

CHAPTER 9

ANOTHER DIMENSION

Tracey Emin's Interest in Mysticism

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'The only thing I am really well read in... is mysticism: moving into other dimensions through the understanding of time and space, whether it's levitation or astral projection. It's the only thing I have ever studied with any interest.'

Tracey Emin, 1997¹

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She is the messenger and her medium is herself: the biographical details of her working-class background, her experiences as a sickly child, suffering from whooping cough, measles and German measles, her fear of ghosts, her musings over love and her triumph as one of the most recognized artists in England. Tracey Emin's celebrity now reaches outside the inbred world of the young British artist phenomenon. Since being shortlisted for the 1999 Turner Prize, Emin has found an audience that transcends artworld boundaries. Even as she utilizes the highly personal and private voice of a contemporary female artist in much of her work, Emin elsewhere appropriates the decidedly feminine performance strategies of the Victorian clairvoyant, who was permitted to transgress the gendered and class-structured boundaries of English society by 'being a lady'.

Being a lady included the creation of a persona characterized by denatured sexuality, personal passivity and formalized rituals of personal decorum. Performing this role, Emin is able to 'channel' the power of a female voice to create a unified oeuvre, using her interest in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century manifestations of the paranormal to define a universal, and genderless, soul. Emin's performance of esoteric rituals, and their incorporation into a complex media matrix,

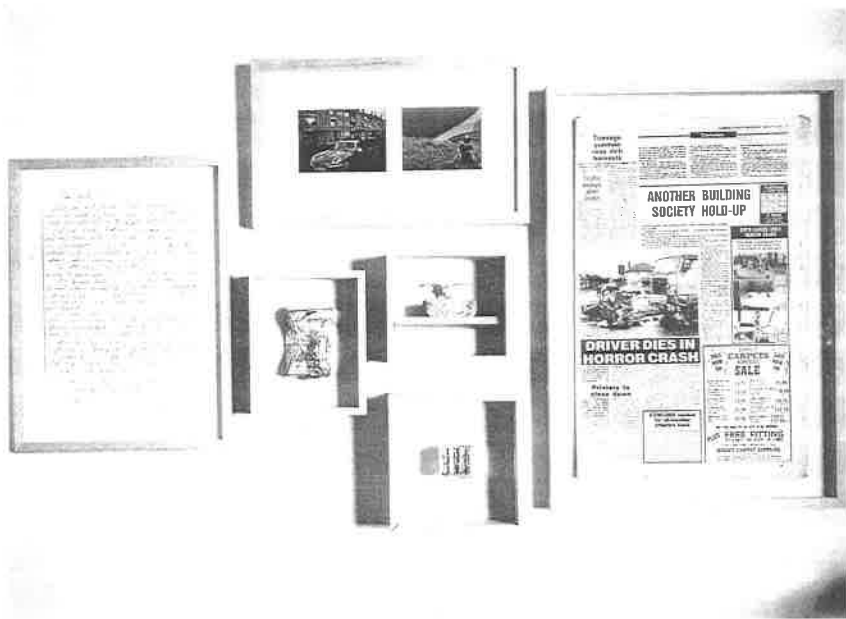
reflects the philosophical theories and thoughts historically associated with mysticism. Mysticism informs Emin's aesthetic, signifying a strategy of resistance, whether intentional or not, to the canon of the spiritual in modern art that has been predominantly defined by male artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian.²

Critics have commented on the widely variable elements in Emin's work, which ranges from crafty appliquéd blankets to textual works of written confession. Among these voices is that of Roberta Smith, who suggests that 'stylistically, it ricochets between various Post-Minimalist conventions, early feminist art and installation art'.³ If superficially Emin's work fails to adhere to expectations of a uniform style, it does exhibit amazing consistency in its exploration of mysticism. Emin has given 'testimonials' in many interviews, between 1995 and her most recent show at White Cube² in 2001, narrating a childhood in a family psychically connected to, and with a solid faith in, the powers of the paranormal. To Emin's frustration, such spiritualism, however, has not been the subject of critical or popular attention, as she noted in a recent interview. 'Everyone focuses on the sexuality of my work. Why doesn't anyone ask me about my thoughts on God?'⁴ From her earliest years, Emin was imbued with an empirical understanding of the otherworld as she was frequently included in traditional spiritualist practices ordained by female role models. Her mother is reported to have conducted séances regularly in her home. During these sessions the teenage Emin took shelter from unsavoury spirits under a Formica table.⁵ In a recent interview, Emin initiates the unknowing reader into the world beyond. 'People imagine that they see the dead because they really want to, but it isn't quite like that. You miss people, you have to see them, and you are desperate to know what happened. So sometimes you feel them or imagine that they're sitting there. You see it, you sense it and then it's gone.'⁶ Emin remarked in an interview with Miranda Sawyer that her twin brother, Paul, is so close to her that the two have 'an almost telepathic relationship.'⁷

Psychic connections extend outside Emin's immediate family and manifest themselves in several of her works. Her uncle Colin, who was said also to have possessed psychic powers, was decapitated while holding a pack of cigarettes when his Jaguar crashed. The assemblage *Uncle Colin*, 1963–93 (46), first installed on the

