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On Probation: 'Tracey Emin' as Sign

Alexandra M. Kokoli

'See These Things Each Side of my Head? Inverted Commas' (Townsend II.5)

Born in London in 1963 to an English mother and Turkish Cypriot father, Tracey Emin is simultaneously one of the most prominent contemporary artists and a celebrity, balancing mainstream art world success (including a Turner Prize nomination in 1999; representing Britain in the fifty-second Venice Biennale; and becoming a member of the Royal Academy in 2008) with a public persona whose notoriety is both reflected in and cultivated by the media. Famous for works such as the installation, *My Bed* (1998), and the now destroyed appliquéd tent, *Everyone I've Ever Slept With, 1963-1995* (1995), Emin's multimedia practice is not merely profoundly autobiographical, narrating intimate details of her teens in Margate and beyond, but has become emblematic of a genre of confessionalism, which attracts popular attention, if not always critical acclaim. Many of the journalistic, art historical and curatorial discourses that have emerged around this genre and Emin, in particular, conflate artist and celebrity in a way that flippantly detracts from any critical evaluation of art practice and even, occasionally, devolves into derision, implicitly hinging on the artist's gender, class and racial identity. Only recently has Emin begun to be represented as an establishment figure in the press, even being courted by David Cameron's Conservative Party.

Nevertheless, familiar framings of Emin's practice, persona and, crucially, the slippage between the two, persist. These perpetuate and reinforce the qualities (authenticity, intuition, 'rawness') that support her careless casting as a 'postmodern primitive', while also, simultaneously, allowing her to be dismissed as a savvy self-promoter. The retrospective curated by Patrick Elliott, 'Tracey Emin 20 Years', at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, in 2008, reinforces these framings and condones this slippage: viewers were funnelled into the exhibition through a corridor lined with 'intimate' Polaroid self-portraits of Emin in various stages of undress; rooms were organised chronologically and around life events. Despite numerous official accolades and external indicators of success, current media, social networks and blogs tend to not so much debate Emin's value as an artist but whether she is an artist at all. As a response to such endurance of suspicion towards Emin, I propose to look closely at some of the mainstream discursive mechanisms of casual dismissal, even derision, foregrounding questions of race, class and gender. Instead of executing a close reading of her work by way of defending Emin as an artist, I will consider the popular, art critical and art historical reception of 'Tracey Emin' as artist, celebrity and celebrity artist. As some of the best critical writing on Emin has suggested, to try to separate the artist from the celebrity is not only unhelpful but disorienting: sometimes, the fan's

statement "I love you, Tracey" is the appropriate aesthetic judgement ... the way in which Emin and others legitimate her practice within art history blocks any effective understanding of what her work does. (Healy 156-7)

In what follows, 'Tracey Emin' is assumed to always be in quotation marks (explicit in my writing and often implied in the writing of others), not (just) a practicing artist, nor a woman, nor a British subject, but a signifier of sorts, always contextual, ambiguous, open to (re)interpretation.

This approach is indebted to a Lacanian understanding of the role and remit of the proper name as signifier in its pure state and, on a more fundamental level, the guiding principle that the subject is (also) a signifier ([Lacan](#) 33–125 and 161–197). Bearing her foreign father's name, 'Emin' is produced by and forms part of geopolitical, psychosexual and symbolic systems of signification which circulate, define and redefine her. In a notable essay, first published in 1978, Elizabeth Cowie revisits Lévi-Strauss's formulation of 'woman as sign' not only to signpost the gender-related blindspots of structural anthropology, but also to contribute to the theoretical apparatus of a feminist critique of representation. Cowie concludes that 'the question of the representation of women and woman as sign' should remain separate,

to avoid any simple denunciation of the sign as inadequate representation/signification of the 'real' object woman, and rather to take up the implications of certain modes of representations of women for the position of women constructed in society. (133)

After all, although the signifier of the sign is the actual person, woman, its signified is not the concept of woman, however fluid this may be, but rather 'that of establishment/reestablishment of kinship structures or culture' (Cowie 130). In the case of 'Tracey Emin', if the signifier is simply taken to be the proper name of this British woman, its signifieds are far more difficult to pinpoint. There is only one certainty, that they are not the 'real', essential Tracey Emin, not simply because the array of signifieds is full of contradictions or, arguably, because they represent misinterpretations of who this person actually is, but because her true identity is never what is at stake. Rather, I propose that the signifieds of 'Emin' have to do with the persistent shortcomings of much criticism and some art history in dealing with the complex relationship between art, life and, perhaps more importantly, beyond the art world,

with a failure to take on board intersectional identifications. In other words, 'Emin' signifies something about racial, sexual and class politics in contemporary British culture.

