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Tate Britain, 28th September 2023 to 14th January 2024

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Sarah Lucas *HAPPY GAS* Tate Britain, 28th September 2023 to 14th January 2024

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ABSTRACT

This review article responds to the recent exhibition at Tate Britain by Sarah Lucas. It critically considers her use of the coded stereotypes, clichés and vernacular language drawn from British popular culture. Often focused on the playful mangling of the codes and assumptions of femininity and masculinity, we show how her work can be adequately characterised by its recurring thematic and formal concerns.

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The appropriation by artists of popular forms of mass culture and their redeployment as art in the rarefied contexts of elite cultural distribution and consumption, is now a tried, trusted and familiar practice. It was certainly central to much of the provocation behind the work of the feted Young British Artists in the 1990s, artists who had cannily assimilated formal ploys and strategies in relation to the readymade in the sculptural art both of artists like Jeff Koons and Robert Gober (included in the 1987–1988 Saatchi show *New York Art Now*, which many would have seen when art students) as well as such British artists as Gilbert and George, Richard Hamilton, and also such sculptors as Richard Wentworth (an influential teacher at Goldsmiths, where a number of YBAs studied) and Bill Woodrow. For some this was combined with a crudely specific working-class urban British vernacular, associated with laddish pub banter, toilet humour, saucy postcards, heavy drinking, smoking and obsessions with sex and death. Drawing upon Carl Freedman's review of a show of British art from the 1980s and 1990s, Julian Stallabrass, has also highlighted the way in which the young artists 'combined Dadaist humour, the literalist qualities of minimalist art and Situationist strategies to question the very status of art'. In contrast, the older British artists, as Freedman put it, were still engaged 'with essences and metaphysics' (Stallabrass 1999, 3).

Sarah Lucas played a central part in this shift in British art. Her substantial solo exhibition at Tate Britain, *HAPPY GAS*, (28th September 2023 to 14th January 2024) provided an ideal opportunity to begin to reconsider the implications of her work for

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the present, especially in terms of her phenomenal success and the impact this has had on her art, both in term of the materials used and its references and allusions.

Lucas' art trades on the familiar: both in terms of the type of readymade domestic objects and settings incorporated into her photographs and sculpture, and in her use of the coded stereotypes, clichés and vernacular language she draws from British popular culture. Often focused on the playful mangling of the codes and assumptions of femininity and masculinity, her work can be adequately characterised by its recurring thematic and formal concerns. What makes it distinctive is the attitude of laidback, serious mockery the work carries. Familiarity, interpreted as creating a sense of relaxed and intimate presence, is evident in much of her photographic work, with images of Lucas frequently depicted smoking, perched on toilets, or lounging on chairs. David Hopkins has referred to her 'mannish masquerade' in relation to the image she cultivates through some of these self-portraits and also refers to the way in which she 'asserts her rights to a self-defined identity in terms of a contemporary working class-vernacular' (Hopkins 2008, 188–189).

In the early 1990s, when many of these works were made, films such as Richard Linklater's comedy drama *Slacker*, about a bunch of Gen X characters in Austin, Texas did much to popularise the term 'slacker' to describe their seemingly aimless and apathetic lifestyle. The term gained wider exposure and currency during the decade and there is something of the 'slacker' attitude and pose in Lucas' work of the period; an overt sense of taking pleasure in loafing around, of not giving a fuck, or at least, taking your own time to give a fuck, and defiantly projecting that back out at the viewer. Taking pleasure in defiance and enjoying things that maybe should not be said or done, is an attitude teasingly performed throughout her work.

HAPPY GAS, the poppy capital-lettered title for her Tate show, elicits multiple interpretations. The most obvious association is nitrous oxide, laughing gas, now the second most popular drug for young people in Britain. Kids getting high to numb the pain. And smoking, an important element of this show, is also a kind of happy gas. But then again, gassing also suggests casual chatting, and to gas someone is to praise someone, to big them up, as in giving someone a retrospective at Tate Britain.

Lucas has said that every time she makes a show it 'has to be a kind of reinvention' (Buck and Lucas 2023, 62). It is a nice idea that every show can involve a reinvention, that something new can come from something old and familiar. Her solo show drawn from thirty-five years of work was certainly not straightforward as a retrospective. She described the show over four rooms at Tate Britain, as a bit like 'staging a drama', a drama 'in four acts' (Behrens 2023). There was also the foyer entrance space, which had two recent works that had spilled over from the show and had its walls covered with pink wallpaper patterned with cigarettes shaped into orbs, *Tits in Space*, as well as a display of Lucas merchandise, including £30 t shirts. This was all a far cry from the shop she ran with Tracey Emin for half a year in the 1990s, which included t shirts, modelled by them, with such hand-painted statements, like, *I'm so Fucky and Sperm Bank*.