Jay Jopling stand at the Köln Art Fair, in 1993, is a type of *memento mori* in which Emin preserves his memory, with a golden Benson and Hedges packet displayed alongside a photograph of her uncle smiling proudly, standing next his to car. What is not immediately evident is that the work also represents an act of spiritual transmutation. Emin intended it to be a 'conscious' engagement with alchemical ideas: the ancient practice of transforming base elements into precious metal, or transforming 'the individual into spiritual gold – to achieve salvation, perfection, longevity, or immortality'.⁸ Thus, at the moment of impact, as Uncle Colin's cigarette packet was transformed into the material properties of gold – 'like real gold', as Emin says – his body transmuted into the immaterial properties of the immortal soul.⁹ Emin's decision to include this work in a major exhibition rested upon her confirmed belief in spirituality as necessary to art. *Uncle Colin* therefore becomes more than a ceremonial object. Emin endows the everyday materials of her uncle's existence – the commodified cigarette packet and the photograph – with the aura of high art by placing them within the sanctity of an art gallery. A more recent video work, *Reading Keys*, 1999 (47), which she recorded in and around her East End studio with her partner Mat Collishaw, suggests that initiates do not have to be blood relatives, just believers. In the six-minute video Emin 'reads' Collishaw's door keys, which he promptly gets 'recut' to fit their relationship.

Although some critics have intimated how mysticism and the esoteric fit into Emin's art, many have disregarded its consistent presence in her oeuvre. Susan Corrigan noted that the central subject of the exhibition 'I Need Art Like I Need God' 'draws on ideas inspired by fantasy – Ouija boards, imaginary conversations with Kurt Cobain, star crushes'.¹⁰ Yet Corrigan failed to recognize that, even if it is pure fantasy, Emin consciously pursues it with the devotion demanded by religion. Her involvement began to extend beyond her family when she first became identified with the emerging group of British artists in the early 1990s that became known as the yBas. In 1993, after several years of disillusion with making art, Emin opened 'The Shop' in Bethnal Green Road with her friend Sarah Lucas. As the well-rehearsed story of Emin's early career has it, both artists sold goods, including T-shirts, badges and other souvenirs, that artworld cognoscenti took



46 *Uncle Colin*, 1963–93
six framed memorabilia
dimensions variable

home from their East End pilgrimages. During those formative years, Lucas shared a book with Emin which featured, among other esoteric teachings, 'descriptions of heaven from people who have died and come back in séances to tell us what it's like'.¹¹ It seems likely that this book was the popular *Doors to Other Worlds*, 1993, by the Spiritualist Raymond Buchland. It recounts the history of the Spiritualist movement, supported by scientific evidence concerning such subjects as Héléne Smith, whose powers were studied by Charcot at the Salpêtrière hospital after his appointment there in 1862.¹² Through its simple explanations, pragmatic organization and low-key packaging, the book demystifies the occult for the everyday reader, reflecting the pluralistic nature of the Spiritualist movement in its attempt to appeal to a broader audience.¹³ Buchland seeks to clarify a common misconception regarding psychic practices, reminding his readers that 'mediumship is not the same thing as possession', because it corresponds to a voluntary rather than an involuntary act and therefore does not require the intervention of outside parties.¹⁴

The book did not influence Emin directly.¹⁵ The significance of Buchland's work in any consideration of Emin's engagement with spirituality lies in its explanation of Spiritualism's relevance to Anglophone culture.¹⁵ Buchland verified the continuity of a significant cultural movement, in both America and England, which reached its apogee during the early twentieth century, by illuminating its contemporary interpretation and popularity within popular culture.¹⁶ While 'The Shop' was experiencing a flurry of activity, Emin befriended one of its many patrons, the precocious Joshua Compston. Compston felt the British art world was in dire need of aesthetic rejuvenation, and shortly after graduating from the Courtauld Institute opened his gallery, Factual Nonsense, nearby, as an alternative venue for emerging artists.¹⁷ Later, Compston was inspired to organize the now mythologized street festival in Shoreditch, the ironically titled 'Fête Worse than Death'. The fair, which included Emin among its regular participants in its different incarnations, was held annually in the heartland of the yBa community, only ceasing after Compston's death in 1996 with a tribute organized by Gavin Turk. Compston solicited artists to rent stalls for small sums, complementing their presence with street performers,



47 *Reading Keys*, 1999

single-screen projection and sound, shot on Mini-DV
duration: 6 mins, 5 secs

musicians and any others willing to participate in a magnificently baroque display of the yBa spirit. In 1993, Emin's first-year contribution featured a table for 'Essential Readings'. Emin offered free readings to any souls willing to face their fate as revealed by simply opening their palm.¹⁸ In Emin's performance as 'clairvoyant', she was dressed in a second-hand jacket, poised behind a makeshift table draped in fabric, relaying messages to her sitters, her mystique enhanced by the burning flames from flanking incense torchères.

