

Essay

Tracey Emin: Life Made Art, Art Made from Life

Miguel Ángel Medina

University of Málaga, Málaga E-29071, Spain; E-Mail: medina@uma.es;

Tel.: +34-952-137-032; Fax: +34-952-132-000

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Abstract: Tracey Emin is one of the best-known current British artists. Her art is essentially autobiographical. The major aim of the present essay is to analyze Emin's artist work and to study her artistic references. To fulfill this goal, biographic references, linked to her artistic work, are mentioned and her topics, obsessions, procedures, and techniques are reviewed, with a special mention to the central role of words in her art.

Keywords: Tracey Emin; Young British Artists; words in art

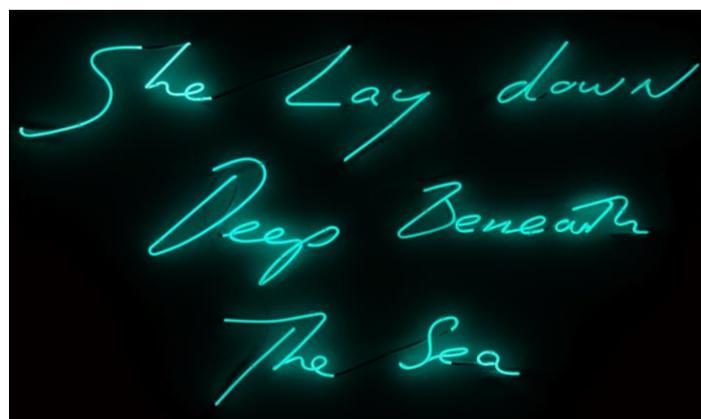
1. To Know Tracy Emin

Born on July 3, 1963, Tracey Emin is a British artist with Turkish-Cypriot origins that, in a few years, changed her complete anonymity to become known and reckoned as one of the most famous active artists within the current international artistic landscape. In fact, only the controverted Damien Hirst, the most relevant representative component of the so-called *Young British Artists*, and one of the most highly quoted current creators worldwide, has a similar level of celebrity among the British artists within her generation. While Damien Hirst is a clever artist whose work appears to incorporate a mechanical, emotionally-detached quality, Tracey Emin is aggressive, intuitive, and passionate, and she makes use of her most traumatic, painful life experiences and her own obsessions, as sources to reinterpret them into extremely personal creative experiences with an ostensible appearance of sincerity that, in some instances, can hurt some sensibilities.

My first occasion to come into contact, directly, with a wide representation of Emin's artistic work was the great retrospective, *20 Years* (in fact, the first exhibition of Tracey Emin in Spain), exhibited from December 2008 to February 2009 in the Center of Contemporary Art of Málaga (CAC Málaga). That great exhibition showed more than 90 works, selected by the exhibition's curator, Patrick Elliott, with agreement from the artist. Altogether, the exhibition was a well-equilibrated sample of the

different creative registers, techniques, and resources used by Tracey Emin [1]. That retrospective was first exhibited at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art of Edinburgh (From August to November 2008), where it successfully established a new record, with more than 40 thousand visits, thus, representing the most visited exhibiton for a living artist in this gallery. After a couple of years of relative silence, Tracey Emin has returned to the center of arts current news through her new survey exhibition, *Love is What You Want* (from May 18 to August 29, 2011, at the Hayward Gallery, London), covering every period of her career and reveling facets of the artist and her work that have been often neglected [2]. Even more recently, as part of the great London 2012 Festival, Tracey Emin's first exhibition in her home town (Margate) has taken place at Turner Contemporary, from May 26 to September 23, 2012, with the suggestive title *She Lay Down Deep Beneath the Sea: Tracey Emin at Turner Contemporary* [3]. *She Lay Down Deep Beneath the Sea* is also the title of one of her most recent neons (Figure 1). On occasion of these recent exhibitions, this seems to be an excellent occasion to analyze Emin's artistic work and to study her artistic references. To contribute to this task is the major aim of the present work.

Figure 1. Tracey Emin, *She Lay down Deep Beneath The Sea*, 2012, Neon © The artist. Courtesy of White Cube. Photo Ben Westoby.



2. For (Better) Knowing Emin's Artistic Work

There are many artists whose work can be known without references to their biographies. This is the case with Damien Hirst. There are many other artists whose art may be understandable without knowing details of their childhood, sexual relationships, or their way of thinking. This can be the case with Henry Moore, Jeff Koons, or Francis Bacon. However, there is a third group of artists for which life and art are inseparable, as their life events sustain their own artistic works. This third group of artists practice an "autobiographic" art that has been termed *confessional art* [4]. According to David Galenson, confessional art should be understood as a "practice of the visual arts, in which painters and sculpturs have used motifs drawn largely or exclusively from their own lives" [5]. In her doctoral thesis, entitled *The Role of Confession in Late Twentieth Century British Art*, Outi Remes mentions Tracey Emin, along with Gillian Wearing and Richard Billingham, as three contemporary British artists who have used confession as a source of artistic inspiration.

