

Projects 44 : Sarah Lucas, Steven Pippin : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 23, 1993-February 8, 1994

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44

sarah lucas
steven pippin

studio project

The Museum of Modern Art
New York

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Some artists have a preference for the outrageous proposition. Dissenters and nonconformists by nature, they seek out opportunities for testing the limits of our tastes and beliefs. If they have picked their targets well, in retrospect we judge them to have been good artists and may even be grateful for their assault on our sensibilities.

Sarah Lucas and Steven Pippin, two young British artists who are now just emerging in their own country, belong to this class of subversives. Although they share nothing in terms of style, they nonetheless complement each other with their different brands of humor. Lucas tells rich jokes based on the materialization of visual and verbal puns; Pippin narrates intricate histories in which the completely improbable is made real through his perverse powers of invention.

Neither Pippin's nor Lucas's work was noticed in London until a few years ago, when it became evident that there had emerged a new and very large generation of young artists. In their paintings, objects, installations, and photographs these artists court the strange, the ephemeral, the grotesquely funny, and the shocking, as well as the inert and the peculiarly null. Self-conscious, ironic, and energetic, their humor often takes the form of visual and verbal shots delivered while in transit from one idea to another. An important event documenting the emergence of this generation was the publication in the mainstream art press in 1991 of the book *Technique Anglaise*, whose title — a French phrase used only by the English to denote the sexual practice of spanking — catches something of the sarcastic humor of this group.¹ The book contained a surprisingly large, if incomplete, roster of twenty-six young artists (Pippin was not included). The book rapidly sold out. It was the first time since the early 1980s — when Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, Richard Deacon, and Anish Kapoor (all ten to twenty years older than the new group and famous today) began to receive important critical attention — that a group of young English artists had attracted such interest. In a review of the first exhibition of this new group in America, the critic Peter Schjeldahl remarked on the absence in their work of "the famous and mysterious British sculptural flair."² This is accurate insofar as the new artists, many of whom are sculptors, quite naturally seem a little bored by, if respectful of, the achievements of their predecessors. These artists also found themselves in a position

Sarah Lucas. *The Old Couple*. 1991. Two wooden chairs, one pair of false teeth, and one cast wax penis. Collection of the artist.



Sarah Lucas. *Penis Nailed to a Board (Boxed Set)*. 1991. Newsprint, painted cardboard box, wooden blocks, cut paper, and varnish, 16 x 13 x 2". Collection of Eileen and Michael Cohen, New York.

where, so it seemed, everything had already been done before, producing in them an anxiety to get on with it, but also a sense of openness and a taste for taking risks.

Of all the objects in the exhibition, the one that most directly violates good taste is Lucas's *The Old Couple* (1991). Made up of — to say constructed from would seem inappropriate — two very unremarkable wooden chairs to which Lucas has attached a set of false teeth and a cast wax penis, the work plays an uncomfortable kinesthetic joke on our normal experience of chairs. Technically speaking, they form a kind of Surrealist object, like Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup, in that the conjunction of dissimilar things produces a sense of shock. Most Surrealist objects, however, were rarely so explicit or raunchy, since their creators preferred the more subtle symbols of Freudian mythology. Not so with Lucas. In *The Old Couple* the teeth rudely grin up from the seat of the chair like some cheerful *vagina dentata* eager to take a bite out of an unsuspecting sitter, while the penis raises its head with an air of insolent superiority. It is a vision of the sexes both terrible and funny, pairing male arrogance and immodesty with the worst of underhanded and passive female aggression. Lucas says that the title of the work could have been "The Eternal Couple" except that the word "eternal" seemed to her pretentious; indeed, one is reminded of all the phallic obsessions and castration anxieties to which the ancient Greeks were prey. At the same time, with its slightly sentimental title (imagine a nostalgic photograph of two rustics) and side-by-side placement of the chairs, the work may also be considered a portrait: Grant Wood's *American Gothic* updated by a Dadaist in the age of sexual toys, or an object-portrait of the procuresses and nasty old men to be found in satirical Dutch brothel pictures of the seventeenth century. Best of all, one suspects Lucas's attitude toward this pair of not being wholly sardonic; the work seems also to celebrate with hearty vulgarity a basic form of human vitality. In the throne room of Lucas's anti-palace, they are her royal couple.