A year after the closure of 'The Shop', Emin continued to explore esoteric practices through rituals held at her public space, the Tracey Emin Museum. In an unpublished interview, Emin reveals how she would get drunk at night, blindfold herself and allow images and text to come to her, recording these impressions on paper without interfering with the automatic process she employed. Though we have no images from this period, the process was responsible for her twilight vision of her friend Suleyman (who had been dead for three years), which Emin recorded in scrawled handwriting and published completely unedited at the back of the catalogue for 'I Need Art Like I Need God'. Emin described to me another ritual where she would get drunk and 'imagine' the faces of all the dead people she had known, blindly drawing her mental images and sometimes even 'feeling someone hold her hand'. These drawings reveal a process analogous to the automatic writings and spirit drawings commonly made by mediums during the 1850s and 1860s while in a state of trance or sleep, induced through voluntary hypnosis. Such evidence was often shown to visitors and sitters at a medium's home in order to demonstrate psychic abilities. Some of these drawings were regarded by Victorian critics as being 'high art', particularly those made during the 1860s and 1870s by Georgiana Houghton. As medium-cum-artist, Houghton, the 'Holy Symbolist', gained a degree of notoriety for her abstract images which in 1865 were accepted at the Royal Academy and then exhibited in 1871 at the New British Gallery in Old Bond Street.¹⁹ However, Houghton's public recognition proved short-lived, prompting several historians to argue that her images have been denied their historical position in the canon of transcendental art, and suggest that they may have informed the work of Kandinsky, Mondrian and Frantisek Kupka.

Tom Gibbons has established that Houghton's 1871 exhibition is mentioned in Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* of 1888, the seminal text that explained the theories of the Theosophy movement. Furthermore, Gibbons argues, Houghton's abstract images may have been the models for John Varley Jr, who illustrated *Thought Forms*, 1905, by Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater, the second-generation leaders of Theosophy. The abstract images contained in the book are widely accepted to have been formative for Kandinsky's and Mondrian's theories and spiritual abstractions.²⁰

These performative 'acts' of clairvoyance and works involving psychic processes in Emin's early oeuvre may appear inconsequential, or merely an ironic, postmodern play on ideas of the occult, but there is significant evidence to counter such scepticism. Although in contemporary culture mysticism has become equated with the occult and the esoteric, for some it remains an area of formal philosophical and historical inquiry, as it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is the latter that finds specific expression in Emin's work. The historian of comparative religion Hal Bridges defines mysticism as the 'selfless, direct, transcendent, unitive experience of God or ultimate reality, and the experient's interpretation of the experience'.²¹ In an interview with Mark Gisborne, Emin answered his question of why her works do not 'look' religious thus: 'I am not religious in terms of being christened or whatever; I don't believe in that kind of thing... I like the idea of all things connecting.' 'Pantheism?' Gisborne asked. 'Yes... So when you think about the world and its structure and everything, all things connect.'²² The pantheist experient, often discussed in the mystical writings of the German Romantics and Symbolists, is someone who 'regards the oneness that characterizes mystical experience as the ultimate reality', and that 'ultimate reality may be denoted as God, the One, Brahma, nirvana', depending on the mystic's specific culture.²³

After Emin's second abortion, in 1992, she destroyed all the work she had made at the Royal College of Art, dismissing the importance of making art through a monumental acknowledgment that her creative ability died with the loss of her foetus. Instead of pursuing her artistic career, Emin took a job as a tutor of young

adults with Southwark Council. It was then, as she subsequently noted in an interview, that she attended a philosophy course at Birkbeck College. 'And suddenly my brain, it was like doing exercises in a gym and your muscles waking up. It was brilliant.'²⁴ However, it took a while for such brilliance to ferment and materialize, as Emin made no art that embodied these philosophical concerns until after she had opened 'The Shop' with Lucas in 1993. Emin's enlarged philosophical preoccupations were nicely summarized in a joint installation made with Lucas, *From Army to Armani*, 1993, shown at the Galerie Analix in Geneva. This ephemeral work featured two director-style chairs around a table covered by a coloured umbrella, their backs draped with black T-shirts stencilled in white 'God is Dad' and 'Nietzsche is Dead'. Two large-scale photographs showing Emin and Lucas standing in front of their shop were mounted on the wall behind the installation, providing evidence to confirm that, yes, it was at this site where they, the 'experients', contemplated the metaphysical and interpreted their existential experience.²⁵ Although it conceals her renewed concern with the spiritual beneath a glib surface, *From Army to Armani* attests to the importance of Emin's philosophical studies, including her interest in the writings of Spinoza, the Dutch philosopher whose theories questioned the Calvinist notion of God's materiality. Central to the formulation of Romantic pantheistic thought, Spinoza's ideas were recognized by Nietzsche as being fundamental in the formation of his own notions of the self. Thus, the installation not only examines the history of questions concerning the eternal spirit, it also makes a larger statement about the commodification of spirituality. In the century after Nietzsche's death, the development of a capitalistic culture could make art act as a commodity. Moreover, with God being present in all creation – even Dad – the backs of souvenir T-shirts could act as pulpits for a pantheistic belief through mass-marketed slogans.

