

BA Liberal Arts & Sciences

Major Humanities: European History and Culture

Bachelor Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Kathryn J. Brown

# The confessional art of Tracey Emin

Simon van der Weele

ANR: 491210

June 2012

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# 1. Introduction

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“The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other.” – *Martin Heidegger, The Origin of the Work of Art*

“My world is my experience, and what I experience comes back into my work.”  
– *Tracey Emin, interview with Sean O’Hagan, 2005*

One day early 2002, British conceptual artist Tracey Emin’s cat, Docket, ran away from home. In an attempt to bring her pet home safely, Emin printed several posters with a picture of Docket and spread these around her neighbourhood in East London. However, rather than trying to help Emin find her cat, passers-by tore the posters down and took them with them – they assumed the posters were works of art. Soon after, the posters were valued at 500 pounds each, and the disappearance of Emin’s cat made the headlines both in Britain and abroad. A gallery spokeswoman was required to explain that the posters were “not a conceptual piece of work,” and that “it has nothing to do with her art”<sup>1</sup>. She then added that “Tracey was very upset about losing her cat, but Docket has been found.”<sup>2</sup>

The above anecdote illustrates two important phenomena in the world of contemporary art. Firstly, it is a testament to the level of stardom some contemporary artists have reached: like popular celebrities, they mesmerize the public not only with their art, but just as much with their media appearances and public image. Secondly, and relatedly, it shows an awkward confusion on part of the audience, which is unable to distinguish between the artist’s private and artistic life. In other words, the distinction between the artist and the work she produces is blurred to the point where the audience is unable to distinguish between intentional creative output and the banal and quotidian, such as the poster for a lost cat. Both of these phenomena are

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<sup>1</sup> “Emin’s cat posters taken by collectors”, *BBC News*, 28 March, 2002, accessed March 24, 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1898461.stm>

<sup>2</sup> “Emin’s Cat Posters.”

perhaps exemplified best by Tracey Emin. Emin's art is characterized by what some have called a confessional voice: her art almost invariably refers back to herself and her life experiences – or at least, so the artist has us believe. It is constantly self-disclosing and self-referential. Because of this confessional mode of “doing” art – which finds expression in a variety of media, including drawing, embroidery, photography, film, sculpture, and life-sized installations – the distinction between Tracey Emin and her art has gradually faded, a development that has been further stimulated by her abundant media appearances and tabloid coverage.

It is this development that forms the starting point of this thesis, in which I explore the effects of the confessional mode of expression found in Tracey Emin's art on the reception and interpretation of her work. These have been characterized by an extremely literal approach: critics and audience alike take her confessions as honest and sincere, and subsequently interpret her art as an autobiographical project. This has led to a discourse of analysis in which authenticity and veracity are key concepts. As we will see, though, this interpretation is problematic, because one of the defining aspects of Emin's art is her tendency to play with the ideas of memory and truth, which has as a result that her work does not express one coherent, complete life story. The main focus of this thesis is to show why the public seems so insistent on interpreting Emin's art literally, and why such an interpretation is, in my view, misguided. I will also address to what extent Emin has actively invited such literal interpretations. Lastly, I will explore the role played by different notions of ‘autobiography’ in the context of Emin's art. Note that I have no intention of assessing the level of ‘truth’ to Emin's confessions: in fact, my argument is that this question completely misses the point of the artist's project.

The thesis is organized as follows. In the first chapter, I will describe the confessional style of Emin's art, and explain the audience's seeming obsession with authenticity in her art by contextualizing her confessional style in a broader cultural context. In the second chapter, I will address Emin's

celebrity status and public image, and investigate how and to what extent these have affected the reception of her art. The third and final chapter is then devoted to a discussion of the extent to which Emin's art could be viewed as autobiographical. Throughout the chapters, I will support my arguments by discussing some of Emin's works of art, some famous, others less well known. My decisions regarding which works were to be discussed were mainly motivated by my objective to show Emin's versatility and multimedial-approach to art production: thus, I will discuss her drawings, embroideries and installations, amongst others. As we will see, this variety of media will play an important role in the argument I will present in the final chapter.

## 2. Tracey Emin's confessional art

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British multi-media artist Tracey Emin was born in 1963 in London, England, to a British mother and a Turkish-Cypriot father. Her family life was complicated by the fact that her father was not married to Emin's mother but to another woman, and he spent his time between the two families. Unlike many other British visual artists, Emin's has a working-class background, having grown up in relative poverty in Margate, England, after the family hotel went bankrupt when she was seven; it was also at this time that her father permanently left the family.<sup>3</sup> Emin continued to live in Margate with her mother and twin brother as a child and as an adolescent, and her experiences from this English seaside town form a major source of inspiration for her artistic work. According to Mandy Merck, these experiences include child abuse, rape, and a subsequent period of sexual promiscuity.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Emin has undergone two abortions, of which one (of twins) had severe complications. Even though she did not finish high school, she managed to enter the Maidstone College of Art, after which she moved on to the Royal College of Art in London, where she obtained a degree in painting. Emin, however, describes her time at the Royal College of Art as one of the worst periods of her life. She destroyed almost all of the work she made during this time soon after she left the school – an event she refers to as her “emotional suicide”.<sup>5</sup>

Emin's rise to prominence started in the White Cube Gallery in London with the 1993 exhibition *My Major Retrospective*: a title that, as the White Cube puts it, suggests that “the artist felt, rather than being at the beginning of her

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<sup>3</sup> Christine Fanthome, “Articulating authenticity through artifice: the contemporary relevance of Tracey Emin's confessional art,” *Social Semiotics* 18:2 (2008), 227

<sup>4</sup> Mandy Merck, “Bedtime,” in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 119

<sup>5</sup> Christine Fanthome, “The Influence and Treatment of Autobiography in Confessional Art: Observations on Tracey Emin's Feature Film *Top Spot*,” *Biography* 29 (2006), 32

career, that significant things had already happened”.<sup>6</sup> Emin hinted at an artistic career, which, in reality, had yet to be lived; clearly, from the outset, Emin occupied herself with the fabrication of an image and the suggestion of lived experience. It was another exhibition that truly propelled her career forward, though: the 1997 *Sensation* exhibition curated by Charles Saatchi, which featured Emin’s famous polyester tent, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*. The tent’s subject matter led to great controversy, in line with the general reaction to the art put forward by the Young British Artists (YBA) movement. This controversy was further stirred on by what is now perhaps Emin’s most famous work, *My Bed*, an installation that earned her a Turner Prize nomination in 1999 (which she did not win), and led to great attention for her work in the British media, not only amongst cultural magazines but particularly in tabloids. I will discuss both works in more detail below. In 2007, Emin represented the United Kingdom in the Venice Biennale, which shows the extent to which Emin has become an established artist in her home country in the years after the controversy surrounding her explicit and allegedly ‘confessional’ works of art. Nonetheless, in her work, Emin continues to draw on the life she led before she became a well-known and wealthy individual.

Emin’s art is characterized by its subject matter, which almost entirely devoted to Tracey Emin herself: to her experiences, fears, and life story. Julian Stallabrass goes as far as suggesting that “Emin’s exclusive subject matter is her personal life.”<sup>7</sup> For this reason, it seems almost superfluous to begin a thesis on the work of this artist with a short biographical overview like the one I provided above. After all, one would expect that a discussion of the mediated experience of the artist through her art would suffice in uncovering her biography, if that art has as its main topic the life of the artist. However, I think it is necessary to get Emin’s biography on paper first, not only because it provides a useful frame of reference for what is to follow, but also because it

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<sup>6</sup> “Tracey Emin: My Major Retrospective 1963-1993”, White Cube Gallery, accessed on 17 May 2012, [http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/tracey\\_emin\\_my\\_major\\_retrospective\\_1963-1993/](http://whitecube.com/exhibitions/tracey_emin_my_major_retrospective_1963-1993/)

<sup>7</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (London: Verso, 2001), 36

allows me to end the discussion of the literal content of these works of art – that is, Emin’s life – at the earliest possible stage. Rather than trying to elucidate factual parallels between Emin’s life and works (a strategy that has been prevalent particularly in the British media and that has also influenced critical evaluations of Emin’s work), I want to focus on what consequences are tied to the focus on Emin’s own experiences in her art for the reception and interpretation of Emin’s work. Additionally, and perhaps of more importance, is that leaving out an introductory biography and replacing it with a discussion of Emin’s art would imply that Emin’s art forms a coherent reflection of her life events: the assumption that we can take Emin’s oeuvre and interpret it as a piece of deliberate and truthful autobiography. This is one of the notions that this thesis sets out to question and reformulate.

## **Emin’s confessional art**

Because the primary subject of Emin’s art appears to be her personal life, her work is most commonly categorized as “confessional art”. “For Tracey Emin, confession is particularly significant as it is both a crucial ingredient of her creative inspiration and also responsible for her status as one of Britain’s best known artists”, Fanthome observes.<sup>8</sup> David Galenson defines confessional art as a “practice in the visual arts, in which painters and sculptors have used motifs drawn largely or exclusively from their own lives.”<sup>9</sup> He likens it to confessional poetry and, in particular, to autobiographical poetry of the second half of the twentieth century which was “highly subjective, privileged the personal over the universal, was written in the language of ordinary speech, often took alienation as a theme, and recognized no subject matter as off limits.”<sup>10</sup> A defining feature of confessional art is the dedication of the artist’s (near-)entire oeuvre to self-exploration and the expression of past experiences. In this sense, the definition excludes artists who might have

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<sup>8</sup> Fanthome, “Articulating authenticity through artifice,” 223

<sup>9</sup> David W. Galenson, “Portraits of the visual artist: personal visual art in the twentieth century,” *NBER Working Papers: 13939* (2008), 2

<sup>10</sup> Galenson, “Portraits of the visual artist,” 5



been interested in the development of the self, but did not pick up this topic as the prime subject of their body of work. Rembrandt is a good example of the latter: he painted a significant number of self-portraits, which are rightfully analysed by Fegley as “comments about aspects of his inner state or his status in the flow of history”,<sup>11</sup> but these portraits are by no means a complete representation of his oeuvre. By contrast, Galenson sees Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh as the first example of confessional visual art, and sketches a history of confessional art from pioneers such as Van Gogh and (slightly later) Edvard Munch, to prolific 20<sup>th</sup>-century artists such as Frida Kahlo and Francis Bacon, to contemporary artists like Louise Bourgeois, Cindy Sherman, and Tracey Emin.