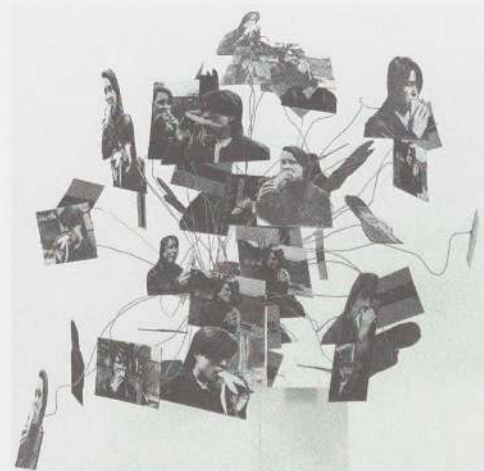
If the scheme of the portrait shadows *The Old Couple*, other of Lucas's sculptures imply furnishings, knickknacks, and other objects evocative of domestic interiors. For *Penis Nailed to a Board (Boxed Set)* (1991), Lucas took as her starting point a page from one of the London tabloids. According to the text of the article "fifteen perverts, including a lawyer, a missile design engineer, and a lay preacher were part of the most shocking porn ring ever cracked by British police." Wrapped in the sublimely meretricious packaging of the yellow press, the headlines scream "Penis Nailed to a Board in Sex Game" and "Some had their testicles sandpapered, court hears." As an artist interested in the matter of boundaries between the permissible and impermissible, Lucas was intrigued by the case,

but what she seemed to have noticed initially was less the legal question of intrusion into privacy, which was debated in parliament and the courts, than the appearance of the page itself. At a first glance, the rows of photographs showing the faces of the arrested men must have looked not like the wooden board referred to in the headline but a board of directors. Add the word "game" from the same headline and you might come up the idea of the board game, as Lucas has. Open the box with the newspaper page on the top and you will find little wooden blocks with pictures of the miscreants that seem to invite playing the game of matching block to name, face to perversion.

There are also other domestic objects. *The Bush* (1992), takes the form of a large frazzled bouquet in which the stems are made of wire and the flowers of black and white photographic self-portraits. Lucas here mocks poetic tropes which compare flowers to faces and to female bodies. Sometimes the process seems to reverse. Consisting of two boots tipped with razor blades, the work *1-123-123-12-12* (1991) recreates the sadistic footwear worn by more violent members of skinhead gangs (the title sounds like one of their militaristic chants), but seems less like an artifact of some subculture than a found Surrealist sculpture. *Concrete Boots* (1993), made by filling two boots with concrete and cutting them away when it had set, is Lucas's technical treatise on cast sculpture and her song of love for a coarse, gritty material most artists would not dream of using.

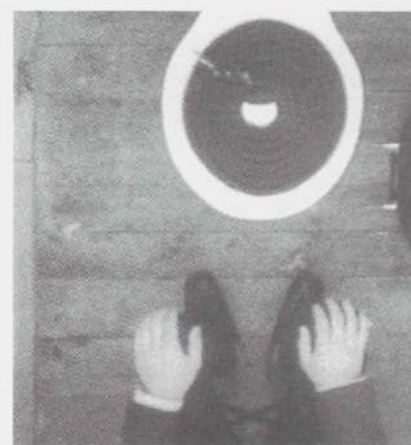
Wit is the province of a performer so it is not surprising that Lucas makes self-portraits. Although they are various in form — straight photographs, elements of mobiles and other sculpture, large collages — the repertoire until recently focused on two images: the jovial Lucas sitting on a flight of stone stairs and seen from below against a clear sky, an Olympian dressed in jeans, workman's shoes, and tee shirt; and Lucas the skinny-faced waif eating and playing with a banana. These two images measure the perils and pleasures of performing for a public. On the one hand there is the elevation that occurs in her "enthroned" portrait, where the ascension of a working-class girl suggests a stability equal to the photograph's triangular composition and monumental perspective. Against this is the self-portrait with a banana, which is suggestive of a comfortable, casual joking around about food and sex, but can suddenly shift, evoking feelings of hunger, poverty, and vulnerability. There is one particularly arresting image of Lucas, looking hollow-