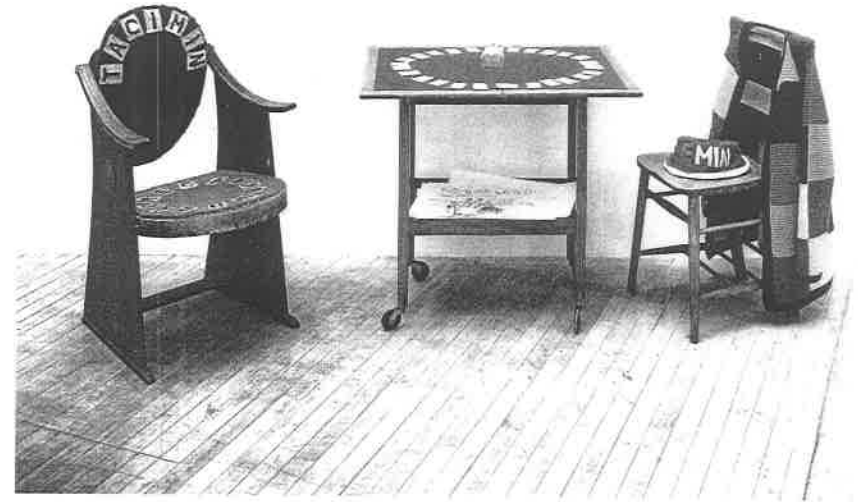
These seemingly disparate interests in mysticism and Spinoza's treatises are clarified in pieces Emin made during her first tour of America with the curator Carl Freedman. Works included a photographic essay made by Freedman of Emin reading her treatise *Exploration of the Soul*, 1994, in seven different locations from San Francisco to New York. The number seven is significant in mystical

teachings, including Theosophy, Spiritualism and numerology, representing the seven stages of evolution of the consciousness to reach eternal enlightenment. The photographic series *Journey across America*, 1994, narrates the journey of both Emin's body and soul; it travels through time from her birth as a twin up to the present. These photographs reveal that Emin's readings were ritualistically made from her talismanic 'Grandmum's chair', which featured in *There's A Lot of Money in Chairs*, 1994 (48). The upholstered armchair, appliquéd with pithy sayings from her beloved grandparent, serves as a 'message' from her relative. Emin inherits the psychometrically endowed seat from a line of three generations of female visionaries empowered with wisdom from worlds beyond. Emin's message is supported by nature as she sits under the infinite expanse of the North American sky. In the role of the itinerant clairvoyant, Emin 'caravanned' across the country, stopping at various galleries with her 'psychometric' chair – a performance that symbolized an endeavour to save the lost soul of the art world. Ironically, the chair, while it remained a locus of this performance, assumed its own talismanic properties for Emin's career. Sustaining the family tradition, her grandmother's chair not only made Emin some money from her 'readings', but most significantly it indicated a fast-growing status with the art world with its arrival at White Cube as installed object for her first solo exhibition in London, 'My Major Retrospective'. This form of readymade was followed three years later by another work, a Ouija board table with assembled chairs, entitled *Tacimin – Can You Hear Me?*, 1997 (49). In its first incarnation this work used a card table which had been given to Emin by her grandmother. Knowing this, we might speculate that *Tacimin* reinforces the notion that psychic ability is often a gift or talent bestowed from birth and that there is a matriarchal genealogy of clairvoyance.

There's A Lot of Money in Chairs marks a significant point in Emin's career where her physical presence within the work expands her philosophical discourse on the nature of the self according to mystical precepts. Perhaps no work so capitalizes on the notion of ritual as circumscribed by presence as *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, 1995 (6). A modified blue camping tent for two, it featured 103 names of all the people Emin had slept with, including her aborted children, her brother and



48 *There's A Lot of Money in Chairs*, 1994
Appliqué armchair
69 x 53.5 x 49.5cm (27¹/₈ x 21 x 19¹/₂in)



49 *Tacimin – Can You Hear Me?*, 1997
table and chairs
dimensions variable

the poet Billy Childish, appliquéd within the interior. Considered by many as her breakthrough work, it was first exhibited in 1995 at the South London Gallery in 'Minky Manky', a show which featured among others Damien Hirst, Mat Collishaw, Sarah Lucas and Gary Hume. In the catalogue, Carl Freedman critically framed the yBa circle of significance: "Minky Manky" is about life, both in the profound sense in that it deals with fundamental questions of existence... Indirectly, it is also an investigation into the phenomena of the artist, and presents the artist as an expressing subject, which rejects the idea of the death of the author.²⁶

Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, which lists Emin's sexual partners as if on a scorecard, is usually interpreted as a work that plays into a culture of public confession and voyeurism. However, such a view ignores the names of the platonic partners that appear, which suggest that there are elements of the work that examine the complex nature of intimacy associated with the ritual of sharing a bed. One issue overlooked in the prevailing interpretation is the work's spirituality, which was obviously missed by curators when it was reinstalled in America in 1995 for the 'Brilliant: New Art from London' exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Emin noted: 'My requirements for the tent were that it be installed in a place where there was no sound, because it is a quiet, contemplative piece. They installed it in between two sound pieces. I thought if this is the way Americans are, I don't want to be here.'²⁷ By disregarding her directions, the museum curators prioritized the loud confessional aspects over the work's solitary qualities – a privatized site for contemplation.²⁸ This curatorial decision also ignored the historical precedents that informed the work's form and function. As Emin has repeatedly stated, her idea was derived from a Tibetan tent she had seen at an exhibition while working in her own 'museum', located near the Imperial War Museum.²⁹ The Tibetan tent is a site of ritualistic and contemplative action, where nomadic Buddhists seek solitude for meditative thought. Emin's tent was also to be a traveling shelter for her performances and, mirroring its Tibetan model's use, was supposed to roam to different galleries, reinforcing concepts first introduced by her grandmother's chair.