'Emin''s circulation as a sign should not be viewed as entirely metaphorical. The Tracey Emin Trading Card was among the original set of twelve cards of theory.org.uk (2000–2001) 'featuring theorists and concepts close to the hearts of people interested in social and cultural theory, gender and identity, and media studies' (Gauntlett). Her listed strengths, weaknesses and special skills reproduce familiar formulations, including the conflicting traits of emotional openness and cynical exploitation of the 'public's dodgy curiosity'.

Fig. 1. Tracey Emin trading card, <http://www.theorycards.org.uk/card09.htm>, part of the Theory.org.uk Trading Cards series, by David Gauntlett at www.theory.org.uk.

'The British Art World's Very Own Postmodern Primitive' (Stallabrass 39)

First published in 1999, *High Art Lite* by Julian Stallabrass was and remains one of the few considered, scholarly and powerfully argued assessments of the phenomenon that the author branded 'high art lite', evoking 'the idea of a fast food version of the less digestible art that preceded it' (2). The revisions of the expanded edition of 2006 consist of some updating and corrections, while a new final chapter has been added to cover the seven years since the book's first publication and to chart the demise of 'high art lite'. The sections on Emin have been similarly expanded to include a brief discussion of her 2002 show, 'This is Another Place', at Modern Art Oxford, and some engagement with critical writing on Emin produced after 1999, but the tone and conclusions remain almost entirely unaltered and, in places, offhand — Emin's nomination for the Turner Prize, for example, is limited to a single line in brackets, which also cites the wrong date, 1998 instead of 1999 (Stallabrass 38). This treatment is now complemented with the nearly wholesale dismissal of recent critical work on this artist, notably the essay collection *The Art of Tracey Emin*, which Stallabrass interprets as

proof of a fruitless compromise, while attempting to 'escape the trap of her everlasting adolescence', Emin finds herself involved in a project that:

she would once have run a mile from ... a largely pliant piece of promotional literature ... based upon a proposition that has a whiff of desperation about it, that behind Emin's apparent directness, conventional expressionism and media manipulation is secreted a sophisticated meditation on all these things, and on the place of art in the media and the market. (282)

Stallabrass's scathing criticism is not only of this attempt to *not* take 'Emin' at face value, but of what he perceives as a slippage between interpretation and inherent qualities of the works and artefacts under consideration. He condemns what he sees as:

a licence to apply the full apparatus of aesthetic theory, media theory and psychobabble to Emin's oeuvre, as some of the contributors do to inadvertently humorous effect, as if all this were inherent to the work itself. (Stallabrass 282)

It is interesting that Stallabrass should accuse the authors of such a slippage, as the original discussion of Emin in the 1999 edition continuously vacillates between describing, condemning and reproducing the superficial reading of Emin and her work, which sees them as transparent, self-exposing and self-evident:

The cover of one of Emin's books, issued by her dealer Jay Jopling, shows her painting naked, and there are other similar pictures inside. [This refers to the performance *Exorcism of the last painting I ever made*, 1996, which is not identified by name either in the main text or the notes]. She is the British art world's very own postmodern primitive, beavering away in a state of nature at words and pictures that place the sophisticated consumer of art in a state of half-belief, or suspension of disbelief. (39)

A few lines on, Stallabrass refers to Emin's 'state of beatific and indulgent primitivism'. The designation of the artist as 'a primitive' stuck with me the first time around, and I found its inclusion without change in the revised edition both surprising and troubling. This is clearly a problematic term, deeply political and embedded in structures of power in terms of gender, race and class. Aware of this, Stallabrass flags up the danger and attempts to brush it off — Emin's 'identity as an eccentric seems more important than the ratification of the work that might emerge from her being half-Cypriot, or working-class, or female' (39). Eccentric or not, there is no denying that Emin is indeed female, of working class provenance and not (quite) white, and it is these aspects of her identity, which throw the term 'primitive' into unsettling relief. (The play on 'not quite-not white' evokes Homi Bhabha's essay 'Of Mimicry and Man'; one could argue that 'Emin' represents the 'reformed, recognisable Other' (Bhabha 86) of the art world; her difference is slight, palatable but also taken for granted, assumed, and, for that reason, usually ignored.)