Although, traditionally, the word *confession* is associated with a religious ritual of forgiveness and with autobiographical literature, and more recently with police investigations and therapist sessions,

currently, confessional traits are found in popular-music genres and confession is a key feature in our “reality-show” television and tabloid culture. Most probably, among current active artists, Tracey Emin is the most extreme case of an artist practicing such a *confessional* art. In this context, it is interesting to mention that, in 2003, she was voted twice at position 41 on two very different “top hundred” lists: In 2003, on *Art Review*’s list of the most important people in the art world, Emin occupied position 41, raising her above David Hockney (No. 47) and Damien Hirst (No. 62) [6]. The same year, Emin was also listed at position 41 in the Channel Four program *100 Worst Britons* [7]. As Remi indicates, “*Emin is a celebrity who we love to hate*” [4]. Most British people know Emin’s name, but very few knows her artistic work. It is hard to get a proper knowledge of her work without the main support of the knowledge of the claimed biographic data to which each of her artistic works is claimed to appeal to. Hence, to (better) know Emin’s artistic work, to know her biography becomes essential. This is not a serious problem in the case of Tracey Emin, as she has publicly exposed, in a very detailed, apparently sincere and uninhibited way, those sometimes banal, sometimes intimate, traumatic, and even sordid biographic details that provide meaning to her works. How she has built her own image has been extensively analyzed elsewhere [4,8–16].

That unchaste exhibition of weaknesses, fears, traumas, and obsessions has supported the negative critical judgement from all those who erroneously underestimate Emin’s talent, identifying her as an impudent exhibitionist or a vocational provoker. Tracey Emin has turned her own life into a public spectacle, an exhibitionist art that fits well “*in the context of a contemporary voyeuristic society*”, in the words of Outi Remes [14]. All her artistic production revolves around herself and her life experiences or, at least, so the artist has us believe [16]. The outside world does not seem to interest her, except for those details that directly affect her. On these grounds, her harshest critics have put her egocentrism or *egotism* at the center of their criticism, as if this fact could, itself, be enough to devalue her artistic work. In fact, is this egotism not a feature common to many creators that have consciousness of their creative genius? At this moment, it might be noteworthy to point out that Henry Beyle (the author of *Le Rouge et le Noir* and *La Chartreuse de Parma*, better known as Stendhal), an avowed egomaniac, wrote *Souvenir D’egotisme*, only published in 1892, fifty years after his death [17]. On the other hand, it should be stressed that the way in which Tracey Emin makes her life a public spectacle is enormously direct, imaginative, and visually captivating.

It is useful to enter into the details of her private life to fully understand Emin’s artistic works. A twin of her brother Paul, and a daughter of the Turk-Cypriot Envar Emin and his wife Pamela Cashin, Tracey Emin was born in London but very soon her family changed their address to that of the International Hotel at Margate (a touristic center by the sea) when this hotel became a property of her father. Some years later, Emin entitled her first patchwork bedspread *International Hotel*. The hard years of her childhood and adolescence, including some sexual abuses and her rape after coming out of a disco on New Year’s eve, 1976 (when she was 13 years old), are reflected time and again in her artistic work. This is particularly true for the series of monotypes entitled *Family Suite* (1994), her famous “autobiographical” text, *Exploration of the soul* (1994), and her short film, *Tracey Emin’s CV: Cunt Vernacular* (1997). Her daily life experiences from 13 to 15 years of age (what Emin herself calls her *shaggy years*) became the central topic of an extraordinary series of monotypes (many of them dated 1995), such as *Fucking Down an Ally*, *Having Sex While He Watched*, and *Sex in the Back of his Van*. Her childhood memories and her work as a waiter at a coffee shop in the Margate attractions

park, Dreamland, are behind her recreation of the roller coaster in her installation, *It's Not the Way I Want to Die* (2005) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Tracey Emin, *It's Not the Way I Want to Die*, 2005, reclaimed metal and timber (310cm × 860 cm × 405 cm).



To have access to a deeper reading and understanding of her short film, *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995), it is required to know the adolescent Emin's enthusiasm for dance, her dance sessions at the *Top Spot* disco, and the anecdotes she made public, in the form of monotypes, written in 1995, concerning her participation in a dance regional contest (from which she mentions that she retired, sobbing, after some guys insulted her, crying "Bitch! Bitch! Bitch!"). The anecdotes concerning an old armchair inherited from her grand-mother should be known in order to properly understand how Tracey Emin transformed this old piece into the artistic object, *There's A Lot of Money in Chairs* (1994) (Figure 3), and so on with each of her creations.

Figure 3. Tracey Emin, *There's A Lot of Money in Chairs*, 1994, appliquéd armchair (69 cm × 53.5 cm × 49.5 cm). Courtesy of White Cube.



The questions on the truth and sincerity of the biographical references in Emin's artwork have led to a great deal of misunderstanding. As mediation is inherent to every art work, these should be necessarily mediated truth and sincerity, what Neal Brown denominates the “*poeticized truth*” that characterizes Emin’s work [12]. According to Outi Remes, “*Like our confessional culture, confessional art pretends exceptional honesty in its approach to subject matter. However, it seldom presents a factual account, rather it manipulates and even fabricates subjective memories*” [4]. Emin says: “*My work is about memories*” [18]. However, memories evolve, memories can be transformed, rethought and redeveloped, yielding a work that is “*the product of a process in which thought and purpose are inevitable*” [16]. That means that Emin recreates her own life “narratives” as *art* through highly mediated procedures. In the words of Rosemary Betterton: “*Emin’s work is a form of ‘self-life drawing’ or purposeful reconstruction of the past as a set of stories, rather than the ‘truth’ of a life*” [19]. As Simon van der Weele has pointed out, in the academic evaluation of “truth” in Emin’s work, “*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*” [16]. For van der Weele, a literal autobiographical interpretation of Emin’s artwork is difficult of defend and, for this reason, he opts for a more neutral term, classifying Emin’s oeuvre as a “*project of life-writing*” [16].