To understand the issues of sexuality within the tent requires more than just

reading the 'writing on the wall' by a 'bad girl': it involves an engagement with a complex philosophy concerning the nature of sex. *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* is not just a site denoting orgasms scored but also one in which one travels to another place in time through the experience of sex. Emin's tent reflects a common belief within contemporary mystical thought that ascribes to sexual relations a meaning of cosmic proportions. Mystical thinkers and pantheists alike consider sex a perfect moment of unity, suspended outside of time and space, and think of it as a means of exploring the fourth dimension. The significance of the act lies outside the materiality of bodies and the physical pleasure of sex.³⁰

Linda Dalrymple Henderson suggests that the notion of another dimension was first introduced in 1904 by Claude Bragdon in discussing the works of the Belgian Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck, and 'put in motion certain mystical themes that became central to early twentieth-century discussions of a fourth dimension'.³¹ If we recognize Emin's concern with sexuality as invoking a pantheistic experience of the fourth dimension, one can further understand her adoption of the guise of the Symbolist artist. Given Emin's interests in mysticism, it is unsurprising that she was attracted to the works of Edvard Munch from a very young age, acknowledging him as one of her most important aesthetic influences.³² Munch was exposed to mysticism when he moved to Berlin in 1892, hopeful of finding international recognition and instead finding himself amid some of the most influential European thinkers of the time. As Carla Lathe has noted, Munch's opening exhibition at the Verein Berliner Künstler in September 1892 caused a scandal, and his work was embraced by a group of radical literati and dissident artists who debated and wrote on topics such as Satanism, Spiritualism and Theosophy.³³ August Strindberg and other avant-garde writers, such as the Swedish critic Ola Hansson, the German critic Franz Servaes and Stanislaw Przybyszewski, frequently met to discuss their interests in mysticism, the occult and Nietzschean philosophy at the bar Zum Schwarzen Ferkel, and became Munch's closest friends in Berlin until his departure in 1903. Przybyszewski, a medical student at the time, formulated his own theories regarding 'synaesthesia', hypothesizing that brain vibrations could create projections between two minds. 'Thought waves' could create invisible bridges between two people, he

proposed.³⁴ Ola Hansson introduced Munch to Nietzsche's writing, emphasizing his call for an art that would produce a 'Rausch'³⁵ or frenzy, and eventually Munch became an admirer of the philosopher as well as a beneficiary of Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche's patronage.³⁶ In addition, Munch accepted Emanuel Swedenborg's theories regarding auras, which he believed could be seen around people, and reaffirmed such ideas by reading related texts, including *Spiritualism and Animism*, 1890, by Aleksandr Aksakov.³⁷ So closely aligned was Munch with these mystical thinkers that he is known to have exhibited several paintings, including *The Kiss* and *The Scream*, at the studio of Hilma af Klint. A Swedish portrait painter who discovered abstraction through the writings of Blavatsky, Besant and Leadbeater, Klint established a female Spiritualist group. Under the direction of spirit guides and with the aid of a psychographic recorder, the women experimented with automatic drawing as a means of artistic expression.³⁸ As Bernard Smith notes, Theosophy, Spiritualism and anthroposophy were integral to the formulation of the modernist aesthetic during the early twentieth century, especially in Germany, Russia and Vienna.³⁹

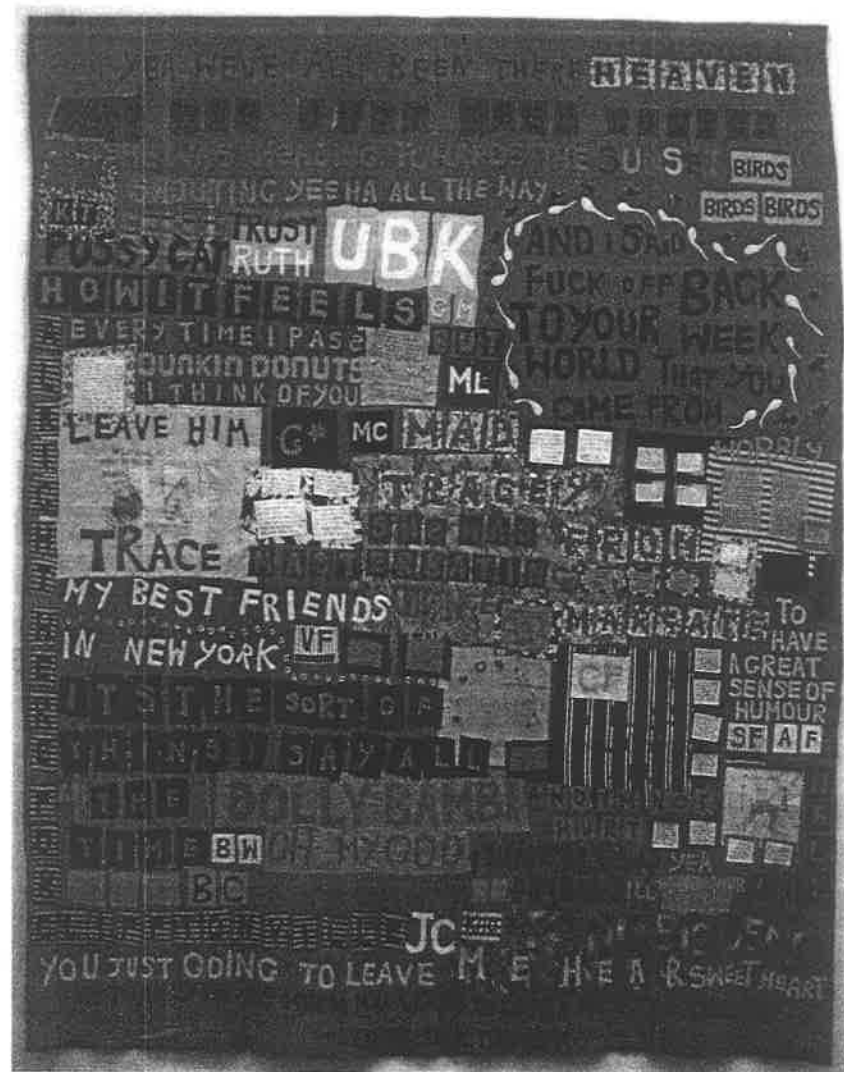
During this time, although Munch was associated with a bohemian, atheist milieu, some scholars have argued that he never completely denied his religious upbringing, trying to balance the claims of faith and freedom in his life and art. Munch was a known pantheist, a belief that he would often express in his writings. 'Everything is movement and light. God is in us and we are in God, God is in everything. In us are whole worlds.'⁴⁰ The lithograph *Madonna*, 1895, assimilates these ideals: it depicts a female figure raising her arms above her head in an ecstatic gesture, while a decorative border of swimming sperm surrounds her. In a colour woodcut, *Encounter in Space*, 1899, a red man and green woman meld together and float on an undefined, abstracted black background where large spermatozoa swim around their unified forms.⁴¹ As Pat Berman has argued, these images show a 'merging of sacred and sexual themes', which was of central concern to Munch during the 1890s as he examined 'sexual love' as a cosmic act in another dimension that he believed linked 'thousands of generations' of human procreation.⁴²

