossible for anyone familiar with the history of sculpture since the 1960s not to associate the square of black and white lino flooring in *Smoking Room (Wolfsburg)* with Carl Andre’s low floor sculptures such as Tate’s *Steel Zinc Plain* (1969).

What I am observing in *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* should not, however be mistaken for some later-day feminist version of the game of ‘reference, deference and difference’ proposed by Griselda Pollock as a way of understanding the ‘decisive character’ of avant-gardism:

To make your mark in the avant-garde community, you had to relate your work to what was going on: *reference*. Then you had to defer to the existing leader, to the work or project which represented the latest move... *deference*. Finally your own move involved establishing a *difference* which had to be both legible in terms of current aesthetics and criticism, and also a definitive advance on that current position.⁹

Instead we should listen to how Lucas answered Carl Freedman when he asked her in the 1994 Frieze interview, ‘How much do you analyse what else goes on in art and appropriate things for yourself?’ she answered:

I don’t see myself as appropriating much. In a way I’ll use anything I can and I think you justify your use of something by what you do with it. I think the really crucial thing is making a climate of ideas for your own work and I’ve managed to establish some kind of context for myself and what I’m doing. And that means that when I do something it’s less empty than if I hadn’t established that context.

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The claim I want to make here is a small one: simply that in 1994 the work of Carl Andre is recognizably part of the ‘climate of ideas’ for Self-Portrait with Knickers and the series of acrylic and collage works that in 1996 culminated in Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs because historically his practice is inescapably part of Lucas’s formation as a sculptor. Like Andre I am a sculptor, say the two self-portraits, but a sculptor marked by not being male and everything that fact entails in the culture in which I live. And you think this is funny?


Sarah Lucas: SITUATION Absolute Beach Man Rubble at the Whitechapel Gallery, London in 2013, was the culmination of a series of eight ‘situations’ created during 2012 and early 2013 in a temporary space above Sadie Coles HQ in New Burlington Place, central London. While ‘SITUATION Absolute Beach Man Rubble’ assembled over two decades of Lucas’s work it was not a retrospective exhibition in the traditional sense, in which individual works represent moments in a chronological archive of development, and it called for a different approach to understanding it, key to which, I would argue, were the two black and white self-portraits Supersensible (1995) (SLIDE) and 1978 (2000) SLIDE) with which it opened.

As we have seen the title Supersensible had already been used in 1994 for the acrylic and gouache on wood precursor to Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs. It was also the title of another four self portraits also dated 1994 made in acrylic on paper called Supersensible Study 1, 2, 3, and 4. Lastly the word was important enough to be, in 1995 the title of Lucas’s first solo exhibition in New York at Gladstone Gallery.

From the first instance of its appearance in Lucas’s self-portrait work typically the title involved word play. At face value it names the person in the picture a tremendously sensible person. Nevertheless as a description of an artist who in 1994/1995 was associated in the public realm with the anything but sensible behavior of the yBa’s the title is ironic. Both these readings, however, depend on
suspending the observation that the title is one word not two. *Supersensible* not Super Sensible.

The term supersensible is associated with enlightenment philosophy, most notably with Emmanuel Kant, and it was to Howard Caygill’s *Kant Dictionary* I went first for a definition, knowing that Caygill, like Jon Thompson, had for many years taught at Goldsmiths. As far as I understand it from Caygill and other commentaries, the supersensible is the hidden substrata of the world, a ground informing both subject and object. Beauty is a kind of revelation of this substrata of the world, and a series of analogies between the activity of aesthetic judgment and of moral judgment lead Kant to claim that beauty is the symbol of morality. The supersensible has therefore, as one commentary explains, ‘a necessary sympathy with our highest human projects’.10 Put another way, it could be said that the supersensible is the ground of human freedom.

(SLIDE) The joke is there in *Supersensible* 1995 in which the artist, a level-headed young woman, poses relaxed in an armchair on a London street outside a second-hand furniture shop for a photograph taken just as the law, in the form of two policemen have passed her by. However it is the pervasive sense of the philosophical idea of the supersensible that interest me most about this photograph because we could, if only by analogy, describe this image of towering stacks of used furniture on a parade of unremarkable shops in a rundown urban thoroughfare as the ‘substrata’ of the world of Lucas’s practice in 1995. It is an image that relates closely to the way in which a year earlier she had responded to Carl Freedman when he observed that her work ‘relates directly to life and ideas about life. ’Yes’, she said, ‘I think it’s both what I like and what I’m like. It is based in my life, not about my childhood or anything, but what I’m like is so much about how I grew up and where’.11

The second self-portrait photograph *1978 (2000)* (SLIDE) installed at the beginning of *Sarah Lucas: SITUATION Absolute Beach Man Rubble* is similarly an

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10 Internet Encyclopedia of philosophy: http://www.iep.utm.edu/kantaest/#SH2e
11 Fieze p. 29.
image about what we might call background in the social sense but no less ontologically than *Supersensible* in the sense of being part of the ‘substrata’ of Lucas’s practice.

While *Supersensible* signals the moment of Lucas’s solo international art-world debut in 1995 at the age of thirty-three with the exhibition of the same name at the Gladstone Gallery, New York, 1978 (2000) is less straightforward because it involves delay, which raises the question – why did a snapshot of Lucas aged sixteen reading a copy of the *New Musical Express* enter the artist’s public catalogue of self-portraits in 2000? Perhaps it is no coincidence that 2000 was also the year of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Lucas’s brilliant installation at the Freud Museum. Delay - the return of the repressed - is central to Freud’s theory of the unconscious. Looking at 1978 (2000) I, though, like to think historically rather than psychoanalytically and imagine that when the teenage artist-to-be looked up and into the camera from her copy of the *NME* in 1978 she had been reading the lively, incisive prose of the seventeen-year old school girl from Bristol, daughter of a communist union activist, hired with Tony Parsons in 1976 (SLIDES x 2) to help the magazine get to grips with punk. I want to associate the early, rude, creative energy of Julie Burchill at the *NME* in the mid 1970s with that of a not so young Sarah Lucas at the start of her career as a professional artist in the mid 1990s because for both women it was rooted in white, working class culture and experience. In 1978 the *NME* named David Bowie best male singer, Debbie Harry best female singer and The Clash best group, so the photograph 1978 (2000) locates historically a moment in the cultural formation of the slightly startled looking sixteen old, wearing make-up that today would alert her ‘lewd detector’, at the juncture of three tendencies in British popular music in the 1970s: Glam Rock, New Wave and Punk.

Damian Hirst’s written contribution to the *SITUATION Absolute Beach Man Rubble* publication is about Lucas’s concrete cast of a portable television set, called *The Law*, (1997). He used as a title for his text a line from the lyrics of *I fought the Law*, a song

12 ‘A lot of manufactured objects alert my lewd detector. Like makeup on a pretty face.’
written by Sony Curtis in 1958 and recorded by The Clash in 1979. Which loops us back to *Supersensible.*