Emin’s famous and controversial work *My Bed* (1998) serves both as a clear example of the nature of confessional art and of Emin’s art in particular (figure 1). The work depicts the end result of a heavy depression: a bed – Emin’s bed? – sheets rumpled and stained with urine and other bodily fluids, surrounded by dirty underwear, contraceptives, cigarette packs and empty vodka bottles. The work contains many of the most important tensions and ambiguities that are characteristic of Emin’s oeuvre. The bed, which brings up associations with warmth, comfort, and rest, is turned into a place of rejection, abuse, and loneliness. In this way, one of the most intimate and private spaces in one’s life becomes public, fully exposing its owner, its sheets covering up nothing. However, nothing is made clear about the events that undoubtedly have preceded the bed’s current state of being: instead, the bed invites the viewer to construct the personality of the absent sleeper. In this way, the audience is confronted with an extremely intimate scene, made unsettling not only by its apparent frankness, but also by the lack of explanation or clarification of its presence. *My Bed* thus not only explores themes of intimacy and public disclosure, but also raises questions about the presence of the artist, forcing us “to inquire about an absent subjectivity

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Fegley Osmond, “Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits,” *World and I*, January 2000, accessed on October 22, 2010, <http://www.worldandi.com/specialreport/rembrandt/rembrandt.html>

whose traces surround us”.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 1. *My Bed* (1998). Mattress, linens, pillows, objects, 79 x 211 x 234 cm. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery.

The reception of *My Bed*, too, was characterized by a discourse that is typical for Emin’s art – opinions were strong and divided, particularly in Emin’s home country the United Kingdom. As Cherry notes, the exhibition of *My Bed* in the United States brought mostly favourable reviews, but when the work was exhibited in London as part of the Turner Prize show in 1999, the British media had trouble coming to terms with the personal nature of Emin’s work.<sup>13</sup> While Ralph Rugoff saw in Emin’s *Bed* “real-life hard-luck stories to which most of us can instantly respond”<sup>14</sup>, other critics were less favourable, considering Emin’s art self-absorbed, unmediated trivialities, spurred on by a desire for media celebrity and market success. Rather than simply talking about the work of art, though, critics commented on the life of the artist as

<sup>12</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “The Rumbled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions,” *Biography* 24 (2001), 5

<sup>13</sup> Deborah Cherry, “On the move: *My Bed*, 1998 to 1999,” in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 141-42

<sup>14</sup> Ralph Rugoff, “Screaming for attention,” *Financial Times*, ‘Weekend’ section, 20-21 November 1999, p. vii.

well. The deeply intimate subject matter of *My Bed* made the discussion of the work transform into a discussion about the lifestyle of its creator. “For her British critics it [*My Bed*] expressed Emin’s sluttish personality and exemplified the detritus of a life quintessentially her own; it was, above all, confessional”, Cherry observes.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the seemingly personal nature of Emin’s work seems to be the cue for her audience to talk about *Tracey*, the ever-present subtext in every word of art Emin makes, rather than about her art itself. The main criticism thus seems to be that the voice of confession was nothing but a scream for attention; a criticism that took on a slightly misogynist undertone, in that the supposedly promiscuous (unwomanly) lifestyle of the artist (which was only implied by the work, if at all present) was scorned as well.

Galenson is quick to note one of the most important issues that arise with the creation and reception of confessional art: “sincerity – whether the work is intended to convince the reader that the speaker is the real author, as opposed to an obviously exaggerated or distorted persona.”<sup>16</sup> This problem is materialized in the critical reception of Emin’s work as well. Indeed, there is a certain “ambiguity to be found in much of Emin’s work, oscillating between truth and disclosure on one hand, and performance and artifice on the other”.<sup>17</sup> What seems to trouble most of the critics I cited above is this ambiguity of voice that is inherent to a confessional work of art like *My Bed*: they focus on the content of the confession, and, as a result, on the personality and “story” of the artist who made that confession – and on whether or not this confession is authentic or not. “If art is no more and no less than the artist’s life, then authenticity becomes a key benchmark for a critical practice that judges the artist rather than the work. Whereas those who supported her argued for the unmediated translation of life into art, less enthusiastic reviewers questioned her genuineness”, Cherry observes.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cherry, “On the move,” 134

<sup>16</sup> Galenson, “Portraits of the visual artist,” 7

<sup>17</sup> Rosemary Betterton, “Why is my art not as good as me? Femininity, feminism and ‘life-drawing’ in Tracey Emin’s art,” in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 23

<sup>18</sup> Cherry, “On the move,” 142

Thus, the supposedly “confessional” nature of a work seems to raise certain expectations about truth, sincerity, and authenticity of the artist.

However, as many authors have pointed out before me, the discussion of Emin’s sincerity becomes irrelevant when one considers the process of mediation that is inherent to all works of art. The simple fact that Emin’s experiences are mediated in some way through the art that she produces, the fact that there is a process of production involved with the making of the confession, shows that her art is constructed at least to some extent. Regardless of the apparent immediacy of expression that is present throughout her body of work, from rapidly drawn sketches to emotional texts embroidered on blankets, the work is the product of a process in which thought and purpose are inevitable. Again, *My Bed* forms a good example: as Cherry notes, the components that make up the installation, and the way in which they were assembled, differed each time *My Bed* was displayed in a new space.<sup>19</sup> Are all of these different beds *the* bed Emin refers to when she speaks of *My Bed*? Clearly, that Emin’s work “is thought, and at times complex in the multiplicity of its meanings, challenges easy reception of Emin’s oeuvre as immediate and unproblematically autobiographical.”<sup>20</sup>

Much of the academic evaluation of Emin’s work is devoted to exactly this problem of sincerity, and many words are written on the possibility of authenticity in confessional works of art such as Emin’s. The point most often made is that the authenticity of Emin’s art is not to be found in its literal content, but rather in the mediation of this content: Emin’s voice of expression, the tone of the works, and the style in which they are written or drawn. Melanie McGrath rightly wonders, “just because her art appears to be literal, who says it's to be taken literally?”<sup>21</sup> Even Julian Stallabrass, one of Emin’s harshest critics, notes that “her authenticity lies at the level of diction,

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<sup>19</sup> Cherry, “On the move,” 138

<sup>20</sup> Chris Townsend and Mandy Merck, “Eminent domain: the cultural location of Tracey Emin,” in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 7

<sup>21</sup> Melanie McGrath, “Something’s Wrong”, Tate Magazine, September/October 2002, accessed on March 27, 2011, <http://www.tate.org.uk/magazine/issue1/something.htm>

not of discourse, in how she speaks rather than what she says”.<sup>22</sup> This point seems to be confirmed by Emin herself, who admits to the selective nature of her work: “I decide to show this or that part of the truth, which isn't necessarily the whole story, it's just what I decide to give you.”<sup>23</sup> The problem of “authenticity” in the sense of “truthfulness” is thus sidestepped or deemed irrelevant in much academic discourse on the work of Tracey Emin.

To the general public, though, these issues are very much alive, and they continue to determine the reflection on Emin’s work. The matter could not be illustrated more clearly than with the case of her 1995 work, *We Killed The Fucking Dinner Lady*. The work suggests that Emin and a friend conspired to kill the dinner lady at Emin’s high school, and Emin had confirmed in various interviews that the story was true. However, journalists doubting Emin’s sincerity soon investigated the matter, and found that in fact no dinner lady had been killed at Emin’s school. The discovery led to significant controversy, and had many conclude that Emin was a fake, a forger. In this case, the audience clearly opted for a literal interpretation of the work, and, on discovering that there was no factual basis for its content, the work was considered a failure. Apparently, then, the confessional mode of diction raises strong expectations of truthfulness and authenticity with the public. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to an enquiry as to the source of these expectations, which is a first step in understanding the public’s obsession over the artist Tracey Emin, and what seems to be the fusing of the artist and her art in the eye of the public.

## **The confession in modern culture**

As I have shown above, the reception of Emin’s work has largely been determined by the response of the audience to the confessional nature of Emin’s intimate and personal forms of expression. The possibility that these

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<sup>22</sup> Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 39

<sup>23</sup> Lynn Barber, “Show and Tell”, *The Observer*, April 22, 2001, accessed March 25, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2001/apr/22/features.magazine27>

narratives spun by Emin are real and factual captivates and fascinates the audience, but, as we have seen, also brings with it very strong expectations of truthfulness and authenticity – expectations that are not always met by the artist. The presence of a self-declared confessional voice has its audience assume that the expression is honest and sincere. A better understanding of the concept of confession and of its position in modern culture is required in order to make sense of this apparent link between confession and authenticity. Much has been written about the role of confession in the present day, and many of these writings are at least partly indebted to Michel Foucault's analysis of the confession in his *History of Sexuality*.<sup>24</sup> Foucault analyses confession as part of a modern discourse on sexuality, but the uses of his study reach beyond these confines. In fact, Foucault directly alludes to the importance of confession in modern literature (and, by extension, art), "a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage".<sup>25</sup> He sees this type of literature, which focuses on the exploration of the self through confession, as part of a broader trend of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which confession has become one of the principal modes of expression for the production of truth.