3. The Construction of an Artist-Image: *Mad Tracey from Margate*

As mentioned above, how Tracey Emin has built her own image has been extensively analyzed elsewhere [4,8–16]. As a matter of fact, Emin has become a celebrity. Her public appearances in the media with stories of sexual promiscuity, drunkenness, and depression have contributed to her public reputation as a “bad girl of current British art”. In addition, her confessional artistic project with its controversial content in which her “confessions” are projected has played an important role in achieving this celebrity [16]. This is what Jennifer Doyle has called “*Tracey Emin’s bad-sex aesthetics*” [19].

Her collaborations with the British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood and a sponsorship deal with Beck’s Beer have also contributed to her current celebrity and to the definition and identification of the “trademark” of Tracey Emin [11,16,20]. A strategy of self-promotion can be clearly recognized in her reiteration of the “famous artist” pose previously cultivated by artists as Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol, but also by her contemporary Damien Hirst [4,11,16]. Emin shares with these three artists a multi-media approach and a great presence in the media. However, where Dalí played the world for laughs and Warhol and Hirst are plentiful in irony, Emin is devoid of irony and seems to take it all very seriously indeed [11,16].

As van der Woole shows, “*the construction of an artist-image is not entirely in the hands of the artist, however*”. He later adds: “*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*”. Van der Woole suggests to call this artistic persona *Mad Tracey from Margate*, a denomination, in fact, used as title for several art pieces, such as the appliqué blanket and the monotype, both entitled *Mad Tracey from Margate. Everyone’s been there* (1997). Sometimes, it has been argued that this artistic persona constitutes, indeed, the most important artwork

of Tracey Emin [21]. Debating all these ideas, Simon van der Woole enunciates and develops the thesis 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*”, afterwards changing the term “project of autobiography” to “*project of life-writing*” [16].

4. But Is This Art?

Most probably, *My Bed* (1998) is the artistic creation of Emin for which more has been said and written for good and for bad (Figure 4). In fact, this piece of work has been analyzed in several academic studies [4,9,12–16,22–26]. *My Bed* is an installation showing her own bed, in all its embarrassing “glory”. Empty booze bottles, cigarette butts, stained sheets, worn panties, all this mess constitutes the bloody aftermath of a nervous breakdown. And, at the other side of the bed, a couple of chained suitcases. This work refers to a particular episode in her life in which she became disgusted with a similar sight. For Tracey Emin, this disgusting experience became an impelling force to find out a creative exit. Her own will to set out of context this chaos of her own life transformed filth into art. This artistic attitude has clear points of connection with the precedents of Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades and Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes. As for these remarkable cases, in Emin, a piece of work becomes a piece of art when she defines it as such. Once again, we face the subject of the lack of precision and dissolution of the concept of *art* in this contemporary time that Arthur Danto has named the time of arts after the end of arts [27]. The Italian philosopher of aesthetics, Dino Formaggio, started his essay *L’arte* (1973) with the laconic phrase: “*Art is all what humans call art*” [28]. In the case of Tracey Emin, her art is what she names *art*. Emin fixes her own “canon” and she has the last word to raise (or not) to the category of her art what her hand makes or what is made by her employees under her supervision, or what is transformed by herself and/or her group. This is well illustrated by the following anecdote: when she prepared a poster claiming help to find her lost cat, and she distributed photocopies in her home surroundings, these photocopies became a collection object for people; however, in this case, Emin decided to exclude this “work” from her canon, stripping it from its potential category (and, hence, its potential value) as an artistic object. Coming back to *My Bed*, it is worth emphasizing that this piece relates to Robert Rauschenberg’s *Bed* (1955), as her piece can be understood as a commentary on the latter (Unfortunately, an image of Rauschenberg’s *Bed* cannot be reproduced in this essay due to MoMA’s Image Permission Policy, which has entrusted the licensing of images of works of art in its collections to Scala Archives of Florence (Italy). Scala does not make an exception for a free reproduction of images even in cases of non-profit academic works, as this is).

It is also noteworthy that, as Deborah Cherry has extensively discussed [25], *My Bed* has been *varyingly* reassembled when exhibited in different continents. It was initially part of the installation *Better to have a straight spine than a broken neck*, created by Emin for the Sagacho Exhibition Space. Cherry describes it as follows: “*In an elongated space with windows ranged down one side, the bed was placed at an angle, a rope noose suspended from the ceiling, and juxtaposed to a wooden coffin box beside which were two bound suitcases*” [25]. *My Bed* reappeared at Lehman Maupin in New York, as part of the solo exhibition *Every Part of Me’s Bleeding*, in May and June, 1999. Here, the bed was approached through and seen between a maze of intersecting installations, with the two blue neons, *My Cunt is Wet with Fear* (1998) and *Sobasex* (1998), adjacent to the bed, and the two bound suitcases

juxtaposed with other pieces in the installation *Leaving Home* (1999). Shortlisted for the Turner Prize in summer of 1999, *My Bed* was installed without the rope noose and the coffin box, and with the suitcases placed close beside the bed, on the opposite side to the objects.