For her Tate show Lucas transformed the aesthetic of the gallery rooms with a combination of concrete-skimmed walls and wallpaper blow-ups of some of her now historical low-fi performative photographs of her younger self, as well as a series of more whimsical contemporary portraits of herself in her sixties, diffused by cigarette smoke.

Concrete brought in a corporate and cool Brutalist aspect, while the photo wallpaper was not without a naff domestic association. Breeze blocks were introduced as bases for many of her sculptures and concrete became a medium to cast both human forms and, in a *Carry On* riposte to British modernism and Henry Moore, large phallic marrows.

The exhibition started effectively, setting up all sorts of collisions and relations between different works, many dating from the beginning of her career and all displayed in an ad hoc assembly. Adjacent to a wooden chair, a motorised arm, set upon a couple of buckets, grinded and pumped away in the corner of the first room – *Wanker*, 1999. The explicit title perfectly matched the directness and immediacy of the work. In the Tate show it was placed beneath a blow-up photograph of a deadpan Lucas, holding a large salmon draped over one shoulder, in front of the entrance to disused toilets. The fish can be read both as a misogynistic slur against women and a phallic symbol: the work's title *Got a Salmon On #1* refers to a slang expression for having an erection. Meaning ricochets between the image of Lucas, knees slightly bent, balancing as she attempts to hold the flaccid, slippery fish erect and the disused brick MEN's toilet block with its barred entrance, both demarcating and nullifying it as a gendered space. This photograph and its mirrored copy were positioned either side of the gallery entrance, the graffiti on the toilet wall extended and joined in a composite image to form an archway framing the entrance to the exhibition, the symmetrical images of Lucas with the salmon held rifle like, performing a ridiculous, erectile guard of honour. The masturbatory repetition and phallic association of the doubled image was further underscored by the placement of *Wanker*, beneath one of the images of Lucas gazing down from above.

The Old Couple, an early work from 1991, consisted of two plain chairs, on one the wax cast of false teeth and on the other the cast of a dildo. The implicit bipolarity of the elements, and the wooden chairs on which they sit, could be read as a playful sneer at Joseph Beuys' *Fat Chair (Fettstuhl)*, 1964). The sexual allusion and dynamic between the dentata like false teeth and virile cock was countered by the spareness and impoverishment of the set up – it was skeletal, pathetic, and deathly.

In the initial YBA context in the 1990s this art impacted the tabloids, captured a popular imagination. The YBA phenomenon was very much promoted and marketed in terms of class and Britishness. It was an art that was loud, vulgar and edgy, a rude and unruly counter to the more restrained, serious and uptight associations of elite culture. On viewing *Brilliant!* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in 1996, the first major US outing of the YBA stars, Matthew Collings suggested Lucas' cast concrete multiple, in snooker ball colours, *Get Hold of This*, 1994–5 of arms and fist in a fuck you gesture, each set out on different cardboard packing boxes, offered a witty mockery of Donald Judd's Minimalist sculpture and how 'the macho-gesture satirised the whole feminist-reading-of-art-history debate about Minimal art's unacceptable masculinism' (Collings 2003, 52). Crass celebrations on the opening night for *Brilliant!*, as Collings noted, involved Buckingham Palace guards with bearskin hats and red uniforms and 'old-fashioned British Bobbies with whistles' as well as 'fair-ground like stalls where you could have your hair cut in a Princess Di style, and have a photo of your head sticking through a hole in an enlarged British tabloid' (Collings 2003, 53).

Lucas' art both fed and critiqued such promotion. None more so than her early body of work from 1990, which consisted of photocopied blown-up spreads from the *Sunday*

Sport, a tabloid renowned for its sensationalist stories about sex and celebrity. Enlarged and framed in a public art gallery, they were always given an anthropological fascination and viewed over thirty years later become a marker of an historical moment in British culture.

On the face of it the *Sunday Sport*, aimed exclusively at men and launched in 1986 by the pornographer David Sullivan, appeared to be a tabloid newspaper, but it never actually functioned as a newspaper, in the sense that it never actually reported what most people would term 'news'. Instead, its pages were filled with lurid fabricated stories, celebrity gossip, laddish pranks, softcore porn images and adverts for massage parlours and escort services. Even by the low standards of the British tabloids in the 1990s, the *Sunday Sport* was something of an outlier.

Such works as *Fat, Forty and Fab-ulous*, 1990, and *Sod You Gits*, 1990, suggest that her fascination with the material resides in its capacity to foreground apparent category mistakes: the *Sunday Sport* as a newspaper, photocopies of pages of the *Sunday Sport* as art. In appropriating aspects of unruly vernacular culture, she performs both the demarcation and transgression of cultural categories and boundaries. Such contextual disruption has become a habitual model for Lucas' practice: uprooting aspects of everyday, readymade, class-inflected mass culture to then redeploy it in the culturally 'wrong', privileged context of fine art.