The significance of confession for contemporary life is exemplified by the roles it plays in many different parts of society: "It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell", Foucault observes. At the root of this phenomenon he sees the practice of confession in the Catholic Church from the Middle Ages onwards, which focused on the disclosure of one's innermost feelings, desires, and thoughts, and would result in the unburdening of sin and in absolution. The confessor

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<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990)

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, 59

per definition *had* to be honest, because only honesty would lead to salvation – one could not hide one’s secrets from God. However, the confession gradually broke loose from the religious sphere it originated from and came “to function within the norms of scientific regularity”, particularly in the scientific discourse on sexuality<sup>26</sup>; but even in this context, the original association with truth remained. In this way, “the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth”.<sup>27</sup>

As Fanthome has already noted<sup>28</sup>, this argument goes a long way in explaining the expectations of truth that arise with the perception and evaluation of a confessional work of art: since its audience recognizes the confession as a technique for producing truth, then it is veracity the audience will expect when a confession is uttered. Moreover, if the discourse on truth that revolves around the confession is indeed at the heart of our society in the way Foucault describes it, then Tracey Emin’s confessional art becomes a visible, tangible testament of this importance of the confession. Foucault defines the confession as “a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; (...) a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated”<sup>29</sup>; the definition quite aptly sums up the Emin’s oeuvre, for, as we have seen, her highly autobiographical work is defined by the narratives of hardship that together form the persona she has created for herself. Moreover, when Foucault speaks of the confession as a ritual that “exonerates, redeems, and purifies” the confessor<sup>30</sup>, in the sense that it potentially brings salvation to the confessor, one is instantly reminded of Emin’s oft-expressed assertion that her work is cathartic to her: an almost therapeutic way of dealing with her allegedly troubled past.<sup>31</sup> Emin’s work,

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<sup>26</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* Volume 1, 65

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* Volume 1, 59

<sup>28</sup> Fanthome, “Articulating authenticity through artifice,” 226

<sup>29</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* Volume 1, 61-62

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* Volume 1, 62

<sup>31</sup> Betterton, “Why is my art not as good as me?,” 29

then, with confession at its core, can be seen as characteristic of the confession-focused modern age Foucault describes.

Foucault also analyzes the role of the “recipient” of the confession, “a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile”.<sup>32</sup> This partner thus exerts power over the confessor. The audience of Emin’s work fulfils a similar role in the reception of the artist’s confessions, for the content of her intimate works of art are under constant scrutiny – not just in terms of their artistic merit, but also in terms of the lifestyle that they represent. Not only is her confessional art then symptomatic for the individual’s apparent need to confess; the public’s fascination with her confessions, and its reaction upon viewing her work, similarly demonstrates the significance of the confession in the current age and manifests an underlying set of power relations that informs this act. In this sense, the work of Tracey Emin and its reception together embody the contemporary zeitgeist as described by Foucault and form a “valid interpretation and reflection of today’s society”.<sup>33</sup>

Such an analysis of Emin’s work as an example of contemporary emphasis on confession does face one problem, however: it fails to adequately deal with the fact that the narratives Emin shares with her audience in her art are constructions, subject to a selective process. Thus, interpreting Emin’s art as symptomatic of contemporary life risks imposing another literal interpretation on them, even though we just established that such a literal interpretation does not hold very well. “It’s all edited, it’s all calculated, it’s all decided”, Emin has stated in the past.<sup>34</sup> Instead of seeing Emin’s art as *exemplifying* the contemporary zeitgeist, I would argue that her work *comments* on modern society’s obsession with confession. The ambiguity between truth and fiction, sincerity and artifice that is central to Emin’s work has great effects on its

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<sup>32</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* Volume 1, 61

<sup>33</sup> Fanthome, “The Influence and Treatment of Autobiography in Confessional Art”, 41

<sup>34</sup> Barber, “Show and Tell”



audience and cleverly plays with the expectations that result from her art being deemed “confessional”. Through the mediation of intimate experiences, Emin has been able to create a sheen of authenticity that captivates her audience and that has allowed her to construct “an artistic identity whose honesty of self-exposure is her trademark”<sup>35</sup> – even if this honesty is merely a façade. In the next chapter, this creation of the artistic persona “Tracey Emin” will be more carefully analysed.

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<sup>35</sup> Betterton, “Why is my art not as good as me?,” 33

### 3. Tracey Emin's artistic persona

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As Stallabrass has pointed out, as a result of her confessional style, Tracey Emin is “cursed with the Midas touch”.<sup>36</sup> Whatever she does or makes, her audience is likely to deem it art. We already observed this tendency in the introduction, where I described the misinterpretation of the posters Emin created of her missing cat. This was an instance of Emin’s private life overlapping with her public one as an artist: while the “work” clearly expressed a private concern, with no audience intended apart from those who might have spotted Dockett somewhere in the neighbourhood, it was interpreted as a work of art by those who recognized the posters as being Emin’s creation, thus turning it into a public statement. Examples of this “Midas touch” abound: Emin has complained that a party she threw for her birthday was thought to be a work of art by those attending,<sup>37</sup> and when she famously took part in a live television debate in the wake of the 1997 Turner prize while drunk the press was quick to analyse this media appearance as “a piece of performance art”.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, then, the line between the person and artist Tracey Emin and the work she produces has been blurred, if not vanished completely, in the public’s imagination: her work disappears as “Emin herself, and any statement she makes, any act she performs (...), becomes art”.<sup>39</sup> In this chapter, by analysing several of Emin’s earlier works, I will show how Emin’s reliance on “confession”, and the subsequent “controversial” nature of her work, have contributed to her rise to celebrity, and to the creation of an artistic persona that has become the context of interpretation for almost everything she makes and does. Moreover, I will demonstrate that this creation is clearly a two-way process, steered both by the audience and by the artist herself. In fact, Emin

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<sup>36</sup> Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 42

<sup>37</sup> Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 39

<sup>38</sup> Clare Longrigg, “Sixty Minutes, Noise: by art’s bad girl,” *The Guardian*, December 4, 1997, accessed May 10, 2012,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/1997/dec/04/20yearsoftheturnerprize.turnerprize1>

<sup>39</sup> Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 48

seems to have actively stimulated the merging of her artistic image with her celebrity status, by featuring the theme of celebrity in her works of art.

## **Emin's celebrity status**

If there is one thing that the Dockett-example pointed out, it is that Tracey Emin has become a celebrity. At least in her home country the United Kingdom, the amount of media attention she has garnered (and still garners) is arguably unrivalled by any other contemporary artist, and has come to extend beyond her artistic endeavours. Of course, the controversial content of Emin's art has been an important cause of this development. The amount of disclosure that typifies works such as *My Bed* is exactly the type of information that would rouse the interest of popular media and its audience. As Ellis Cashmore points out, "we credit a celebrity with inadvertent ingenuity for becoming involved in a moral indiscretion that manages to outrage and delight in such proportions that it creates rather than destroys their careers."<sup>40</sup> Stories of drunkenness and promiscuity are predictably devoured by curious readers, and in her art, Emin provides them in abundance. In her work, she projects herself as living a life defined by sex, sexuality, abusive relationships, alcohol, and depression, which together form a pattern of themes that in its totality gives the audience an idea of what the person Tracey Emin is like. Her artist-image as it appears in the media is thus not just based on her public appearances, but also (especially, in fact) derived from these projections in her art; and that image is consequently confirmed by the activities outside of the context of her art.

The construction of an artist-image is not entirely in the hands of the artist, however. As Andrew Hay points out, "it is a matter for debate as to whether, in the context of some artworks, it is the public who constructs the artist, as

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<sup>40</sup> Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 143

much as the artist constructs themselves through the work and vice versa.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in the case of Tracey Emin, I would argue that the artist-image is as much a creation that can be attributed to the audience as it can be attributed to the artist herself. This image of Emin, superficially derived from her art, is the Tracey Emin that has become famous. I call this superficially, because as I have shown in the previous chapter, such a literal interpretation of Emin’s work often misses the point. Take for example her 1995 work *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* (figure 2), which was part of the famous 1997 *Sensation* exhibition and received much attention in the British media, propelling Emin



Figure 2. *Everyone I have ever slept with (1963-1995)* (1995). Appliquéd tent, mattress and light, 122 x 245 x 214 cm. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery.

towards public recognition. The work, which was destroyed by the 2004 Momart fire, was a polyester tent, embroidered on the inside with the names of everyone she literally had slept with, ranging from lovers to her family and the foetuses of her unborn twins. The tent was as haunting as it was welcoming, the tent symbolizing at once home and exile, intimacy and loneliness. Like *My Bed*, the work challenged the audience with an experience

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<sup>41</sup> Andrew Hay, “Introduction,” in *From Self to Shelf: the Artist Under Construction*, ed. Sally Bayley and William May (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 3

that “may be intimate or voyeuristic, depending on one’s viewpoint.”<sup>42</sup> Additionally, using embroidery as a medium suggested the labour not only in the making the work itself, “but in the making of relationships, traditionally a feminine task”.<sup>43</sup> Even though *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* clearly was thus about more than a list of sexual partners, the British media did not look far beyond its title, and consequently, the work has often been interpreted merely in terms of its sexual connotations. It thus secured an association of Emin with sex, and Emin as a “bad-girl” character who provokes her audience with works such as the cheekily titled tent.

Emin’s appliqué blanket *Mad Tracey from Margate. Everyone’s Been There* (1997, figure 3), which she made from clothes provided by her friends, is another example of a work that clearly contributed to the fabrication of Emin’s artist persona and her celebrity-image. The blanket is decorated with words and sentences of different colours, shapes, and sizes, such as “don’t die just keep loving”, “and I said fuck off back to your week world where you came from”, and, most famously, “Mad Tracey from Margate”, along with several poems in smaller writing and drawings. Like Emin’s drawings, the blanket suggests directness and frankness by means of the haphazard assemblage of sentences and words, the seemingly stream-of-consciousness style of writing, and the spelling mistakes – which is in contradiction with the laborious process that must have led to the creation of the blanket, each letter cut out and stitched to the cloth individually. Moreover, the choice of materials (her friends’ clothing) and the namedropping of acquaintances, who may or may not be fictional (“trust Ruth”, “CF I’ll always love you”), give the blanket a further sheen of authenticity. The confessions made on the blanket (“she was masterbating”) are in line with the themes of previous works in different media, thus strengthening the image of Emin that had already surfaced. Most importantly, though, the work provided a name for Emin’s persona to be used by the media: the blanket’s famous quote, “Mad Tracey from Margate” has

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<sup>42</sup> Betterton, “Why is my art not as good as me?,” 34

<sup>43</sup> Betterton, “Why is my art not as good as me?,” 34

become widely used in the media and by art critics to refer to the artist herself. The cases of *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* and *Mad Tracey from Margate*. *Everyone's been there*, form good examples of Cashmore's assertion that "celebrities aren't just there: we create them out of the two-dimensional material presented on the screen" (or, in Emin's case, cloth).<sup>44</sup>



Figure 3. *Mad Tracey from Margate. Everyone's been there (1997)*. Appliqué blanket, 215 x 267cm. Courtesy of the White Cube.