There are several ways in which Emin's writings, reputation and public image mirror Munch's, including her intimate sibling relationship, her descriptions of childhood as defined by illness, and a highly personalized art enacted through techniques of seemingly 'authentic' confessional expression. The introspective Munch turned to diaries for their almost 'therapeutic function', then published them later in life as the means by which others could decipher 'the meaning' of his paintings.⁴³ His published writings contain passages that seem to have influenced Emin's writings, especially in *Exploration of the Soul*. Reflecting on the importance of his painting *Dance of Life*, 1899, from Copenhagen in 1908 after his nervous breakdown, Munch remarked, 'I who came into the World sick/ into a sick environment/ whose Youth was a hospital room'⁴⁴ and later, in the romanticized style that was fashionable in Symbolist circles, that 'Sickness, insanity, and death were the malevolent angels that... have followed me through my life ever since.'⁴⁵ This exemplifies what Berman has identified as a common literary trope in the wake of Baudelaire and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, 1872, where sickness of body and mind was made emblematic of artistic genius. In *Exploration of the Soul*, Emin utilizes similar tropes as she recalls her life as shaped by childhood sickness, as plagued by what the artist describes as 'neurotic ramblings'. She starts her narrative with the beginnings of her and her brother's lives in hospital, writing that 'When I was born – they thought I was dead', and therefore 'They put me into a little glass box.' Later she confesses that 'As a baby I wanted to die... my soul had been floating along when somehow a giant hook – had pulled me down from the sky – one moment free – the next – a creature of this world.'⁴⁶

The most obvious means by which Emin fashions herself and her work in the tradition of male modernist artists such as Munch is by creating an oeuvre of personal confession, situating her life and body as its source, its corpus. Munch's work is often discussed in terms of his biography, especially his magnum opus *The Frieze of Life*, an installation that included *The Voice*, 1893, *The Vampire*, 1893, *The Scream*, 1893, and other paintings, which he first showed in 1893 and exhibited in various arrangements until the late 1920s. This work in particular has been subject to interpretation as a reflection of Munch's struggles with the deaths of his

mother and favourite sister while a teenager, the trauma associated with unrequited love affairs, his 'madman' reputation within conservative art circles, and his struggle with alcoholism. Arne Eggum romanticizes Munch's persona by claiming that, of all the modernist artists, 'none developed such a unique "private" symbolism with a deliberative use of their own traumatic experiences as Munch did. He had the courage to soberly display his own life for observation, renouncing all self-pity, a display of temperament that, profoundly speaking, became his life philosophy.'⁴⁷ As Sander Gilman has argued, Munch consciously created connections between his life, creativity and wayward social image in his diaries and literary notebooks, some of which were explicitly intended for public consumption.⁴⁷ Eggum's appraisal of Munch is not so remote from the headlines that surrounded Emin's initial success. She has titled herself 'Mad Tracey from Margate', her experiences appliquéd into history by her own hand in the blanket *Mad Tracey from Margate. Everyone's Been There*, 1997 (50). Critics have even speculated that Emin staged her drunken exit from a live television discussion between leading critics during a Turner Prize Award show in 1997. Emin clearly takes a cue from Munch's tumultuous life, making the 'story' of her life into a narrative art of which the tabloids cannot get enough, and which Emin continues to exploit through her advertising appearances. In a video entitled *Tracey Emin's CV. Cunt Vernacular*, 1997 (42), Emin visually catalogues every detail of her apartment while reciting her entire life story in the manner of a résumé. The viewer is exposed to all the particulars of Emin's life, from the intimacies of her rumpled bed to the trash in her bathroom, becoming a voyeuristic witness of the stuff of her life, which is paramount to her art. Where Emin carefully manipulates Munch's art of personal confession is in her inversion of its gender. For the life of the male 'genius' she substitutes the experiences of a woman artist, her successful career regaled in a first-person female voice.