Figure 4. Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998, mixed media (79 cm × 211 cm × 234 cm). © The artist. Courtesy of The Saatchi Gallery, London. Photo Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.



Time and again, this act of creation will be repeated in Emin's artist work, an act through which those objects by her gathered/selected as meta-references to biographic events are raised to the category of artistic. This happens with a tooth, a dentist card, and a passport in *My Future* (1993–1994). This happens with a newspaper sheet and a wrinkled cigarette pack in *Uncle Colin* (1963–1993). In a different way, this also happens in her collection *My Major Retrospective* (1982–1992) consisting of small framed photographic reproductions of her previous artistic work, disappeared in two destructive acts commented on later.

5. The Topics, the Obsessions

The recurrent topics in Tracey Emin's artistic work are her fears, weaknesses, and obsessions. By showing them in a torn and sincere way, Emin becomes strong and finds motives to carry on. For her, art is the only possible way, the only escape. In her installation/video, *Conversation with my Mum* (2001), Tracey talks with her mother for 33 min. In a moment, her mother asks her what would she have been if not an artist. Tracey answers: "I would be dead". To be an artist, to feel like an artist is her own way of being, and of being outside, it's her own way of living. To live, reviving memories of old traumas as a way to heal those old wounds. Her topics, her obsessions, that is to say: sex, her childhood, her rape, to feel pregnant, her abortions, her non-motherhood. These last ones are present in the series of monotypes, *Abortion: How it Feels* (1995), in the short film, *Homage to Edvard Munch and All My Dead Children* (1998), in the blanket, *I Do Not Expect* (2002), and in the installations, *Feeling Pregnant II* (1999–2002) (Figure 5) and *Feeling Pregnant III* (2005). In the film, *Homage to Edvard*

Munch and All My Dead Children (1998), Emin is screaming for less than a minute but, according to Clare Johnson, we “hear Emin scream for what feels like an eternity” [29]. Another recurrent topic is her fear to pain and illness, as in *A Week from Hell* (1995).

Figure 5. Tracey Emin, *Feeling Pregnant II* 1999–2002, mixed media (vitrine: 49.7 cm × 56.7 cm × 17 cm; framed texts: 35 cm × 26.3 cm). Courtesy of White Cube. Photo Stephen White.



Throughout the whole artistic work of Tracey Emin appears, time and again, the so-called meta-topic of art at the end of the millenium: the body. In the case of Emin, her own body. In fact, Emin’s body as an organic expression of her own vital reality is present -either explicitly or implicitly- in all her artistic production, as all her art refers to herself. Her body, many times naked, is the explicit subject for many of her Polaroid snapshots. Her body is also the protagonist in *Outside Myself* (1994), the series, *Naked Photos: Life Model goes Mad* (1996), *I’ve Got it All* (2000), *Sometimes...* (2001), and *The Last Thing I Said to You is Don’t Leave Me Here I* (2000). The photograph, *I’ve Got it All*, is one of the most commented artistic pieces of Emin [1,2,4,11,12,16,30], and has been considered one of her most problematic works due to its remarkable ambiguity [12]. In this photo, Emin appears sitting on the floor, bare legged, legs apart, her face gazing her hands that are clutching cash -both coins and notes- around the area of her vagina.

Finally, birds pervade all her artistic work, as an antidote for her sex-loaded works. Her series of monotypes, *Bird Drawings* (2001), is full of a delicate (and, apparently, unusual) lyricism (Figure 6). Asked by Carl Freedman what attracts her to birds, Emin answered: “*From a personal point of view, when I’ve been lonely I watch birds and I feel them and it’s been comforting. And of course, symbolically their flying is freedom. When I was little I used to have very strong dreams of flying and I remember the flying as it were a true experience. So now when I watch birds fly, it’s me that’s flying*” [12].

Figure 6. Tracey Emin, *Mum I'm Stuck*, 2001, one of 14 monoprints of the *Bird Drawing* series (14 framed monoprints, dimensions variable). © The artist. Courtesy of White Cube. Photo by Stephen White.



6. The Procedures, the Means

Emin's creativity to turn her obsessions into art finds no limit. For this, she makes use of procedures and means as diverse as monotypes, painting, photographs, neons, beadspreads, "interesting objects", installations, films, books, and sculptures.

The relationship of Emin with *painting* has been complex and devious. When she attended for the last term at Medway College of design (Rochester) at the beginning of 1982, she met Billy Childish and started an affair with him. This meeting was decisive for her determination to become an artist. Their mutual creative influence -extended during their years at Maidstone College of Art- yielded similitudes between their respective paintings, as well as a common marked influence of Munch and the Austrian expressionist artist Egon Schiele [31]. After entering the Royal College of Art (London), in a kind of very personal performance, she spent a whole afternoon destroying her creations at Maidstone, in the courtyard of the College. This gesture of rupture with her past work was accompanied by a total and radical change of register: for a time, she made use of religious subjects, inspired by Giotto and Byzantine art. Her first abortion (in May 1990) produced her creative blockade (what she calls her "emotional suicide") and this led her to throw all her artistic production at the College in the garbage. After leaving the College, she painted *Deposition of Christ*, her last painting for years. To surpass her prolonged blockade with painting, she took advantage of the opportunity offered by an invitation to make an exhibition in an art gallery in Stockholm (February 1996). She decided to turn the exhibition in to a performance: she locked herself naked into a studio for three weeks to force herself to paint. Spectators could follow the evolutions of Emin's personal fight with painting through one of the sixteen peepholes in the walls. Later, all the space and its contents were sold as a whole artist piece entitled *Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made*. Certainly, this "exorcism" was effective, as her blockade with painting vanished, as shown by her series of watercolors, *Berlin the Last Week, in April 1998*, and by her more recent acrylics (some of them,