But it was Emin who provided this name for her persona, and not her audience. Undoubtedly, Emin is aware of the process of image creation through her art, and the power her confessions can have in this process. Cashmore notes that "The whole point about celebrities is that there can never be too much information"; "to be a celebrity means to be willing to go public with the minutiae of what might, at another time in history, be known as

<sup>44</sup> Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture*, 81

a private life.”<sup>45</sup> Obviously, Emin’s confessional art achieves exactly this: she shares with her audiences all that might be considered shameful or immoral, exposing herself with no boundaries, seemingly without hesitating. Cashmore gives as the most important example of the self-disclosing celebrity Madonna, who, from the end of the 1980s until the mid-1990s, through a combination of disclosure and scandal, ensured continuous media presence and attention from the public – “not just visible (...), but transparent: there was no contradiction”.<sup>46</sup> In some ways, Emin has applied similar tactics, and it is interesting to note that the start of Emin’s career coincided with the heyday of Madonna’s success. While Emin was probably not directly inspired by Madonna’s media strategy, she did start her career in an environment in which disclosure of the private life became essential in order to stay (or even become) famous. She might have understood the principle, or, through her playful treatment of truth and memory, she might have wanted to comment on it: the title of her tent, for instance, clearly invites the more literal interpretation, which was bound to cause controversy. At any rate, it is clear that from the outset, Emin must have been aware of the relationship between confession, celebrity, and the artist-image.

Whether her confessions conformed to this new trend in celebrity culture or were a reaction against it, at the start of the 1990s, it was common practice for artists like Tracey Emin to aim for an audience outside the traditional world of contemporary art, particularly in the United Kingdom. Partly, this was a trend already set by artist-superstar Andy Warhol in the 1960s (I shall return to this below), but another important moment for the commercialisation of the British art scene was when the 1989 recession took off, and the “once confident and affluent private art market went into hibernation”.<sup>47</sup> Stallabrass explains that the artists associated with the Young British Artists “movement” (YBA), in search for a new audience to show and sell their art, turned to more popular themes and the mass media in order to appeal to the masses. For

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<sup>45</sup> Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture*, 43

<sup>46</sup> Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture*, 11

<sup>47</sup> Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 4

this reason, many YBAs make use of unorthodox materials (cow dung, animal corpses) or take on controversial topics (Marcus Harvey's portrait of Myra Hindley springs to mind) in order to be noticed not only by the established art circles, but by the public eye as well. In fact, as Stallabrass points out, "To court a wider audience, high art lite [YBA] took on an accessible veneer (...) even sometimes, in its use of mass culture, incorporating materials that those with specialist knowledge would general *not* understand."<sup>48</sup> In this way, YBA did not only aim for the masses, but simultaneously "rebelled" against the "elite" as well, which further increased its appeal.

If any British artist made such a move towards the mainstream, it has to be Tracey Emin. This much is clear not only from the amount of media attention she garners, but also from the commercial and lucrative excursions she has made into the worlds of fashion and advertising: in addition to her frequent appearance in the British media (particularly in tabloids, and more often than not, not in direct relation to her art), she has gained a further status of celebrity through her collaboration with British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood (for whom she has modelled both on the runway and on paper print) and a sponsorship deal with Beck's Beer. This engagement with commercial brands not only increased her fame: it also fuelled and confirmed the image she had already created for herself in her art and in interviews. Emin had expressed her love for clothes and fashion before she started her collaboration with Westwood, and of course, sponsoring a brand of beer is in line with her oft-professed love for alcoholic drinks. Thus, these undertakings, which in principle have nothing to do with her art, helped sustain an image that had already been expressed in the art she makes. Moreover, they underline and sustain her celebrity status.

Emin's celebrity as an artist is by no means a unique phenomenon, nor is her affiliation with popular culture. Probably, her greatest precursor in this regard

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<sup>48</sup> Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 9



is Andy Warhol: through his “famous-artist pose”<sup>49</sup> and his association with pop culture and celebrity culture (not to mention his desire to “create” new celebrities), Warhol managed to create a public artist-image of himself with the result that his name became a brand of its own. A more obvious association with Emin is fellow YBA Damien Hirst, who has deliberately cultivated an link between art and celebrity. Hirst, not unlike Warhol, created an artistic image that became one with his art, by repeating themes, using controversial media (in Hirst’s case, animal corpses spring to mind), and giving a consistent but elusive media performance. Hirst’s image is “a media image from which the work is by no means clearly separated”, Stallabrass observes.<sup>50</sup> Both Warhol and Hirst rely on their celebrity for their art to be successful, because the themes that they use, at one point universal and taken on their own, become associated with the artist’s media profile instead: and from then onwards, it is the artist’s image that determines the interpretation of the work, rather than the other way around.

Outi Remes argues that such tactics are also visible in the work of Emin: “Emin’s ironic engagement with the art business machine and common culture utilises strategies also employed by Andy Warhol”, she asserts.<sup>51</sup> I agree that Emin shares with Warhol a multi-media approach and a great presence in the (British) media. Nonetheless, in my view, Emin differs from both Warhol and Hirst in that her media performance is on the surface, and is, apparently, devoid of irony. Her assertions of sincerity make her media presence difficult to compare to Warhol’s or even Hirst’s, because these artists never seem to take their own works too seriously. By contrast, Emin approaches the media and her work with the sheen of authenticity that I described in the previous chapter. This contrast also appears in the way they present their artistic process: while Warhol took pride in his “Factory”, which replaced the traditional artist’s studio and emphasized the impersonal, mass-

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<sup>49</sup> Merck and Townsend, “Eminent domain,” 10

<sup>50</sup> Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 32

<sup>51</sup> Outi Remes, “Replaying the old stereotypes into an artistic role: the case of Tracey Emin,” *Women’s History Review* 18:4, 2009, 564

produced nature of his work (a concept to some extent picked up by Hirst and his studio assistants as well), Emin clearly strives to be perceived as much emotionally closer to the work she produces – in spite of the fact that she has studio assistants working for her as well.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, the effect of Emin’s celebrity on the reception of her work that appears to be an inconvenient consequence of the confessional nature of her art rather than a self-conscious attempt to create an artist-persona. In fact, Emin has defended herself against those who argue that her celebrity and consequent wealth weakens the message of her art, which relies on her vulnerability and unhappiness: “People think that because my life has become more comfortable, my work will get inspid. On the outside it might look like my life is very comfortable, but inside my heart is still in turmoil over things.”<sup>53</sup>

### **Celebrity culture in Emin’s art**

Nonetheless, the appearance of the theme of celebrity in her art suggests that Emin is most definitely aware of the interaction between her art and her life as a celebrity. On the ink-jet print *I’ve Got It All* (2000, figure 4), we see the Tracey Emin sitting on a concrete floor, bare legged, legs apart, her face angled towards her hands, clutching a pile of money to her lower abdomen and crotch. Characteristically for Emin’s work, her pose is at once exhibitionist and vulnerable – meditative, even. Moreover, the print’s original is a polaroid photograph, an imprecise and in-the-moment medium that suggests a certain directness and hastiness, which we find in Emin’s drawings as well. The work comments on Emin’s celebrity in a variety of ways. First of these is the fact that the artist herself is featured in the photograph: this fact encourages a confessional interpretation and is in line with the major themes of her work. Then there is the presence of money, suggesting wealth and – with the knowledge that the woman depicted is Tracey Emin – the celebrity from which this wealth resulted. By shoving the money towards her crotch, Emin suggests

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<sup>52</sup> Barber, “Show and Tell”

<sup>53</sup> Mark Gisbourne, “Life into art,” *Contemporary Visual Arts* 20, 1998, 33

a relationship between money and sex: “money fucks; money fucks you; money fucks with you; money fucks you over”.<sup>54</sup> The ambiguity of this relationship is underlined by the title, which can be read as sincere or ironic; considering Emin’s above statement, the latter becomes all the more viable. This sentiment also contrasts with *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*, which suggested the labour-heavy nature of maintaining relationships by representing them as part of a sewed work. *I’ve got it all* thus reflects and self-consciously comments on Emin’s celebrity status: it seems to be a visual representation of Emin’s assertion that her celebrity has not necessarily made her happy or different from the Emin we think to see in works such as *My Bed*.



Figure 4. *I've got it all* (2000). Ink-jet print, 122 x 91 cm. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Osborne, “Greedy kunst”, in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 51

*I've got it all* carries more subtle links with Emin's celebrity status as well. Peter Osborne points out that the artist is depicted while wearing a Vivienne Westwood dress: the same brand she modelled for in the year this photograph was taken.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Emin does not only confirm her artist image through the commercial interests she has in a brand like Vivienne Westwood; she further establishes links with the brand by featuring it in her art. Indeed, as Osborne notes, the work is indirectly turned into an "advertisement for Vivienne Westwood clothing".<sup>56</sup> By taking the role of Vivienne Westwood model in the context of her own art, *I've got it all* seems to represent quite directly the fusing of the artist Tracey Emin with the celebrity Tracey Emin. However, the work's ambiguity in message obviously does not make for a very straightforward advertisement: the image does not confirm that happiness or satisfaction is to be gained from money and expensive clothing. Instead, Emin leaves the audience with uncertainty, not just about the merits of consumerism but especially about Emin's opinion on the matter. This confession does not lend itself to a straightforward reading.