Sarah Lucas. *The Bush*. 1992. Cut-and-pasted black and white photographs, cardboard, wire, tape, and glass vase, 30 x 30" (approx.). Private collection, New York.



cheeked and underfed, cramming a banana in her mouth while she eyes the viewer suspiciously: the artist as street child. In *Self-portrait* (1993), a large collage of color photocopies on brown paper, Lucas has devised a third persona that resolves the tension between the two others: Lucas the dressed-down bohemian, clad in leather jacket, jeans and boots, sporting sunglasses, a large stylishly knotted wool scarf, and an expression of defiance. When asked who she had become in this image she replied, "I think of it as my Clint Eastwood portrait."

If Lucas's humor is sudden and explosive, Pippin's is slow and introspective, a perverse mirth walled up behind an impeccable deadpan facade of seriousness. The two pieces by Pippin, *Follies of An Amateur Photographer* (1987) and *The*



Steven Pippin. "Contemplating Exposure," film still from video for *The Follies of An Amateur Photographer*. 1987. Edition shown in exhibition. Collection of Andrew and Karen Stillpass, Cincinnati.

Continued Saga of An Amateur Photographer (1993), do not shock like Lucas's sculptures but beguile us with the precision of their method and their air of introspection, making us witnesses to the performance of the most dubious miracles.

Follies of An Amateur Photographer documents perhaps the most questionable way of making photographs yet invented. Here is the artist's technical description:

Using a large black cloak to prevent fogging, a semi-circular piece of photographic paper was formed into a cone and pushed into a toilet bowl. An attachment made from wood, rubber, and fabric was then fitted onto the toilet and inflated. A small aperture in the top of the cover projected an image of the room down into the toilet. After the exposure (approximately 40 minutes), developer was added to the cistern and heated using a small portable electric element wired to the light fitting. Once the water reached 20°C the toilet was flushed, processing the image in the bowl.³

The final images, positive contact prints from a paper negative, are indeed views of a room as seen from the bottom of a toilet. As we search their surfaces, noting the ghostly evidence of the artist's strange ingenuity, we may feel some discomfort at the point of view Pippin has forced on us, and wonder whether we should not look so closely lest we sully our sight. By making four photographs rather than just one, Pippin accelerates us along a path of questionable connoisseurship, inviting us to admire his repetition of the original feat and to search for subtle differences in the etching of details and the play of light and shadow.



Steven Pippin. Film still from *The Continued Saga of An Amateur Photographer*. 1993.