Among the small edits that Stallabrass made to the revised edition was the addition of the adjective 'British' in the phrase 'the British art world's very own postmodern primitive' (39). As he argues, Emin's brand of confessionalism has now purportedly spread well beyond the UK, but this is only a partial explanation. Strangely, possessives have always abounded around 'Emin'. She has always been claimed by the British, both fans and detractors, as their own, typical of the current state of cultural (and often social and sexual) affairs, for better or for worse; 'our Tracey ... the low-caste ... girl from a charmingly dysfunctional family' is not simply from Margate but is 'pure Margate' (Januszczak 10–11). Andrea Rose, the commissioner for the fifty-second Venice Biennale, proclaims Emin's quintessential, contemporary Britishness just as she disclaims the artist's choice on merit:

‘It’s not a question of picking the best artist, if there is such a thing, but the one who, in the circumstances, is best able to represent Britain at this particular moment’ (Rose cited in Herbert).

Years earlier, Melanie McGrath expressed the same unwillingness to assess Emin as an artist in an article named after the appliquéd blanket *Something’s Wrong*. In the aptly titled article ‘Undutiful Daughters’, Rosemary Betterton unpicks Emin’s highly ambivalent relationship with second-wave feminist art and her much more comfortable engagement with popular media and ‘ladette’ culture. In their introduction to the essay collection dismissed by Stallabrass, editors Merck and Townsend discuss the question of Emin’s ownership openly. As well as being ‘eminent’ in the dictionary definition of the word, in their view Emin constitutes an ‘eminent domain’ in the legal sense, referring to ‘the power to take something previously conceived as private property into public use’ (8). This isn’t simply about Emin’s life history being confiscated – nationalised – private property, more or less voluntarily (even exhibitionistically), but also opens up a wider question to which the whole of this essay collection is a response — who is entitled to interpret ‘Emin’, the oeuvre, the celebrity, the ‘phenomenon’? What was traditionally the purview of art historical scholarship is now *also* tabloid fodder, claimed by the masses. ‘Emin’, the outsider who made it against the odds, the quintessential Brit, ‘the self-appointed seaside slut’ (Januszczak 10) belongs to all, experts and gossips, lovers and haters, regardless of intention, training or critical skill. As one of her appliquéd blankets declares, ‘everybody’s been there’: a truly public woman (artist).

The term ‘primitive’ has everything to do with ownership, belonging and access. Being designated as ‘primitive’ reinforces the already existing tendency to disregard the work and evade construing ‘Emin’ as an artist. Although Emin is not among those written out of the history of post-World War Two British art and she is certainly rarely met with silence, she is still the victim of a neo-primitivist discourse that writes her off and out of the canon of

(serious) contemporary art practice, by either celebrating her as ‘a natural’ or condemning her as an amateur and/or a charlatan. The fact that her success is both undeniable and simultaneously considered exceptional, due precisely to her gender and socioeconomic background, makes her suspect to those secretly (or openly) attached to the white, male, middle-class privilege of the art world. And not only those. ‘Emin’ has often been construed as conveniently, superficially subversive in a way that reassures art institutions and audiences of their own liberalism; the room that Emin curated for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 2008 is a case in point. Some of Stallabrass’s, criticisms not only of ‘Emin’ but of all ‘young British artists’, have to do with their function as safety valves for the establishment. In the same vein, Michael Bracewell revisits Tom Wolfe’s essay ‘Radical Chic’ (1970), a bitter satire of the strategic rapprochement between the (white) social elite of urban America and (black) young radicals, and finds resonance in ‘a broader gentrification of the avant-garde’, and more specifically in ‘the glittering trajectory of [yBa] success’. (Bracewell misquotes Wolf’s term ‘pet primitives’ as ‘tame primitives’, an expression which does not appear anywhere in Wolf’s text. This is a telling error; the Black Panthers may have temporarily played pets to the elite but were never ‘tamed’, while the yBas may have always already been domesticated.) But can ‘primitive’ ever become an anodyne critical term, outside polemics and, crucially, free from racism?