The fusing between Emin's art and her celebrity persona is shown even more explicitly by a series of monoprints entitled *Vivienne Westwood* (2000, figure 5). Several of these consist of nothing more than a redrawing of Vivienne Westwood's logo, the only difference being that they are written in reverse – a consequence of choosing the monoprint as medium. These prints truly call to mind Warhol's work, resembling his copies of Campbell's tomato soup and Brillo detergent in particular. Of course, the main difference again seems to be an implied sincerity, here suggested by the hurried pencil strokes and the uneven letters: Ulrich Lehmann calls it a "faux-naïf" style.<sup>57</sup> By showing the Vivienne Westwood trademark in Tracey Emin's trademark style of drawing, *Vivienne Westwood* represents the importance of brand recognisability in the world of fashion and in the world of art: in this case, these brands are the

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<sup>55</sup> Osborne, "Greedy kunst", 55

<sup>56</sup> Osborne, "Greedy kunst," 56

<sup>57</sup> Ulrich Lehmann, "The trademark Tracey Emin," in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 67

literal logo of Vivienne Westwood and Emin's signature style. Furthermore, the print shows the relationship that has developed between the world of popular culture and high art, of which Emin's art is obviously a very fitting example. Perhaps Emin is commenting on the idea that celebrity and art sit uneasily together in contemporary culture. Indeed, she has stated that "I know some curators and art historians think that art and celebrity just don't mix, but I say, join the 21st century."<sup>58</sup> By self-consciously referring to a "real-life" friendship within the domain of her art (a friendship that would not have existed were it not for her fame), the work further fuels the disappearance of any differentiation between Emin's art and her media image as a celebrity. A stable artistic persona that combines the two emerges instead.

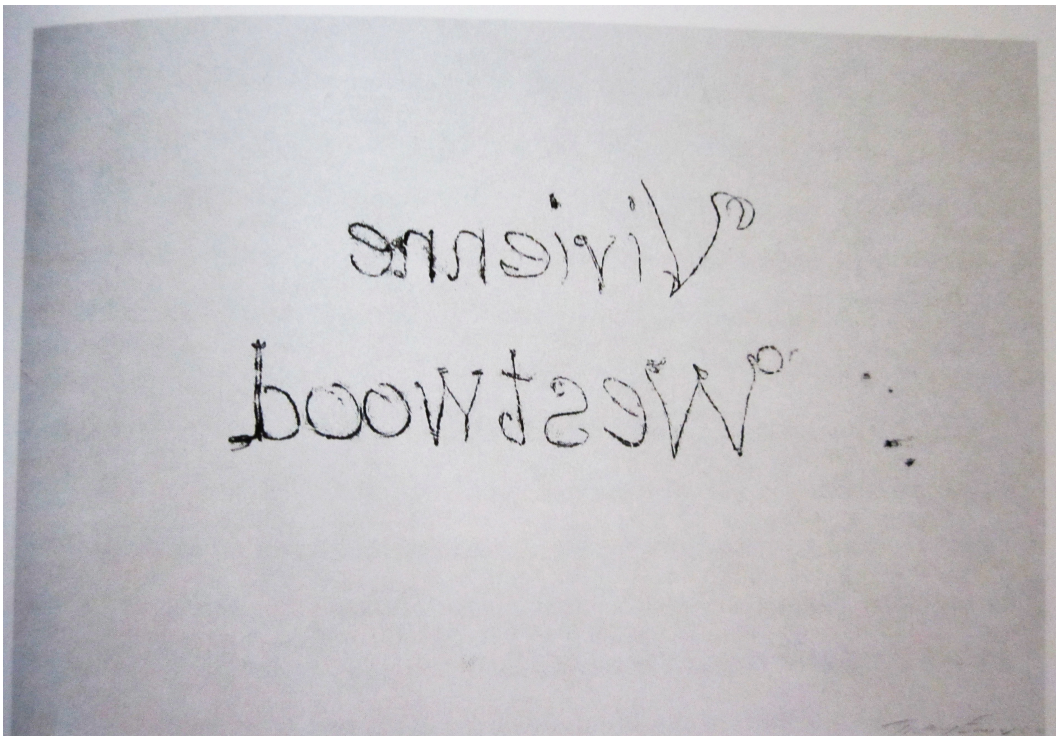


Figure 5. *Vivienne Westwood (2000)*. Monoprint, 29.5 x 41.75 cm. Courtesy of the White Cube.

In recent years, this commercial side to Emin's art seems to have become even more prominent. Her website has an online shop, which sells not only limited edition prints of her work but also a series of kitchenware featuring drawings of birds and, ironically, her cat Dockett, the same pet that had been the cause of so much confusion amongst her audience. All drawings are, of

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<sup>58</sup> Sean O'Hagan, "It's a vision of hell, sometimes, being me," *The Observer*, May 22 2005, accessed on May 10 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2005/may/22/art>

course, executed in Emin's signature style, as were the Tracey Emin suitcases the White Cube gallery was selling in 2007, which resembled Emin's appliqué blankets. Emin was one of the artists to create a promotional poster for the 2012 Olympics in London, and she also designed the 2012 summer edition of the London tube map. Both designs feature birds, resembling drawings that have appeared in Emin's non-commissioned art before. These more commercial examples of Emin's art show the extent to which her style (particularly her drawings) have become instantly recognizable, to the point where they can be used to sell products other than gallery art. Indeed, Tracey Emin has become a brand in its own right. And even in these "products", Emin has attempted to maintain a sense of confession: the limited edition White Cube suitcases were adorned by 200 unique rosettes, each of which carried the address of a "place of love" Emin had visited, handwritten by Emin herself; her design for the Olympics reads "You inspire me/With your determination/And I love you"; and her design for the London tube features a personal map with only the names of stations she often visits. These personal touches ensure that Emin's art blurs self-expression and a sense of intimacy with the highly commercial celebrity culture of which she is part.

### **A double masquerade**

The failure of Emin's audience and the media to distinguish between life and art, coupled with Emin's own 'confessional' strategies, has led to the collective creation of a strong and all-pervading artistic persona. This persona, let us call her *Mad Tracey from Margate*, relies on the middle class, uneducated bad-girl trope, and has become the main context in which to assess and interpret Tracey Emin's art. Emin herself has actively reinforced this merging of her celebrity life with her art, not only through the assertion that her art is autobiographical, but also by featuring this relatively newfound celebrity-life as a theme in her art, alongside the well-known topics of sex and depression.

However, through her assertions in the media on the sincerity of her project<sup>59</sup>, Emin seemingly denies that this image building forms any conscious part of her work, even though works such as *Mad Tracey From Margate. Everyone's been there* clearly suggest otherwise. Perhaps the biggest difference between Emin and her precursors such as Warhol, then, is that Emin is “not so much engaged in a masquerade (in putting on an identity as you would a costume) as in a masquerade of a masquerade”<sup>60</sup>: her acts and suggestions of authenticity and sincerity are attempts to hide the laborious process of persona-construction – a persona that is a fabrication in the first place.

In principle, the existence of *Mad Tracey* does not pose any immediate problem for Emin's art: in fact, I would argue that it strengthens her art, because each individual work gains in meaning and significance due to the over-arching presence of Emin's persona. The audience can draw on this persona in order to make sense of the work that is in front of them; each work is related to the next. In this sense, there is something to the argument that it is this persona that constitutes Emin's most important work of art.<sup>61</sup> However, some of Emin's more recent commercial works might rely on this persona too much. These projects lack the conceptual depth of works such as *My Bed* and *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*, relying instead on rather trivial ‘confessions’ without any added light-heartedness. As a result, in these works, the persona turns out to be the only source of meaning, and they are dangerously close to becoming self-parody. It does seem like Emin struggles more to uphold her persona along with her new life as a wealthy, successful, dare I say happy, celebrity than she would like to admit. Ironically, it is her representation in the media as a successful celebrity that reaves Emin's art from its power – the same media that was complicit in the creation of Emin's initial artist-image.

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<sup>59</sup> Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 37

<sup>60</sup> Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*, 47

<sup>61</sup> Laura Cumming, “Tracey Emin: Love is what you want – review,” *The Observer*, 22 May 2011, accessed on 18 May 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/may/22/tracey-emin-love-hayward-review?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487>

This notion of the double masquerade poses another important question about the interpretation of Emin's art as well. Through her persona, Emin has created a strong and effective tool for understanding her art, her works becoming a string of mini-stories that all refer back to some grand truth, the narrative of Tracey Emin. But if, as we have seen in the last chapter, the authenticity of the confessions on which these mini-stories are built is debatable, and if, as we have seen in this chapter, the persona itself is a construct as dependent on media appearances and sponsorship as on her art itself, then what exactly is at the core of Tracey Emin's art? Is it, as Stallabrass would suggest, an example of 'high art lite', empty art that is created to take advantage of the commercialisation of the art world? Is it symptomatic for the public's interest in public confession and voyeurism? Is it a self-indulgent exploration of the self? Or could it be that, at the core of Tracey Emin's art, something meaningful can be found about the illusion of veracity and the interaction between artist and audience in a project of autobiography? It is my conviction that the latter is true for the art of Tracey Emin. The final chapter will be devoted to exploring this possibility.



### 3. Emin's art as autobiography

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As I mentioned in the first chapter, the name of Tracey Emin's first solo exhibition, which took place in 1993, was *My Major Retrospective*: a name that suggested that this exhibition was a kind of ending point, looking back on a career that, in actuality, had yet to begin. In this sense, even in her earliest exhibition, Emin showed signs of constructing a narrative about her artistic career. This concept of narrativity is a key component of Tracey Emin's art: as I have shown, viewers are invited to reconstruct parts of the narrative of Emin's personal life in almost all of Emin's works of art. As a result, this narrative has become a binding element that makes her oeuvre into a coherent entity, in spite of its great variety in media (it was with this observation that I closed the discussion on Emin's persona). In this way, even the simplest of her drawings can, through association with Emin's "grand narrative" (the familiar story of sexual abuse, depression, alcoholism, and abortion), turn into significant self-portraits and, for some, evoke great emotions.



*Figure 6. If I could just go back and start again (1995). Monoprint, 65 x 81.5cm. Courtesy of the White Cube.*

A good example is the melancholy-tinged monoprint *If I could just go back and start again* (1995, figure 6), which depicts a young, naked girl, standing straight but seemingly relaxed, staring curiously ahead into the beyond. The title of the work is neatly written in the bottom-left corner of the print. Taken on its own, the drawing nicely frames a longing for the unhurried, wide-eyed attitude that characterizes adolescence. However, considered within the context of Emin's personal history (in particular because of that suggestive title) the drawing becomes a yearning for a different past, for a chance to correct past mistakes, and to overcome trauma. It is this presence of Emin's "grand narrative" – which is obviously closely connected to her artistic persona – that makes critics like Chris Townsend interpret such drawings as autobiographical.<sup>62</sup> However, he also points out that the image is "a reflexive image not drawn from a mirror as a self-portrait might traditionally be"<sup>63</sup>: rather than being structured as portrait of the artist herself, the image represents a young, untarnished, innocent Emin that is merely a recollection of the past (or perhaps never really was). Such works invite an autobiographical reading, but are not structured as self-portraits in the traditional sense.