Pippin's universe is elaborated on in a film which documents his photographic technique, which in itself is an integral part of the work. Through the camera's eye we see, in a mixture of close-up vignettes and wide overhead shots, the essential elements of the performance: Pippin under his cloak readying his apparatus; inflating the bellows with a bicycle pump; contemplating exposure as the film camera overhead stares directly into the aperture of his contraption; twiddling his thumbs in boredom during the exposure; heating the developer in the cistern; flushing the toilet to develop the image. Inserted into this sequence are two scenes which may possibly illuminate Pippin's vision of heaven and hell. Shot in slow motion, a roll of toilet paper drops away from the viewer toward a gray whiteness where it is suddenly and disturbingly swallowed up; if not exactly hell, this quiet catastrophe evokes all the terrors of the void. In the complementary scene the film seems suddenly to split open, revealing a factory where newly manufactured toilets descend slowly on an overhead cable to the floor of a brilliantly lit warehouse where they are put in orderly rows by a single worker. The whole tone of the scene is one of extraordinary bliss: the rapture of the factory's pervasive whiteness, the quiet ecstasy of the neat rows of toilets, the reassuring calm of repetition as the new toilets, untainted by any use, are welcomed like newly born souls into a hospital ward of paradise by an angelic nurse in overalls. It is also a resigned and tragic vision, for nowhere does Pippin suggest that the soul might be reborn. Pippin himself, as the protagonist of the film, becomes a sort of high priest of the watercloset, performing through his photography a ritual illuminating a tragic theology: the steady descent from immaculate conception to soft annihilation.

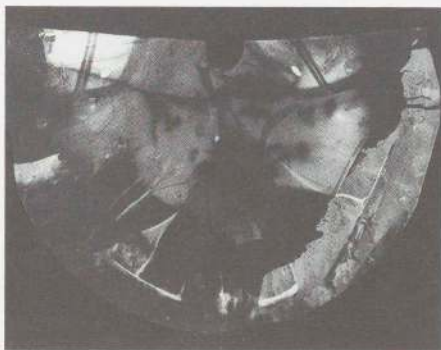
Pippin's precise and, to anyone who has faith in the camera as an objective instrument of truth, deeply humiliating assault on photography began in 1983. In addition to making films and sculptures, he has executed approximately one photographic project per year, in the process converting a bathtub, a wardrobe, a public photo booth, an abandoned house, and a washing machine into cameras. *The Continued Saga of An Amateur Photographer* (1993) was made in the bathroom of a British Rail train (London to Brighton, 12:32 p.m.) and is a sequel to *Follies*. Although not completed by the time this brochure went to press, preliminary trials indicate that the motion of the train and vigorous flushing

action of the toilet have given rise to more dramatic, expressionistic images. In each case Pippin's instruments of choice have been the pinhole camera and paper negative, the same ones used by the inventors of photography in the early nineteenth century. In recent times, this method has been favored only by obsessive antiquarians and occasionally snoopers.⁴ In resurrecting its corpse, Pippin has found a way to a different ideal of photographic practice:

*The future of photography seems to rely on the progress of the camera and its ability to be continually refined, to a point whereby images will be indistinguishable from reality. Working in the opposite direction to this mentality I have become fascinated with the idea of constructing a camera whose viewpoint is not some external subject, but instead one having the capability of looking back in on itself toward its own darkness.*⁵

Pippin espouses what might be called an imperialist photography in reverse, one that reverts to primitive methods of control, draws back from the conquest of exterior space into its own *camera obscura*, and claims no more descriptive power other than a transcription of its own workings.

The conjunction of works by Lucas and Pippin unexpectedly furnishes us with a simple but complete inversion of a fable of social order. It goes like this: Once upon a time there lived a king and queen who, though they derived their authority from God, through the Magna Carta ruled a devout and obedient people. Protected by a palace guard and surrounded by works of art and an illustrious court, they patronized artistic genius, which was visionary, universal, and scientific. The royal symbol was the sun, which stood for manners, decorum, and myth; the symbol of the people was the tree, which grows up to the sun. Such an image of order would have been resonant five hundred years ago, but it still echoes in our paternalistic and progressive democracies (even in America we have our elected royalty, with their White House intellectuals, official charities, and arts councils). Now, as we pass from the kingdom to the land of Pippin and Lucas, a terrible travesty occurs. Instead of a king and queen we encounter the awful eternity of *The Old Couple*, whose document of solidarity with the people is the tabloid, and whose chamber contains not works of art but objects concocted of snapshots, cardboard, concrete, and wire. The black sun of bad manners, broken taboos, and reality picks out with its light no palace guard but the sinister boots of 1-123-123-12-12. Set loose in this kingdom is an artist; particular, neurotic, and dystopian, he turns his genius to the assassination of an advanced technological medium and the promulgation of a scatological faith. The people in this anti-kingdom are profane, rebellious, and anti-