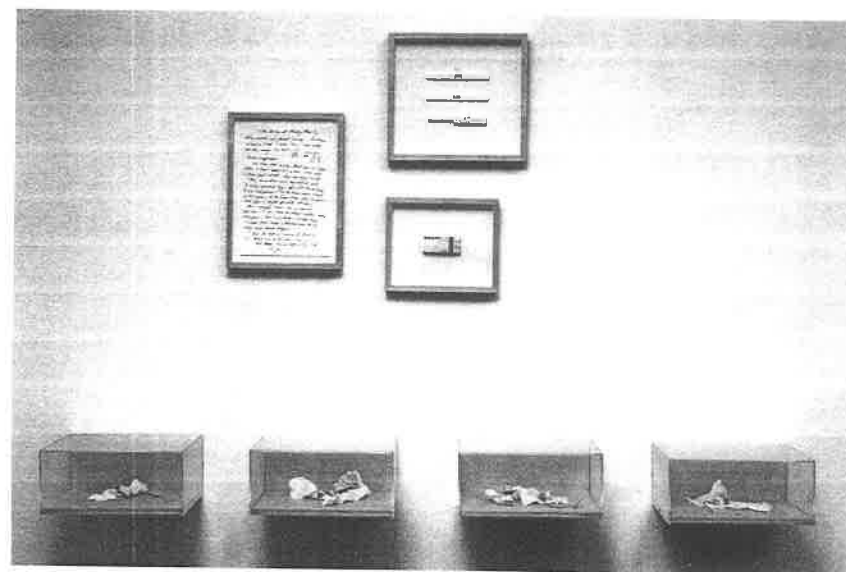
Emin not only redefines Munch's public persona, rhetoric and confessional style, she also redraws his aesthetic, which vacillated from Romantic Symbolism to raw Expressionism. Munch's early style was nurtured by the radical Hans Jaeger. Munch's attachment to Jaeger is cited by Övind Storm Bjerke as a rebellion against his father's rigid thinking and proscriptive lifestyle.⁴⁹ Jaeger demanded that



50 *Mad Tracey from Margate. Everyone's Been There*, 1997
 appliqué blanket fabric from clothing provided by friends
 215 x 267cm (84½ x 105½in)

intellectuals and artists break away from bourgeois ideas by abandoning their genteel lives, denying their roots and rewriting their lives, which were to end in suicide, the ultimate denial. Jaeger called for an aesthetic that used naturalism not to reproduce or imitate nature, but to portray human reality by adapting one's personal experience to it. Thus, one's private life was the raw material from which an artist was to create, which convinced Munch that 'All art, literature and music must be brought forth with your heart's blood. Art is your heart's blood.'⁵⁰ As a consequence, both Munch's literary and artistic creations emphasized the importance of expression through a symbolic incorporation of blood in the colour red and images of death. Munch maintained this aesthetic ideal throughout his life and cogently demonstrated it in *Self-portrait*, 1898, a woodcut he made for the German periodical *Quickborn* to be published with an image of Strindberg. Munch depicts himself as the suffering artist, with one arm above his head in a grand gesture of anguish while his other hand grabs at his heart, blood pouring forth to nourish a flower in the ground. Gerd Woll has remarked that Munch often compared himself to a woman, who through her ability to conceive and create a child plays a central role in the cycle of both life and the universe.⁵¹

Emin situates herself within this discourse of creativity, birth and sacrifice in numerous works and performative statements. Certainly the way she talks about the ceremonial destruction of all of the works she made between 1990 and 1992, following an abortion, echoes with a similar sentiment. In one interview, she stated: 'I couldn't go on doing art unless it meant something to me emotionally... so I began making things out of bits of me.'⁵² Her 1999 exhibition at Lehmann Maupin, entitled 'Every Part of Me's Bleeding', is a monumental statement to this effect. The complete installation was focused upon her now infamous *My Bed*, 1998 (36), and included watercolours, videos, neon-scripted statements, cloth appliqués and blankets, monoprints and readymades, which formulated a unified statement looking backwards to Munch's discourse on creative powers. Hung on the wall was one of her signature appliqué blankets. Entitled *Psyco Slut*, 1999 (39), it employed what might be understood as Munch's cosmic sperm swimming next to the cut-out statement 'Oh TRACE', echoing the orgasmic moan of a lover. Other works, such as



51 *The History of Painting*, 1999
mixed media
dimensions variable
Galerie Gebauer, Berlin, 2000

The first time I was pregnant I started to crochet the baby a shawl, 1990–2000 (38) (an unfinished baby's shawl encased in Plexiglas), and *The History of Painting*, 1999 (51), in which a tableau of three pregnancy-test kits, morning-after pills and used tampons was assembled in five cases, allowed Emin to reassert her own ability to create an art more authentic than Munch's painting. Thus, her own blood replaces Munch's pigment, and endows it with reality rather than symbolic value. Emin trumps the ideals of modern aesthetics as defined by the male artist. Moreover, blood held magical properties within the discourse of Theosophy. In *Isis Unveiled* Blavatsky claims that blood is the first incarnation of the universal fluid and 'contains all the mysterious secrets of existence'.⁵³ With this installation, Emin not only reclaimed procreative power from the male modernist artist, she also relocated its discourse from one historically defined by Munch's male literary circle to the female psychic circle of Theosophy.