Lucas has spoken of her engagement with feminist theory in the years between leaving Goldsmiths and her first show in 1992: 'I started off on Andrea Dworkin, and that led me on to other feminists, Jaqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell, which led me into psychoanalysis, and Freud and Lacan' (Collings 2003, 31). Such a context seems a far cry from the bluntness of her appropriation of spreads from the *Sunday Sport*. Lucas has also said she used the spread *Fat, Forty and Flab-ulous*, with its story about a man who wanted to sell his insatiable 25 stone wife, illustrated with front and rear pictures of her naked except for black stockings, because she found it 'horny' (Collings 2003, 36). For her the *Sunday Sport* was important because of its 'common currency', 'the fact that it only cost 25p and that everyone knew about' and it was not 'unambiguously pornographic' (Collings 2003, 26).

In her large colour photomural that ended the first room, *Chicken Knickers*, 1997, an unstuffed raw chicken placed over unsexy white pants, made a vulgar and comical allusion to the female sex, and counterpoint to the phallic associations of the fish at the other end of the space. These wall-size photographs also framed the blow ups from pages from the *Sunday Sport*, feeding upon and recycling its scurrilous humour.

Language, words are central to her art. Titles are playful, often punning, jokey and vulgar. A significant early work, *Five Lists*, 1991 presents just listings of swear words, handwritten and alphabetised – like the *Sunday Sport* spreads, this work has a documentary, anthropological element, fixing Britain's abusive but inventive use of language, all fixated upon body parts, male and female. Lucas is ventriloquising speech or attitudes that tend to be associated with men. In this listing of bad words, the language is charged with sexism and homophobia, a tirade of name calling that appropriated and rechannelled as art on Tate Britain's walls, albeit walls whose surface has been roughened and tempered by a concrete veneer, was also captioned by a statement in which Lucas speaks of it as an act of retaliation, answering back.

Of the 74 works listed in the catalogue of the Tate show, 44 featured a chair of some description. What is it about the chair that Lucas finds so fascinating? The chair and its variants, sofa, toilet etc. is the go-to common object in her work. It is often used as a familiar, homely stage on which to perform various acts of transgression.

In Act Two, the most spectacular installation of the show, twisted configurations of stuffed tights, tan and coloured, painted and also cast in concrete, resin and bronze, were variously entangled around or spread out from chairs. There is a lavish and Baroque richness to these exuberant and often colourful sculptures. It is a far cry from the deathly stripping back of *The Old Couple*. These recent sculptures were framed by a wallpaper frieze of early black and white photographs of a laddish-looking Lucas, sporting a leather jacket and biting into a banana. The banana eating sequence played out the sexual innuendo, over and over, a repeated gag and reiteration that chimed with the various twisting and turnings of the gendered forms on chairs. But, just as the constant repetition of the banana biting image deflated the force of its sexual innuendo, so the reiteration of the contorted configuration of the 'Bunnies' as she calls them, might also be seen to exhaust their sexualised charge, rendering them common place, banal even. Maybe that is the point.

Despite the apparent formal exuberance of these hyper-sexualised 'Bunnies', with their skinny legs accessorised with coloured stockings and platform trainers, writhing, and flopping on chairs, there was a lethargy about their exaggerated display, something half-hearted in their compliant pose. Lacking the kinetic energy of *Wanker*, there was nonetheless something of the mechanical in their rote performance; each adopts a pose, one of many, some more overt than others, in a cycle of display. At times it seems as if Lucas is parodying through excess the fetishised objectification of women performed by Allen Jones in his *Furniture* sculptures of the 1960s. In many ways they can be seen as companion pieces to *Wanker* in that both are locked into a mechanical masturbatory cycle, with the 'Bunnies' at one end as objects of desire and *Wanker* at the other, going through the motions of completion that never comes.

The spatial curation brought to mind the display aesthetic deployed to present catwalk fashion shows or high-end commodities. The sense of commodity production literally ran the length of the gallery, with each sculpture an individual riff on the figure/chair fetish format, different but the same. Most of these works were recent and featured noticeably enhanced production values: cast and polished bronze joining Lucas' familiar material repertoire of tights, wool, wire and shoes, to fashion the human-like forms. Most were posed on iconic 'designer' chairs, atop vibrantly coloured MDF plinths. The material upgrade of the sculptural components and the display aesthetic employed in their presentation suggests that issues of commodity production were on Lucas' radar, both in terms of the issues she is dealing with in the subject matter of her work, as well and as a condition of her own status as a producer of luxury commodities for the art market.