The distinction between these two terms – an autobiographical portrait and a self-portrait – is useful in understanding Emin's work, because it releases us from the heavy constraint of interpreting everything she does and makes in terms of a direct representation of the artistic self, be it in body or mind. However, at the same time, calling Emin's work "autobiographic" brings with it a new set of assumptions and expectations that are equally difficult to work with. As I showed in the first chapter, if we expect autobiography to be an immediate mode of expression, which conveys truths about its creator, then the mediated, thought nature of Emin's work challenges an interpretation of her art as unproblematically autobiographical – a point that was confirmed by Townsend and Merck<sup>64</sup>. This issue becomes particularly pressing when we

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<sup>62</sup> Chris Townsend, "Heart of glass: Reflection, Reprise, and Riposte in Self-Representation," in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 90

<sup>63</sup> Townsend, "Heart of glass," 90

<sup>64</sup> Townsend and Merck, "Eminent domain," 7

consider the degree of fabrication that was necessary for the creation and mediation of Emin's narrative and persona: there does not seem to be a "true" Emin, whose autobiography we can read through her work. But what exactly is this story told throughout Emin's art, if not autobiography? This chapter sets out to investigate the extent to which Emin's confessional, self-conscious style of making art invites or resists an 'autobiographical' interpretation.

## Writing and language in Emin's art

A narrow understanding of autobiography as a *written* account of the author himself might exclude most visual art, simply on the basis that visual art is not written. It is for this reason that some scholars have opted for the term *autographics* in order to refer to the telling of a life narrative in a variety of visual media, sometimes (but not always) combined with the written word.<sup>65</sup> As Whitlock and Poletti point out, "There is now more than ever a proliferation of the autobio-graphical in visual cultures and new media, and these intersections of various modes and media of self-representation produce some new issues for critical inquiry."<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Emin's art seems to provide an excellent example of the graphic life narrative. In fact, the authors argue that Emin's entry for the 1999 Turner Prize, which included the *My Bed* installation, was the progenitor of the term 'autographics'. As I noted in my discussion of this work, *My Bed* raised questions about subjectivity and spectatorship in visual art that asks to be read as autobiographical. The work did not let itself be analysed in the same way a written autobiography would: the work was more direct due to its physical, tangible presence, and provided merely one snapshot, one trace of a history. The narrative suggested by the trace had to be invented by the audience (with some help, no doubt, by Emin's media appearances). For works like these, 'autographics' could perhaps be useful at least in determining what exactly Tracey Emin's art *is*.

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<sup>65</sup> Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti, "Self-regarding art," *Biography* 31:1 (2008), v

<sup>66</sup> Whitlock and Poletti, "Self-regarding art," vii

The work of Emin, however, avoids such pigeonholing either way, because it features a great amount of writing, which often holds both visual impact and a textual meaning. Emin herself has underlined the importance of words for her visual art: “I don't think I'm visually the best artist in the world, right? (...) But when it comes to words, I have a uniqueness that I find almost impossible in terms of art - and it's my words that actually make my art quite unique.”<sup>67</sup> In Emin's art, the aesthetics of writing go beyond typography, and the images are not merely illustrative of what is written down. The visual and scriptural elements of her work complement each other, strengthen each other, depend on each other, and occasionally clash with each other (take, for instance, the juvenile-looking but fiercely outspoken *Mad Tracey from Margate. Everyone's been there*, which I discussed previously). Indeed, as Lynn Barber points out, “she needs both - the fierceness of the words playing off the delicacy of the art - to really make her point”.<sup>68</sup> Thus, by featuring writing as such a prominent part of her work, Emin blurs the traditional lines between literature and visual art: indeed, “She challenges us to think of writing as visual art and visual art as a kind of text.”<sup>69</sup>

This fusion between visual art and literature is perhaps best illustrated by Emin's 1996 appliqué blanket *Love Poem* (figure 7). On a colourful background, letters are embroidered to form a poem. The imprecise execution of the blanket (letters unevenly cut out and unevenly aligned), along with the variety of colours, gives the work a sense of innocence, childishness, even. However, the contents of the actual poem that is embroidered on the blanket suggests otherwise:

YOU PUT YOUR HAND  
ACROSS MY MOUTH STILL  
THE NOISE CONTINUES  
EVERY PART OF MY BODY IS

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<sup>67</sup> Barber, “Show and Tell”

<sup>68</sup> Barber, “Show and Tell”

<sup>69</sup> Melanie McGrath, “Something's Wrong”

SCREAMING IM LOST  
ABOUT TO BE SMASHED  
INTO A THOUSAND MILLION  
PIECES EACH PART FOR  
EVER BELONGING TO YOU

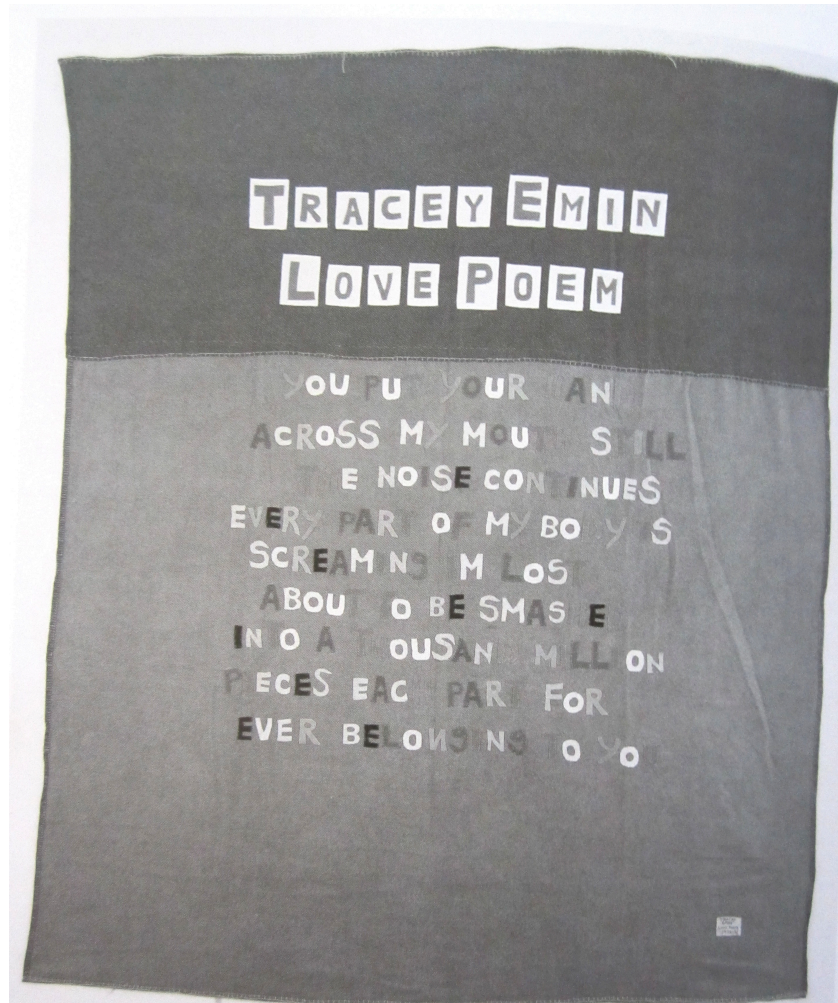


Figure 7. *Love Poem* (1996). Appliqué blanket, 243.8 x 243.8 cm. Courtesy of the White Cube.

*Love Poem* seems to be a declaration of dedication (“EACH PART FOR/EVER BELONGING TO YOU) in spite of (or possibly even because of) the violent, possibly painful, process the subject seems to go through: being smashed to pieces suggests pain, and the mentioning of a hand across the mouth suggests that it might be involuntary. The poem thus revisits the themes of sex and the thin line between sex and violence, both common to Emin’s work. While the poem’s imagery is strong on its own, it is the synthesis of these words and the contradictory visual cues that truly gives the work an edge.

Unlike some of her other blankets, such as the previously discussed *Mad Tracey from Margate. Everyone's been there*, which have drawings embroidered on them alongside words and lines, *Love Poem* features only writing. However, Emin still clearly makes use of the visual qualities of the work in addition to the words themselves: it is the juxtaposition of the materials and arrangement with the poem's content that grant this work its effect. At the same time, the poem's familiar themes and even its potential reference to sexual abuse tie it in neatly with the "grand narrative" of Tracey Emin.



Figure 8. *I think it's in my head* (2002). Size unknown. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery.

A very similar effect is achieved by many of Tracey Emin's neon installations, which have become one of her trademarks, the kind of instantly recognizable objects one usually associates with commercial brands and companies. These installations usually feature one or multiple lines of texts written in red, pink, or purple neon lights and expressive, almost slogan-like verses, such as "you forgot to kiss my soul" (2001, figure 9), "people like you/need to/fuck people like/me" (2005), and "I promise to love you" (2010). The texts are "written" in Emin's handwriting, and sometimes even feature crossed-out lines (e.g. *I think it's in my head* (2002, figure 8)), thus conjuring a similar sense of hurriedness and uncertainty as the writing on her drawings. Like the texts on Emin's blankets, these blunt confessions read like diary entries, but because most of the neon installations are one-liners, they often lack the personal

details that characterize the blankets. Instead, through the ubiquity of their content, they seem to reach for universality and relatability. This effect is further enhanced by the usage of neon as a medium: their associations with popular culture and mass consumption fit with the ubiquity of their content. These installations are thus characterized by a glaring contradiction: the private nature of the confession is juxtaposed with the medium of neon, which is found in public, crowded spaces and generally used to convey impersonal, practical information. They are also reminiscent of the short, personal, but very public on-line status updates on new social media. There is hardly need to point out the irony in the fact that Tracey Emin has made these neon signs – the works that rely most on associations with pop culture and consumerism – into one of her trademarks: like some of the works discussed in chapter two, the signs seem to carry a commentary on the commercial nature of the contemporary art world, and on the contemporary trend of public exposure.