accompanied by drawing and/or pastel), such as *Preying for a Penis* (2006), *Pelvis High* (2007), and *I Told You Not to Try and Find Me* (2007).

Tracey Emin likes to make artistic objects with *neons*, as a meta-biographical reference to the period of her life in which she worked as an employee in a sexshop. Emin's neons are her most conceptual artistic pieces. In them, the message constitutes the artistic work, as illustrated by the very explicit *My Cunt is Wet with Fear* (1998) and by the more amiable *You Forgot to Kiss my Soul* (2001) and *Love is What You Want* (2011).

Some of the most famous works created by Tracey Emin are *installations*. *Self Portrait* (2005) is a small installation consisting in an old tinplate bath full of bamboo branches, wires, and neons that has been described as a neat example of *arte povera*. A very different kind of installation was the renowned, and many times misunderstood, tent *Everyone I Have Slept With 1963–1995*, destroyed in the fire of MoMart store (London, 2004). It has been erroneously assumed that both the title and the whole set of names sewn in the tent referred to Emin's sexual partners [32]. However, Tracey Emin clarifies in an interview that the intention was to celebrate intimacy, not sex [33]. In fact, the list of sewn names in the destroyed tent included people with whom she shared confidences by sleeping in the same bed, as her grandmother and her twin brother. Therefore, it can be suspected that the title of this piece and the actual meaning of the names incorporated into the piece are deliberately at odds with one another. In other words, Emin seems to be aware of the fact that her viewers will assume these are the names of sexual lovers, thereby, complicating the relationship between artistic intentionality and viewer assumptions, as well as the relationship between words and their multivalent meanings.

Emin makes use of fabric in the form of *applications* (trimmed pieces sewn on another support) very frequently. In her first exhibition, Emin showed a small piece made by herself at the age of seven with embroidering and remnants, entitled *My Elephant*. Currently, her blankets with applications are part of her most popular works. On the other hand, these blankets are the most showy examples of her obsessions and fears made art. This is the case of *Automatic Orgasm (Come Unto Me)* (2001), see Figure 7, and *Star Trek Voyager* (2007), among many others.

Figure 7. Tracey Emin, *Automatic Orgasm (Come Unto Me)*, 2001, appliquéd blanket (263 cm × 214 cm). Courtesy of White Cube. Photo by Stephen White.



Monotypes are a fundamental part of Emin's artistic work [19,34]. A monotype is a technique between engraving and drawing. There are several alternative methods to produce monotypes. Emin uses the so-called direct trace drawing, a method that seems to have been invented by Paul Gauguin. Neal Brown describes the procedure as follows: “Using a roller, tacky ink is applied uniformly to a hard surface like glass. A piece of paper is then laid on the sticky inked surface, which will attract the ink below it when a hard contact pressure is applied from above. A line drawing is created on the upper side of the paper using a pencil, which pushes the paper into contact with the ink below, forcing it to stick to the underside” [12]. Finally, the sheet of paper is detached with an approximate (inverted) duplicate of the writing or the drawing. This technique offers a sensation of immediacy and authenticity.

Another peculiarity of Emin's artistic creations is the incorporation of “*objects of interest*” of any type and condition, always referring to episodes of her own life. Emin's artistic production is also characterized by the use of poor and waste products, connecting her with *povera art*, imprinting her creations with an appearance of provisional state, of fragility, and of ephemeral art.

Videos, films, and photographs are frequently used by Emin as artistic media to express herself freely.

7. ... And Writing in the Center of Her Artistic Work

The word plays a central role in all the artistic work of Tracey Emin. The word as a message, or a meta-message, connecting the artist with conceptual art. However, her use of words as a central part of her art is actually far from conceptual art and much closer to the way in which words were used as weapons by dadaist artists, and, most notably, by Marcel Duchamp. In fact, for Emin, without writing there would not be art. Words are integral part of her works: handwritten manuscripts, her readings of texts written by herself, the sentences (preserving all their grammatical and orthographic mistakes, either intentional or not) traced in a monotype, and the very same phrase made art in the materiality of a neon tube or in the application sewed on blankets.

Emin herself has underscored the importance of writing for her 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*” [35]. Van der Woole indicates that “*by featuring writing as such a prominent part of her work, Emin blurs the traditional lines between literature and visual art*” [16]. Perhaps this fusion between literature and visual arts is best illustrated in *appliqué blankets*, such as *Love Poem* (1996) and, the aforementioned, *Automatic Orgasm (Come Unto Me)*, reproduced in Figure 7, and *I Do Not Expect* (2002), among many others.