Two of the video works featured on a continuous loop during 'Every Part of Me's Bleeding' further support Emin's strategy of reconfiguring modernism's imagination as a pantheistic site of creativity. *How It Feels*, 1996 (45), is a twenty-four-minute recording of Emin, dressed in a dark suit, answering a litany of questions posed off-camera. The film opens on the steps of a church. A sign behind Emin's head ironically assures us that 'Art Is Therapy', as she gives her interpretation of the way in which her first abortion was mishandled by medical practitioners. At first she was denied permission for the procedure, delaying it for six weeks, after which doctors ineffectively terminated the foetus. Emin admits to the interviewer that, in having an abortion, she also lost control over her own procreative rights and thus 'the essence of creativity'. Her ability to make this experience of loss into a material work displayed in the confines of a New York gallery is the means by which she inverts metaphor. No longer concerned with symbolic gestures based on intellectual principles, Emin emphasizes the empirical weight of authentic experience and rewrites Munch's notion of articulating personal history within Expressionist painting.

Perhaps no work acknowledges Emin's conscious debt to Munch's mystical works and ideals more profoundly than her one-minute video work *Homage to*

Edvard Munch and all My Dead Children, 1998 (44). Filmed in Norway on the docks near Munch's studio, it served as the finale to a continuous loop of videos at Lehmann Maupin. Often mislabelled *The Scream*, after Munch's canonical painting, the video captures Emin curled face-down, lit from above.⁵⁴ The camera tilts down the side of the dock, recording light reflecting off the water's surface, twinkling in a random pattern, while the viewer's equanimity is broken by Emin's scream. The wailing continues as the camera tilts upwards to the dark sky, the glimmering water evanescing into a blinding oval in the shape of a distorted sunspot. The video ends with a full-screen shot of the sun, an image reminiscent of those in Leadbeater and Besant's *Thought Forms*. The pain of Munch's scream, its expression no longer limited to the silence of pigment and colour, is rendered real, its veracity confirmed through Emin's personal experience. Furthermore, Emin makes esoteric Theosophist teachings visible by recording the transformation of matter. In *The Ancient Wisdom*, 1897, Besant charts the transformation of the basic chemical elements through 'etheric stages', which begins with the most solid form – physical matter – and ends in the fourth form – an image of oval energy.⁵⁵ Allegorically, Emin's video charts the journey of the universal soul from the material depths of the woman's womb to the metaphysical heights of the sky.

Though some critics, as well as Emin herself, might question this rewriting of Munch's spiritualism as not purely feminist, Emin's work is neither fixedly polemical nor simply 'pure'.⁵⁶ However, as Alex Owen has shown, Victorian women who participated in Spiritualism were not consciously enacting a feminist programme; their agreement to 'play' the role of the medium, whether authentic or fraudulent, was voluntary and, more importantly, resisted dominant constructions of femininity.⁵⁷ A similar strategy of resistance consistently manifests itself in Emin's work from her early career to the present, finding its expression in a wide variety of media. With Emin's rearticulation of the visual and rhetorical techniques of Edvard Munch through her own soul and body, his avant-garde spiritual works and principles that were representative of modernist intellectual thought are recast. Art history is Emin's portal to aesthetic power and her vessel is the modernist artist. What better medium to actualize her voice than by adopting the style of Munch's Expressionism?

By bringing into her possession this modernist idiom, Emin reclaims the voice of Victorian parlour culture, largely articulated by the female mystic for her own exploration, and thereby elevates it to the centre of postmodern aesthetics.

CHAPTER 10

INTERVIEW WITH TRACEY EMIN

JEAN WAINWRIGHT

JW At Maidstone College of Art you studied for your BA in printmaking. You've spoken in the past about being in love with that prolific printmaker Edward Munch and many of the other Expressionists. You talked almost in religious terms of touching Munch's bed and the presence of the artist. What was it about Munch that engaged you?

TE There were two things going on there. I wasn't very well grounded in art history, I had very little understanding of it. I don't even think that I really knew what the Renaissance was until after I had finished my degree. I was quite blinkered and not very interested in very much that was 'art' – but I was interested in things that would connect to me. Of course, the Expressionists in a certain way were almost naïve, guttural workers. They thought with their stomach basically. So I could relate to that, because everything was just so obvious, it was easy to understand. But the thing with Munch, though – there were a lot of artists that I liked at that time, and copied for want of a better word – I still carried on liking his work. If I had a Munch painting I would still want it on my wall. I wouldn't look back at it and think 'that was what I used to like when I was twenty'. I think that Munch was sophisticated because he used emotion in art, but not in an illustrative way. In *The Scream* he is actually painting sound and this is quite a radical idea for that time, quite a conceptual idea and also to actually paint jealousy is a completely different way of understanding art. My engagement with Munch was about where he took his influences from, ancient Egypt or mummified bodies. There is more to it than just the obvious connections.

JW Another artist you have mentioned in relation to your work is Egon Schiele.

TE Yeah, I really like his drawings, he is brilliant at drawing, fantastic. Not so good