*Figure 9. You forgot to kiss my soul (2001). Pale pink and white neon, 45 1/2 x 55 5/16 inches. Courtesy of the Seavest Gallery.*

It is easy to view this use of language as an attempt to write an autobiography through visual art, and these writings have in fact probably contributed to the many autobiographical interpretations of Emin's art. However, these writings only support such a reading of her work to some extent. While in works such as *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*, *Mad Tracey from Margate*. *Everyone's been there*, and perhaps even *If I could just go back and start again*, the text has a clear narrative dimension, conveying parts of a history that at least pretends to be steeped in autobiographical meaning, in some of her embroideries, and particularly in her neon installations, the text is unspecific and the impact consequently mostly visual. These texts only contribute to Emin's "grand narrative" through implication and association. As a result, an autobiographical reading of a work like *You forgot to kiss my soul*, when taken on its own, becomes problematic: the "you" and "my" are anonymous and thus lack a reference to the artist's own life. Clearly, not every work that features writing in Emin's oeuvre can be read as autobiographical in the literal sense. Although almost every work Emin makes appears to refer back to herself, interpreting all of her writing as autobiographical in its own right is a mistake, similar to the mistake of interpreting her purely visual art as unproblematically autobiographical.

By featuring writing as such a prominent part of her work, Emin blurs the traditional lines between literature and visual art: "She challenges us to think of writing as visual art and visual art as a kind of text."<sup>70</sup> This tendency pervades the many different media Emin works with – drawings, embroidery, and installations. In terms of categorization, Emin's blend of art and literature obviously does not let itself be pinned down very easily. Emin's style, a hybrid of visual art and literature, invites her audience to think beyond the categories of art and create a framework of interpretation that can account for all elements of her work. And while the narrative told by Emin is perhaps not autobiographical, it does offer a new idea about the way an autobiography can be constructed: instead of a singular, complete account, Emin provides an

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<sup>70</sup> Melanie McGrath, "Something's Wrong"



array of narratives in different forms: physical traces of her past (*My Bed*), visual representations of her self, imagined or otherwise (*I've got it all; If I could just go back and start again*), and poetic and prosaic transcriptions of lived experiences (*Mad Tracey from Margate*). In this way, Emin's work, rather than *being* an attempt at writing autobiography through art, seems to *comment* on the writing of autobiography through art, and the impossibility of capturing one's life story in a single work – an argument I will further develop below.

### *Strangeland*: Emin's multimediality pushed further

The life narrative that unfolds in Emin's visual art has been captured in a more formal form of autobiography as well. Her interest in writing her life is underlined by the publishing of several books, of which some are indeed explicitly expressed to be autobiographical. Of these autobiographical works, Emin's series of recollections *Strangeland* (2005) is the most famous and most widely published, but it was preceded very early in her career by *Exploration of the Soul* (1994), a short story which was printed as a limited edition of 200 copies. While *Exploration of the Soul* focuses only on Emin's childhood until the age of 13, *Strangeland* expands on it by covering a timespan that stretches from her birth to her present life, divided in three parts: *Motherland*, spanning from birth to her teenage years, *Fatherland*, covering the tumultuous relationship with her father, and *Traceyland*, which is largely devoted to what happened after she became an artist. Moreover, some of the poetic texts featured in *Exploration* appear in *Strangeland* in a slightly edited, more prose-like version. A more significant difference between the two works, however, is that while *Exploration* has been published as a book as well as exhibited as a work of art in its own right (currently owned, in fact, by London's Tate Modern)<sup>71</sup>, *Strangeland* is a mass media paperback, and therefore situated outside the realm of Emin's visual art – albeit obviously

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<sup>71</sup> "Exploration of the Soul", Tate Modern, accessed on June 12, 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/emin-exploration-of-the-soul-t11887>

strongly connected to it, due to its subject matter. It is for this reason that I limit my discussion of Emin's printed autobiography to *Strangeland*.

According to Max Saunders, an autobiography is a 'supplementary' form: "It stands outside a prior oeuvre, to comment upon it. It seeks to incorporate or contain that oeuvre."<sup>72</sup> An autobiography thus serves to elucidate and remark on the oeuvre that went before it. It should come as no surprise, then, that some critics felt that there was no real "need" for an autobiography by Tracey Emin: "Tracey Emin is at a strategic disadvantage when it comes to writing her autobiography - we know most of the juicy bits already".<sup>73</sup> In other words, the same critics that were used to interpreting Emin's art in the most literal of ways felt that an autobiography would serve no real purpose, because her art had already told the story, and her art was all there was to understand about her. And indeed, in *Strangeland*, Emin mostly tells stories that her art (and lest we forget, media appearances) had already familiarized us with: the stories of her rape and sexual abuse, her promiscuity as a teenager in Margate, her two abortions, and her alcoholism. The book even features the narrative *Why I Never Became A Dancer*, which she already told in her 1995 film of the same name.<sup>74</sup> By touching on these familiar themes and retelling the stories that are so prominent in her art, *Strangeland* reinforces the grand narrative that is the topic of her art, and the *Mad Tracey from Margate* persona that she constructed through it.

Like its content, the making of Emin's autobiography recalls her visual art. In an interview with Sean O'Hagan, she proclaims that the work consists of writings that she wrote in different times of her life, spanning a total of 25 years: "I gave my editor, Nicholas Blincoe, four big boxes of my writings, and he's edited it down."<sup>75</sup> Thus, rather than a series of recollections, or a reflection on her past, *Strangeland* is to be understood as a collection of

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<sup>72</sup> Max Saunders, *Self Impression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 517

<sup>73</sup> Alice O'Keefe, "Still an enigma," *The Observer*, 30 October 2005, accessed on May 28th 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2005/oct/30/art.biography>

<sup>74</sup> Tracey Emin, *Strangeland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2005), 42-46

<sup>75</sup> O'Hagan, "It's a vision of hell, sometimes, being me"

stories that are almost like diary entries, since they are written around the time that the event of which they narrate took place. This method suggests immediacy in the same way that Emin's visual art does, and as a result, it informs the supposed authenticity of what is written down: since the content was written right after events occurred, it has the appearance of being unmediated, in the same way her "haphazard" drawings are. Of course, the fact that the work has been edited by a second party already undermines such claims of immediacy, but this story of the book's conception does give the work the same sheen of authenticity that characterizes her visual art. Moreover, this format might further undermine the labelling of *Strangeland* as what Saunders calls "formal" autobiography, meaning "real author, narrator, and the name on the title-page all coincide, and seek to interpret their own life"<sup>76</sup>: while Emin is indeed the author, narrator, and featured on *Strangeland's* title-page, throughout the book, Emin does not seem to make any attempt at interpretation, aiming instead for the direct mediation of experience as it was lived by her. It is for this reason that I consider *Strangeland* not an autobiography, but rather an autobiographical novel, "something that is not a formal autobiography, but that has some qualities or content of autobiography in it".<sup>77</sup> This distinction between autobiography and autobiographical novel perhaps resembles Townsend's distinction between an autobiographical portrait and a self-portrait: a work of art that does not represent the artist directly, but nonetheless has some connection with the artist's life experiences.

*Strangeland* resembles Emin's visual art in another way as well, namely, through its ambiguous stance towards 'truth'. As critic Nicholas Lezard notes, "most of the time, it is [a memoir], although her [Emin's] relationship to the truth is variable: incidents described here have been contradicted by her elsewhere".<sup>78</sup> In fact, Lezard seems to suggest here that the parts where

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<sup>76</sup> Saunders, *Self-impression*, 4

<sup>77</sup> Saunders, *Self-impression*, 4

<sup>78</sup> Nicholas Lezard, "In bed with Tracey Emin," *The Guardian*, 7 October 2006, accessed on May 28th 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/oct/07/art>

*Strangeland* seems to deviate from the truth, we ought to stop calling it a memoir. Apparently, it is expected from autobiography that it is truthful and non-fictional. Indeed, as Paul de Man observes in his 1979 essay *Autobiography as De-Facement*, autobiography “seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does.”<sup>79</sup> However, as Saunders notes, there is no way for a reader to determine to what extent certain parts of an autobiography are fictionalized.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, “It appears, then, that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable”, De Man concludes himself as well.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the matter of truth is generally ambiguous in the field of autobiography, and autobiography as a genre can altogether not clearly be separated from fiction. Of course, by calling Emin’s novel autobiographical rather than an autobiography, this problem of fictionalization is already partly sidestepped. But the observation that autobiography and fiction are not polar opposites opens up possibilities for the interpretation of Emin’s visual art as well – a point I will revisit below.

Nonetheless, things are slightly different in the case of Emin’s *Strangeland* when compared to other autobiographies, because the work inevitably is brought into contact with her visual art, which, in Emin’s case, is apparently autobiographical as well. Due to this similarly autobiographical stance in her art, it becomes almost impossible to see the book as a ‘supplement’ to her oeuvre in the way Saunders described. The book does everything her art does as well: it is similar in tone, style, and content (even its form is not out of step with the rest of her oeuvre, considering her frequent usage of writing). In effect, *Strangeland* is basically “just” another work in her oeuvre. This point is underlined by the fact that the author largely stays quiet about her life as an artist and on her motivations to make art, and that she does not directly *comment* on her art in any way: while there is a quick reference to her “emotional suicide” – the moment she quit art and destroyed her paintings –

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<sup>79</sup> Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” *Modern Language Notes*, 94:5 (1979), 920

<sup>80</sup> Saunders, *Self-impression*, 5

<sup>81</sup> De Man, “Autobiography as De-facement,” 921

and in the first part of the book, there is some interaction with works she has made in the past (such as the aforementioned chapter *Why I Never Became I Dancer*), on the whole these instances are slight. In doing so, Emin makes no attempt to step out of her primary public role, “removing the mask and revealing the self”, which Saunders names as one of the tropes of formal autobiography.<sup>82</sup> Instead, Emin stays within the boundaries of the persona that she had already assumed in her art, and continues to enact this performance. However, as Saunders points out, since the author of an autobiography takes on the pose of revealing a “true self” that was hidden in his other works, this taking off of a mask can *also* be seen as an artificial performance, striving as it might be for authenticity. By staying true to the “self” of her other art, Emin avoids this paradox.