Her autobiographical “book” *Exploration of the Soul* (1994) is a paradigm of the central role played by writing in Emin's art. For ten days, she summarized on 32 sheet of blue paper (size A4) outstanding moments of her biography, from her conception to the rape she suffered at the age of 13. Accompanied by two photographs of herself, the assembly was converted in to an artistic work (in fact, currently, the originals are exhibited at the Tate Gallery, Figure 8). Writings are also essential parts of *A Week from Hell* (1995) and *Feeling Pregnant II* (1999–2002). Furthermore, even in those works, in which writing does not participate explicitly, words also play an essential role. In fact, Tracey Emin knows well how to make art within art, choosing, for her creations, titles that are not simple findings but authentic “artistic” creations.

Figure 8. Tracey Emin, *Exploration of the Soul*, 1994, canvas, felt, bound book, and photographs. **(a)** One of the 200 issues of the edition. Courtesy of Lehmann Maupin. **(b)** As exhibited.



(a)



(b)

Very recently, Ali Smith has analyzed the importance of words in Emin’s art [36], stating that “she’s really good with words”. Smith makes a detailed analysis of the possibilities of the particular and powerful word *cunt*, as frequently used by Tracey Emin. This is the case of her video work *Tracey Emin’s CV: Cunt Vernacular* (1997), her neon *My Cunt is Wet with Fear* (1998), and her monoprint *A cunt is a rose is a cunt* (2000). With this last title, Emin reworks the famous verse “*Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose*” contained in the poem *Sacred Emily* (1913), written by Gertrude Stein.

8. Traces of Feminism and Spirituality in Tracey’s Work

Tracey Emin has emphatically distanced herself from *feminism*, which she has publicly denounced and disavowed, rejecting discussion of it in many interviews [12]. When asked what she thinks about feminism, Emin laconically answers: “*I don’t*” [4]. However, this public personal position seems to be contradicted in her work, where she obsessively shows issues of her “life-writing” project that are at the heart of the “old” feminist agenda: sexual abuse, rape, abortion, and public exhibition of her naked body. These are enough reasons to take this issue seriously, as several academic studies on Emin’s work do [4,12,14,22]. Rape trauma in the art of Tracey Emin has been put in the context of law in an extensive essay by Yxta Maya Murray [37]. According to Outi Remes, both Barbara Pollack and Michelle Falkenstein suggest that Emin’s behaviour should be put in a feminist context, since she does not accept at all the traditional passive female roles [4]. Rosemary Betterton suggests that Emin could have been inspired by Janis Jeffries, a feminist who taught in the Maidstone College of Art when Tracy was studying there [22]. For Outi Remes, it is important to compare part of the artistic work produced by Emin with those of relevant feminist artists to set Emin’s work into an artistic historical context [4,14]. Among others, Remes mentions Carolee Schneemann, Hanna Wilke, and Mary Kelly. Schneemann’s use of her own naked body in the performance *Naked Action Lecture* (1968) is to be compared with Emin’s Stockholm performance *Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made* (1996),

which, on the other hand, is compared by Neal Brown with Yoko Ono's performance, *Cut Piece* (1964) [12]. Wilke's poses as both the passive model and the active artist in her photo series *Help Me Hannah* (1978) and *S.O.S, Stratification Object Series* (1974-5) can be compared with so many photos of naked Emin made by Emin herself. Peter Osborne compares Emin's, *I've Got it All*, with Hannah Wilke's, *What Does This Represent? What Do You Represent? (Reinhardt)* (1979-1984) [30]. Mary Kelly's multi-part installation, *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979), addressing the issue of motherhood, is compared with many art pieces devoted by Emin to motherhood and abortion. However, Kelly distances herself from the emotional experience of motherhood, in high contrast with Tracey Emin, who -although not a mother- appears fascinated by pregnancy and ideas of maternity. Rebecca Baillie has hinted that the traumatic experience of abortion and the importance and meaning of unattained motherhood are connected in Emin with the idea of melancholy [38]. In fact, Baillie identifies "one work in which Emin unites the ideas of melancholy and maternity in a particularly powerful way", providing a suggestive lecture of the short, Super 8 film, *Homage to Edvard Much and all My Dead Children*. Jennifer Doyle invokes a range of feminist historical context for Emin. To the aforementioned Carolee Schneemann and Hanna Wilke, she adds the names of Cindy Sherman, Judy Chicago, Ann Magnuson, and Annie Sprinkle [19]. Recently, Emin's work has been placed in relation to feminism, "post-feminism", and feminist art history in interesting academic studies by Amelia Jones and Clare Johnson, among others [39,40].