David Theo Goldberg, drawing on anthropologist Adam Kuper, traces the history of the idea and term ‘primitive’ in nineteenth-century legal anthropology, in which it was developed ‘in binary differentiation from a civilised order: nomadic rather than settled; sexually promiscuous’ and having a looser attitude towards property; ‘illogical in mentality and practicing magic rather than rational and scientific’ (160). The myth of primitivism, therefore, crosses paths with the myths of ‘Emin’. Sexual promiscuity is a key component of the ‘Tracey’ universe, worryingly underpinned by the ambivalent documentation of her abortions

and her accounts of sexual violence. Voyeuristic curiosity has been so decisive in shaping and directing the reading of all of her production that many of her best-known works have been dominated by such interpretations to the exclusion of other principal thematic concerns and analytical possibilities. For instance, *My Bed* could just as plausibly be interpreted in reference to depression, alcoholism, loneliness or gendered diasporic subjectivity, as Deborah Cherry and Mandy Merck have demonstrated in their contributions to *The Art of Tracey Emin*. She is ‘illogical and practicing magic’, ‘Emin’s belief in her own and her family’s psychic abilities are oft cited as proof of her authenticity and status as an *idiot savante*. Her ability to read keys has been used as an interview gimmick to the unconvinced amusement of interviewers. Her intense interest in mysticism, ‘the only thing I am really well read in’, as she confesses (cited in Vara 172), is both reaffirmation of her intuitive way of working and a robust rivet pinning her life to her art. The richly illustrated volume, *Tracey Emin: Works, 1963–2006*, gives the year of her birth as the start of her career — a life’s work, a life/work. ‘Emin’s bad spelling, allegedly a symptom of dyslexia, has become an art critical topos and simultaneously an emblem of her fragmented education, as well as a reminder of how she spent her teens, tying into other ‘Emin’ myths. Rather than an epilogue, *Strangeland*, a collection of autobiographical writings, closes with an ‘Author’s Note’, which attracted some derisive comments from reviewers:

I felt it would be unreasonable for anyone to read a book that had spelling mistakes throughout. It was my decision to have my spelling corrected, and I’m now in the process of learning to spell. (214)

The spelling idiosyncrasies of the monoprints and blankets are the source of brilliant puns and double entendres that, even though they may have probably originally been unintended, were not edited out and thus became part of the work. In the case of monoprinting specifically,

technical constraints would suggest that spelling errors and reversing letters left to right are not out of the ordinary. Despite the repeated foregrounding of the poetic character of Emin's writing in general, not least on the blankets, puns emerging from misspellings are left more often than not entirely without commentary. For example, in the blanket *Helter Fucking Skelter* (2001), 'You see it's a spirial witch goes down', the misspelling of 'which' evokes 'witch', particularly when read in the context of the gendered slurs and insults dominating the blanket, addressing and at times quoting another woman, who 'knows who she is'; in 'Everythig [\[sic\]](#) you steel will turn to ash', the misspelling of 'steal' as the metal accentuates the idea of the disintegration into ash. In *Mad Tracey from Margate Everyone's Been There* (1997), the misspelled 'she was masterbating' makes it hard to resist the obvious but poignant feminist pun, 'master-baiting'.

Finally, and most importantly, 'Emin' is nomadic. She has written about her early childhood in Margate living in her mother's Hotel International, a place where habitation is by definition impermanent and provisional, with transient guests and squatters as housemates (*Strangeland* 3-25). Leaving Margate and her unsettled life as a teenager has been elevated to a central metaphor in 'Emin's' oeuvre. Her feature film, *Top Spot*, for example, ends with Emin, for the first time seen on screen [in this film](#), escaping on a plane from which she bombs Margate into oblivion. Albeit heavy-handed, by her own admission, the scene works as a powerful metaphor for a troubled but not unhappy girlhood, culminating into the confidence and autonomy of womanhood — and 'international womanhood' at that.