While Lucas may say every show is a reinvention, in a commodity economy, where brand identity is crucial, every show is also a re-iteration. That is how the market works. A sense of bored compliance accompanies the 'Bunnies', despite, maybe because of, their gymnastic contortions. The sculptures enact a form of fatigued performance, a case of 'going through the motion' of exaggerated fetishistic display. If we read them in terms of permutations of the female figure then they accord with the

hypersexuality and hypervisibility of the female body within Western culture, but that spectacle of erotic permutation is something other to how Lucas presents herself in the photographs. She has a look that is not typically feminine and that she chooses to be depicted biting into the banana might also be seen as a mischievous undoing of or messing with the familiar erotic connotation.

The erotic display of women in relationship to chairs has a track record and is a familiar trope in pornography to conjure erotic charge amidst seemingly ordinary, often domestic settings. Lucas' 'Bunnies' tap into a staged display of female sexuality reminiscent of that depicted in Lewis Morley's 1963 photograph of model Christine Keeler. Posed naked astride a plywood chair the photograph of Keeler has popular currency as an image freighted with scandalous association. Shot to promote a film about the Profumo affair involving the relationship between the teenage Keeler and the then Secretary of State for War, John Profumo, Morley's photograph was leaked to the tabloid *Sunday Mirror*. In the image, Keeler, pressured by contractual obligations, coyly posed nude on a knock-off copy of Arne Jacobsen's classic Model 3107 chair. Sitting back to front on the chair, the image, and the pose, have become engrained in the popular imaginary as a clichéd visual marker of risqué provocation. Even Homer Simpson appeared in a parody version on the cover of a Simpson's video.

In Act Three, one framed photograph in colour shows Lucas adorned in a straw hat seated in a chair in a corn field, a country bumkin figure. The title *Stooks* refers to the way the haystacks have been cut and tied, through traditional, pre-mechanical means. It is a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of her change in fortune. She now owns and lives on a farm in Suffolk, having left London in 2005. In the other photograph, dating from the 1990s, she is seated in an armchair on the street outside a second-hand furniture store in London. She nonchalantly sits amidst the clutter of objects and men; a group of men are gathered by the shop entrance as two policemen walk by. Here, and in much of her sculpture, the chair functions as a stage on which to perform acts of cheeky transgression, testing the boundaries of what the Law permits.

Small black bronze sculptures, each entitled *Tit Tom*, were distributed in three of the four exhibition rooms. Suggesting the forms of a black cat, Lucas could be seen to be making a reference to Edouard Manet's *Olympia*. In the painting, the cat is phallic and registers a combative responsive to the viewer, an echo of the confrontational presence of Manet's sexualised female subject. The sculptures and their title playfully shifted between art historical respectability and crude reference: reverse the wording of the work's title and *Tit Tom* becomes Tom Tit and rhyming slang reframes the extruded forms as shit.

The final act was dominated by a car cut in two and partly burnt out: *This Car's Going to Heaven*, 2018. Cars have been used before by Lucas and in an unequivocal underscoring of their gendered connotation in one version combined with the wanking arm, fixed in the driver's seat. At the Tate, the bonnet was up and we could see the big V6 engine of the Jaguar. Cigarettes covered the seats and the bonnet of the car. In decorating the car, they forced a relation between the two: the slow deathly harm of smoking linked with the potential fast deathliness of the car itself. This play between binary characteristics: slow/fast, hard/soft, high/low culture is a feature common to much of her work.

Smoking can be associated with working-class pleasures. There is a memorable early photograph (not in the show) of Lucas playing with class and the masculine phallic

connotations of the cigarette, letting a cigarette dangle from her mouth with as much ash as possible, *Fighting Fire with Fire*, 1996. The walls of the final room were covered with recent images of Lucas blurred by motion and diffused in the haze of smoke, wistful and pensive, they lacked the directness of her earlier photographs.

There were more chairs in the final room. With *Exacto*, 2018, an expensive looking red leather and chrome swivel office chair was pierced by white fluorescent tube lights. Displayed on breeze blocks, amidst a tangle of cables, light cutting up the chair could be read as a phallic underscoring of corporate power. But it could also be read as a destabilising of power. As the show progressed, British class references were replaced by a more generic aesthetics of edginess and mischief. The difficulty with art like this is how to maintain criticality. The show started brilliantly, the work had a material and conceptual rawness that was ‘common’ and as a result disruptive, but the show ended with a sense that it had played itself out, work was becoming too refined and mannered. As a sense of design and questions of taste and aesthetics dominated, the work was less interesting and engaging.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Mark Durden is an artist and, together with Ian Brown, exhibit as the artist group Common Culture.

David Campbell is an artist and, together with Ian Brown, exhibit as the artist group Common Culture.

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