Neil Brown devotes one of the chapters of his monography on Tracey Emin to the impact of religious or spiritual beliefs in her art [12]. In the 1980s, and for years, Emin made religious art mainly based on Christian iconography, such as Jesus being crucified, Mary Magdalene at his feet, Wedding Feast at Cana and Deposition. Most of these works were destroyed by her or abandoned during the course of her "emotional suicide". Afterwards, she has returned now and then to Christian topics, but also to Zoroastrism and Islamic Sufi mysticism. Related to this last one, Tracey Emin has declared her admiration for Farid al-Din Attar, the twelfth-century author of *The Conference of the Birds*, a work containing beliefs similar to that of the "Universal Pantheism" in Western philosophy. This declared admiration is consistent with Emin's declared interest in the pantheism of Spinoza, and connect her in a different way to the figure of Edvard Munch, another pantheist [41]. According to Renée Vara, Tracey Emin's interest in mysticism is rooted in the fact that she comes from a family with a firm belief in the powers of the paranormal and in life after death [41]. Emin has declared: "People think that my work is about sex, but actually a lot of it is about faith". And also: "Is there life after death? Of course there is" [12]. Based in this faith, and her genuine interest in mysticism, Renée Vara offers interesting re-interpretations of several artworks in which Tracey Emin appeal to missing relatives, such as the collected memorabilia *Uncle Colin* (1963-1993) and the pieces of furniture *There's A lot of Money in Chairs* (1994) and *Tacimin- Can You Hear Me?* (1997). Interestingly, Vara also offers an alternative interpretation to the prevailing one for *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* (the famous *Tent*) underscoring this work's spirituality [41].

9. The Artistic References

Life and artistic work are so tightly integrated in Tracey Emin that, speaking of her artistic references, there is no other option than beginning with those with whom she has interacted with.

Among them, the artists Billy Childish (who was her partner) and Sarah Lucas, the curator Carl Freedman (another of her partners), the gallerist Charles Saatchi, and the art dealer Jay Jopling.

Concerning her references from art history, it should be taken into account that Tracey Emin says that she held a great ignorance of the history of art and contemporary art during her initial years as an artist. Is Tracey Emin feigning ignorance to promote her artwork? The fact is that, advisedly or unintentionally, many of Emin's artistic pieces visually reference other works from other artists.

The influence of Edvard Munch and Egon Schiele in Emin's work is frequently mentioned. Concerning the first one, what can be perceived in Emin's work is a certain kind of pose, as in her aforementioned screaming in her film, *Homage to Edvard Munch and All My Dead Children*. On the other hand, symbolism and pantheism are shared by both artists [12,41]. Concerning the supposed influence of Egon Schiele [31], this can be considered a myth, created by Tracey Emin; in fact, this is an indirect influence through her contacts with Billy Childish and the interest that, in her adolescence, she had for the cover of David Bowie's album *Lodger* (this certainly inspired by a Schiele's picture). Nonetheless, Chris Townsend, very convincingly, establishes neat connections between Emin's self-representation in many of her monoprints, and a series of drawings of pre-pubescent females produced by Schiele in 1910, such as *Self-Portrait Drawing a Nude Model in Front of a Mirror*, as well as his famous pencil and watercolor *Self-Portrait Masturbating* (1911) [34]. Townsend constructs an interesting argumentation around the strategy described by André Gide as a *mise-en-abyme* in which the medium discloses its own properties of mediation in the artwork. Additionally, Townsend finds in the contortions shared by Schiele and his models in these and other drawings "a mapping of the male artist onto a feminine materiality, and indeed onto what was considered at that time (...) to be a specifically feminine condition, that of hysteria" and another connection with the discourses surrounding Emin's work [34]. In some works by Tracey Emin, a distant expressionist echo can be found connecting her, not only with the historic expressionism, but also with the German "new wild ones" of the 1980s. In any case, according to the arguments developed in the doctoral thesis by Outi Remes, Emin has moved away from the expressionist style [4].

Less commented, Van Gogh seems particularly relevant when discussing Emin's work [12]. In fact, Van Gogh is seen by David Galenson as the first example of confessional visual art, tracing a continuity line connecting him with Munch, Frida Kahlo, Francis Bacon, Louise Bourgeois, Cindy Sherman, and, finally, Tracey Emin [5]. Neil Brown suggests that "*Munch, Van Gogh and Emin are a trinity of artists, whose work depicts physical and spiritual anguish*" [12].

Emin's explicit exhibitionism could be compared with that of feminist artists working in the 1960s, such as Carolee Schneemann and Hanna Wilke [4,14,30]. While these artists used exhibitionism as a potent ideological weapon, it seems that Emin uses her exhibitionism in a symbolic manner, in the context of an essentially voyeurist society.

Her attitude transforming into art anything she wishes connects her with Duchamp's *ready made* and dadaism, as well as with Andy Warhol and *pop*. The comparison between Emin and Warhol was not properly discussed by art historians up to the doctoral thesis by Outi Remes, where this topic is widely, and deeply, covered [4]. I find an additional connection with Marcel Duchamp through the parallelism between the role played by the peephole, in her installation *The Perfect Place to Growth* (2001), and in the famous installation *Etant Donnés* (1946–1966), last major Duchamp's artistic work. In his monograph, devoted to Tracey Emin [12], Neil Brown also mentions *Etant Donnés* to connect it with

the re-presentation of the *Last Painting I Ever Made* in Emin's solo show *I Need Art Like I Need God* (South London Gallery, 1997). In contrast, Brown denies the value of *ready made* to *My Bed*, in contrast to other erroneous descriptions of this installation. Furthermore, for Brown "*its sense of theatre further disqualifies it from being properly described as Conceptual art*" [12]. As mentioned before, her installation, *My Bed*, is clearly a commentary on Rauschenberg's *Bed*.

Her use of blankets to express her art could allow to propose a link (although very collateral) with Faith Ringgold and her quilts devoted to the history of African-American life. Rosemary Betterton has suggested that there is a link between Emin's blankets and Roszika Parker's influential book, *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), in which, in the final chapter, she explores the role of embroidery in the 1970s' Women's Liberation Movement [22].