Steven Pippin.
*The Continued Saga
of An Amateur
Photographer*. 1993.
Black and white
contact print from paper
negative, 20 x 27".
Courtesy of enterprise,
inc., New York.

authoritarian. If they have a symbol it is not the tree but the phallus, whose blind and aggressive generative powers challenge the void. (It seems only appropriate that the exhibition was finally installed on the winter solstice, December 21, darkest day of the year and, in pagan times, occasion for riotous celebrations in which everyone joined briefly to overturn the established order.)

Perhaps it now appears clear that in the work of Pippin and Lucas humor is not necessarily the end toward which their art is the means but possibly the means toward an end. This end would be a political one, but not in the currently fashionable sense in which works of art are thought to be political. The little outrages and treasons they commit preach no new politically correct liberal rules of conduct, nor are they topical comments on any momentary issue of the day. Rather, they are appeals to whatever remains in us of our skepticism and eccentricity and independence, to all that is somehow rebellious and uncomforming, and these appeals are made to ensure that it is the individual who will fashion the structures of society and not the reverse. Having developed their sensibilities during a period, more than a decade long, of conservative and often regressive government ideologies and policies, their desire to drop-kick some of the old mythologies seems all the more understandable.

Robert Evrén

Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings

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Notes

1. Andrew Renton and Liam Gillick, eds., *Technique Anglaise: Current Trends in British Art* (London: Thames and Hudson), 1991.
2. Review of "Twelve British Artists" at Barbara Gladstone Gallery and SteinGladstone Gallery, New York, in *Frieze* (London), #7 (Nov./Dec. 1991), p. 45.
3. *Steven Pippin: The Rigmarole of Photography*, statement and notes by the artist, essays by Stuart Morgan and Brian Catling (London: Institute for Contemporary Arts, 1993), p. 52.
4. On a recent trip to London I saw a newspaper photograph of Diana, Princess of Wales, working out at a gym that had been taken using a pinhole camera installed in the ceiling with the connivance of the proprietor. More than one person interviewed in subsequent articles wondered whether newspapers would not eventually publish a photograph of her seated on the toilet.
5. *Steven Pippin: The Rigmarole of Photography*, p. 7.

Biographies

Sarah Lucas:

Born in London, 1961. Studies at the London College of Printing, 1983 – 83, and Goldsmith's College, University of London, 1984 – 87 (B.A. Hons.). Group exhibitions include "Freeze," PLA Building, London, 1988, and "East Country Yard," Surrey Docks and London, 1990, and Saatchi Collection, London, 1993. Solo exhibitions include "Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab" (in rented storefront, 1991), and at Galerie Analix, Geneva (1993), and Monika Sprüth, Cologne (1993). Summer 1993, opens *The Shop* with partner Tracy Emin, a temporary project in a storefront on Bethnal Green Road, where she sold a variety of multiples and art merchandise. Lives and works in London.

Steven Pippin:

Born in Redhill, England, 1960. Studies mechanical engineering at Charles Keene College, Leicester, 1976 – 78, art and design at Loughborough College, Leicestershire, 1981 – 82, sculpture at Brighton Polytechnic (B.A. 1985) and at Chelsea School of Art, London (M.A. 1987). Work included in London Film Festival, Leicester Film Festival. Group exhibitions include "Aperto 93," Biennale di Venezia. First solo exhibition as artist-in-residence at Sculpture Space, Utica, New York, 1991. Subsequent one-man exhibitions at Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (1993), and enterprise, inc., in association with AC Project Room, Gallery 303, New York. Lives and works in London.

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