Thus, in *Strangeland*, Emin does not try to undo the masquerade of her artistic persona – the masquerade of a masquerade we observed in the previous chapter, which makes the work remarkably different from those autobiographies that claim to shed new light on the way we should perceive the person who wrote it. But to what extent can an artist’s autobiography really elucidate the oeuvre on which it reflects to begin with? After all, the autobiography, too, is per definition an aesthetic expression of its creator, just like the works that it is supposed to elucidate. In other words, the autobiography becomes part of the oeuvre on which it is supposed to comment. The formal autobiography is thus awkwardly positioned both outside and inside the artist’s oeuvre. Emin’s *Strangeland*, which goes without the pretention to reveal something not available in Emin’s oeuvre already, avoids falling prey to this paradox as well. In fact, its form – a collection of seemingly separate narratives that resemble diary entries – through its lack of the reflexive dimension that for some characterizes autobiography, seems to underline the impossibility of packaging the experiences in one’s life into one singular narrative. Similarly, its content – without much reference to her artistic life – suggests the impossibility of singling out those life experiences that have

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<sup>82</sup> Saunders, *Self-impression*, 515

shaped the artist's vision, made her into the "woman she is today". In this way, while presenting itself as an autobiography (even though it is, in fact, more appropriate to speak of an autobiographical novel), *Strangeland* defies several important expectations of formal autobiography, and it (perhaps unconsciously) comments on some of the truisms about what an autobiography can achieve.

## The limits of autobiography

The discussion of Emin's "autobiography" *Strangeland* has left us with some important observations. First, that all autobiographers, by stepping outside of their formal role, are involved in some kind of performance; and second, that autobiography and fiction do not necessarily oppose each other, but are in fact difficult to distinguish, and often overlap. In my view, these observations have significant implications for Emin's oeuvre beyond *Strangeland* as well. Regarding the first: Emin's art clearly is affected by, and complicit in, the performance of Emin's artistic persona, a fact that potentially delegitimizes the claim that her art constitutes an authentic autobiographical project. However, if all autobiographers in some way enact a performance in the way they transcribe their self onto a piece of art, taken as a whole, Emin's performance does not stand out as abnormal at all; performance is in some way inherent to autobiography. In regards to the second: while the potential (if not sometimes glaringly obvious) fictitiousness of Emin's recollections again might problematize the characterization of her art as an authentic autobiographical project, the fact that fiction is in essence indistinguishable from autobiography, and in fact inherent to the rendering of experience into a narrative form, provides an argument against such a dismissal of Emin's art as autobiography.

These conclusions could potentially point at an autobiographical reading of Emin's work. And certainly, I see no reason to doubt that behind the façade, the recurring themes in her art are in some way inspired by events that she

experienced personally. But the large amount of tabloid coverage, interviews, and other media appearances has ensured that such an interpretation of Emin's work has become completely uninteresting. If her art really is nothing more than a sincere autobiographic project, then her art has lost most of its significance as she rose to celebrity stardom: certainly, there is nothing avant-garde about self-exposure any more. But Emin's refusal to provide a stable, non-contradicting representation of herself in her art seems to suggest that at the heart of Emin's work lies something else than autobiography. As I pointed out above, the core of Emin's art is formed by a narrative, which is presented by the artist as being her life story. This narrative, though, if not strictly autobiographical, is surely *biographical*: someone's story is being told, even if it is not Tracey Emin's. It is for this reason that I suggest to take Emin's art as a complicated piece of what Hermione Lee calls life-writing: a piece of writing in which "the distinction between biography and autobiography is being deliberately blurred".<sup>83</sup> This description fits many of Emin's works perfectly, because they are all explicitly biographical, even when it is unclear to what extent they really refer to the artist herself.

I would thus argue that rather than a project of autobiography, Emin's work constitutes a project of life-writing. In this project, Emin reconsiders the parameters of autobiography and points out the impossibility of capturing the "real" the self in a singular, hermetic work. The multitude of forms used by Emin (traces, visual representations, written confessions) can be viewed as a new approach to autobiography, one that does not focus on conveying a coherent, structured, chronological account, but instead tries to evoke lived experiences and states of mind in order to give the audience a sense of the complexity of, and contradictions within, the self that is exposed. Rather than individual works, it is the totality of Emin's body of work that constitutes this "autobiography", each part complimenting the other, and, through the creation of new works, constantly being revised. The idea of a body of work constituting a piece of life-writing is also found in Saunders, who notes that

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<sup>83</sup> Hermione Lee, *Body Parts* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005), 100

“an entire oeuvre is itself also an accumulative autobiography; and arguably the fullest autobiography of that writer.”<sup>84</sup> When Saunders speaks of the oeuvre as autobiography, he bases this claim on an observation made by both Wilde and Nietzsche about the inevitability of autobiography in literature, even when the author has no real intention of writing in an autobiographic mode. Emin, though, has every intention of writing autobiographically, or at least, so she has her audience believe: a point that further supports my decision to analyse Emin’s oeuvre as one entity.

It is my argument, then, that the art of Tracey Emin, when taken as a whole, while not formally an autobiography, constitutes a project of life-writing that purposely invites an autobiographical reading – further encouraged by Emin’s media performance and public image. Of course, the reading of Emin’s oeuvre as a project of life-writing should never be the sole reading, nor should it necessarily be the principal one. Indeed, as I have pointed out at many other parts in this thesis, Emin’s individual works often carry a multitude of meanings – I have observed comments on femininity and womanhood, celebrity culture, the distinction between private and public, and the relationship between spectator and audience. All of these readings are valid and all of them carry weight. Nonetheless, it is life-writing that forms the connecting thread in her oeuvre, and it is life-writing that her oeuvre as a whole aims towards – regardless of whether the life being written is Emin’s own. Emin’s work makes the audience wonder about the qualities and limitations of autobiography, and about new ways of writing and conveying the self. She challenges the viewer/reader with intense intimacy and honesty, making the private public, while at the same time, posing questions about the possibility of autobiography and the performative aspects of being an artist. Complex, multi-layered, flawed, but ultimately cathartic: the confessional art of Tracey Emin.

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<sup>84</sup> Saunders, *Self-impression*, 256



## 5. Conclusion

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The art of Tracey Emin is characterized by its confessional voice: throughout her oeuvre, she continuously suggests that her art draws on the story of her own life. She thus actively invites her audience to read and interpret her work autobiographically. However, the mode of confession raises specific expectations on part of the audience: as we have seen, confession is traditionally associated with the production of truth, as an honest confession (which, in fact, is a tautology of sorts) is considered to potentially lead to absolution. Accordingly, Emin's audience expects her art to be authentic, because a dishonest confession is not a confession at all. Emin, though, has proven to be unable or unwilling to assure her authenticity, at least on the level of discourse: the life story she narrates in her art shows signs of incoherence and outright contradiction. But on the level of mediation, too, her authenticity is by no means a guarantee. While the hurried, imprecise, heart-on-sleeve nature of many of her works suggests that the artist is pouring out her soul in whatever she produces, in reality, every piece of work she creates is undoubtedly mediated and thought in some way, no matter how direct it appears to be, her art is always a fabrication, at least to some extent.

The issue is further complicated by the celebrity status Emin has acquired since she first became active as an artist: from this point onwards, the confessions in her art were supplemented by, and consequently compared with, her representation in the media and her public performance. As a result, the already thinly-drawn line between "life" and "art" became almost indistinguishable. At the same time, Emin has purposefully encouraged such blurring between the artist and her art, by drawing on the theme of her celebrity in her artistic output. This shows that Emin is very aware of the effects her art have on the public, and of how her art relates to her public image outside of her art. This development resulted in the birth of an artistic

persona that has become the main source of interpretation for much of Emin's work. As we have seen, our "knowledge" of Emin's life story and our ideas on her personality can be applied to analyse all of her works, even the ones that do not explicitly or specifically seem to address the artist's private life: it is thus an impressive fabrication that has served Emin well throughout her career, and something is to be said for considering this her most important work of art.

In this thesis, though, I have argued otherwise. Clearly, throughout her oeuvre, Emin has constantly tiptoed the line between fact and fiction and between memory and imagination. Subsequently, an autobiographical interpretation of her work is difficult to defend. Instead, I have opted for a more neutral term that brings with it a set of different expectations: life-writing. Classifying Emin's oeuvre as a project of life-writing helps us understand Emin's constant confusing (or deliberate blurring) of fiction and autobiography, and her reluctance to provide a coherent life narrative. Instead, through her multi-media approach, Emin explores the limits of autobiography and comments on the impossibility of capturing one's self in an organized, rational manner. She simultaneously addresses the issue of performance as inherent to being an artist. In this way, Emin's confessional art becomes an experimental way of conveying life narratives, one that acknowledges that art is always calculated and always a performance. In my view, the possibility of authenticity, the keyword in so many interpretations of Emin's work, is actually what is constantly questioned in the art of Tracey Emin.

There is much room for additional research on the topic of authenticity in autobiography, both in visual and other arts. Confessional art as a genre deserves more attention: in particular, in spite of its clear narrative dimension, I think it has not sufficiently been linked to the field of literature as of yet. The case of Tracey Emin obviously shows that such a link might be fruitful: after all, because of her extensive use of language, her art often defies pigeonholing as either visual art or literature. More specifically, I think a

comparison of the work of Tracey Emin with authors such as Sylvia Plath or even Virginia Woolf could provide interesting: all women who have supposedly incorporated autobiographical elements in their art, and who all relied on a public image that went beyond what was present in their art. But there is room for further research within the boundaries of visual art, too. Comparing Emin to fellow artists Frida Kahlo or Louise Bourgeois could shed more light on how the (female) self has been represented in visual art, and on the relationship of life-writing in visual art with a public artist image. Especially since celebrity culture has now truly entered the domain of contemporary art, such research could prove to be enlightening.

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