Emin's purgative way to turn her traumas into creative acts that at the same time give her additional strength makes possible to link her to Louise Bourgeois. In fact, Tracey Emin maintained a collaboration with Louise Bourgeois, shortly before her death, yielding the painting series *Do Not Abandon Me* (2011).

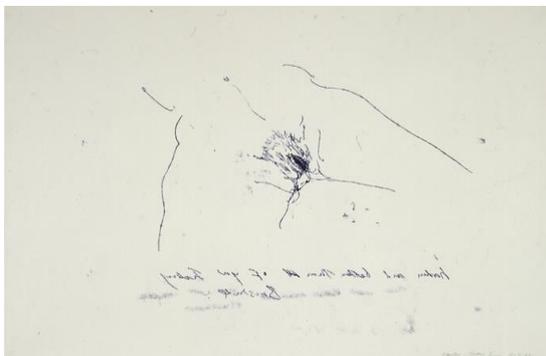
The way in which she transformed her "exhibition" in Stockholm in a performance with an almost mystery and shamanic background can clearly be connected to Joseph Beuys. As him, she rebuilds the past and projects her memories. In contrast with him, Emin does not do it trying to better understand the world, but to tear from her trauma, pain, and anger. Frequently, she does it with such a violence and brutality, and always with such an indecency as to recall Paul McCarthy dissecting collective neurosis (but Emin dissects her own neurosis).

Emin's use of waste material connects her with povera art, as previously mentioned.

The central role of *words* (and the *ideas* they symbolize) in her art makes a natural connection with conceptual art [12,16,35,36]. Neil Brown relates the texts in Emin's blankets with those of the American artist Bruce Nauman. Brown finds a similarity "*in that both artists devise combinations of textual assertion that create simultaneous, polyphonic mood*". Furthermore, "*like Nauman, Emin is emphatic in her concise utterance*". In contrast, Brown also finds a marked difference between both artists: "*There are also positive qualities in Emin's work that are fundamentally absent in that of Nauman who... is emotionally negative in the absoluteness of his existential void*" [12].

Without trying to close a chapter that must remain open, it seems reasonable to propose a more than casual connection between the famous *L'Origin du Monde*, by Courbet (1866), and her drawing, *Harder* (1995), and one of her Polaroid photos in the *Parkett Self-Portrait Series* (2001), in both of which she exhibits her open sex (for comparison, see Figure 9). Ulrich Lehmann and Peter Osborne have also connected the famous painting on the vagina by Courbet with Emin's work; Lehmann links Courbet and Emin through the concept of *poncif* ("trademark", but also "pattern"), whose creation Baudelaire identifies with genius; Osborne refers to *L'Origin du Monde* in the context of his analysis of the meanings of *I've Got it All* [20,30]. Recently, Cliff Lawson [42] has claimed that the video work *Those Who Suffer Love* (2009), an animation of a woman masturbating, has two canonical precursor in Courbet's painting, *L'Origin du Monde*, and Duchamp's installation, *Etant Donnés*.

Figure 9. (a) Tracey Emin, *Harder*, 1995, monoprint on paper (58 cm × 75 cm). © The artist. Courtesy of Jay Jopling/White Cube, London. Photo by Stephen White. (b) Tracey Emin, one of the Polaroid photos of the *Parker Self-Portrait* series, 2001. (c) Gustave Courbet, *L'Origin du Monde*, 1866, oil on canvas. Location: Musée d'Orsay, Paris. (d) Marcel Duchamp, 1946–1966, internal view of *Etant Donnés*. Location: Philadelphia Museum of Art.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

10. As a Kind of Conclusion: When Life and Art Become One

Tracey Emin labels her art as “own”, an appropriate term making reference to the perfect integration that she achieves of her life and her art in her work. This personal art arouses fervent adhesions and unmerciful rejections, but it leaves nobody indifferent. Her art impassions, so unconditionally, young people in United Kingdom that she has become an authentic social and artistic icon [4,11,12,16]. There is very little interest for the visual (at least, in a strict sense) in a great part of Emin’s work, which is deeply material and organic. In contrast, her striking use of color and her exploration of the material possibilities of the different media she uses are evident visual values of her work. Her pieces of work are shouts, complaints, impudic exhibitions, exorcisms of her traumas, pains, fears, and obsessions. At the same time, the creation of these works have, also, a therapeutical, purgative, and healing purpose, according to her own declarations. Emin has been sometimes considered a practitioner of the “re” (*repetition, recycling, revisit*); Townsend and Merck claim she is rather a practitioner of the “in” (*introspection, intention, intelligence*) [11]. In fact, Emin’s artistic work is full of introspection and shows her “truth”, intentionally mediated, rethought, and transformed with intelligence within what van der Woole has called a project of “life-writing” [16]. As Outi Remes

concludes in her doctoral thesis' chapter devoted to the art of Tracey Emin, "*Emin is an exceptional storyteller who knows how to use, develop, and transform her confessional persona, memories and experiences into sources of great artistic inspiration*" [4]. Thus, Tracey Emin does not only makes art from her own life, but she also gets her art to become life. As Will Gompertz has recently written: "*History will judge the quality of her work, but she is not a fraud*" [43].

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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