Although, originally not necessarily racialised (Goldberg 159; see also Amselle), in its history 'primitive' has been inextricably linked to the construction of 'race' and racisms through colonialism, employed as a building block and support for both. Emin has regularly talked about her foreign father, Enver, whom she has often photographed and who is also a great storyteller (like his daughter) and has struggled with some of the same demons as her: smoking, drinking, being 'over-sexed' (Emin, *Strangeland* 72-75). There is an insistence on Emin's part that she is of at least two cultures, hybrid, split *and* more than one, and importantly, that she is not quite white. In 'Fatherland', the reader is introduced to the

author's Turkish Cypriot roots, right on the border of Europe and non-(not yet?) Europe, on an island where borderlines have long been at the centre of bloody conflict. *Strangeland* is full of stories of her father's eventful life, her own visits to the Turkish part of Cyprus and Asia Minor, but also an exploration of Emin's purported clairvoyance and her descent from a Sudanese slave. Emin's selection for the 2007 Venice Biennale seems to provide further motivation to speak of her hybridity. In the catalogue, she defines her identity as follows:

I'm very London, I'm very British, – but not English. Being half Cypriot, or half Mediterranean, is really different because I use my hands a lot. People say which bit of you is Turkish, and I always say the bottom bit. ('Splash of Milk' np)

(Her half-bare 'bottom bit' dominates the poster and catalogue cover of her Edinburgh retrospective, 'Tracey Emin 20 Years'). Further on, she relates the story of her slave ancestry as fact this time, as family history rather than imaginary autobiography:

My great great grandfather's from the Sudan. He was a slave in the Ottoman Empire and was given his freedom in Cyprus. That's why my dad's really dark-skinned and not Turkish looking at all. My granddad was black, but with a fez and sword, you know. What's really good is when you take on the half-ness of something and you realise it's not half anything, it's you, your whole you and it explains why you didn't feel you fitted in, because part of you is from a completely different side of the world. (*ibid*)

'How Similar We Are': Migratory Identifications and Probationary Whiteness

On 10 June 2005, Emin was a guest on *The Kumars at No. 42*, the comedy talk show devised by Sanjeev Bhaskar, Meera Syal and Anil Gupta, and 'indirect spin-off from *Goodness, Gracious Me*', the popular radio and then television comedy series, which satirised British Asian stereotypes. Emin has just done an impression of her favourite *Star Trek Voyager* character and first female lead in the whole series, Captain Kathryn Janeway. (Since the show

aired, Emin made an appliquéd blanket with the title *Star Trek Voyager*, 2007). Interviewer Bhaskar responds:

Sanjeev Bhaskar: 'Is that Punjabi? ... You know, the more we're talking the more I realise how similar we are. Because, er ... '

Tracey Emin [interrupting]: 'We both like *Star Trek*.' [Laughter]

SB: 'In addition to which, we are, er, I, like you, I'm a free-thinking maverick that doesn't like to abide by the rules.'

TE: 'And you live with your mum and dad.'

Figs. 2 & 3. Tracey Emin, *Longchamp Suitcase (front and back)*, 2004. Copyright of the artist, courtesy of White Cube.

In 2004, Emin collaborated with Longchamp, the leather and luxury goods company, to produce the *International Woman Suitcase*, a limited edition piece of luggage with appliquéd inscriptions in Turkish, Arabic, French and English. Anticipating this work and reflecting on the neglected postcolonial and feminist aspects of the artist's output, Deborah Cherry eloquently discussed the travelling (and changing) installation of *My Bed* as 'a troubling work about migration, diaspora, and sexual difference' and 'transit and displacement'. Cherry pays close attention to the semiotics of the suitcases that were included in some installations: 'they carry traces of past movement and prefigure that which is to come ... they spoke of a life lived out of suitcases ... packed and unpacked again elsewhere, or even abandoned' (151). In a skit in *Goodness Gracious Me*, a comically formal estate agent sings the virtues of a bedroom that comes ready with a stack of suitcases on top of the wardrobe — the trace of past migrations and marker of shared migrant identifications between seller, agent and buyer. As

well as being *Star Trek* fans and mavericks, Sanjeev and Tracey carry the same baggage — they are both the children of immigrants.

Matthew Frye Jacobson interrogates the fabrication of race, whiteness in particular, that most invisible of races (see also Dyer), through the waves of European migration to the United States. Migration and the consequent lives of immigrants in the new country shape both their own racial identifications and how they are perceived outwardly, and specifically inform the nuances of whiteness within and in the periphery of Caucasianess as a hegemonically privileged category. He uses the term ‘probationary whiteness’ to emphasise, not only the contingency of racial classifications, but also the conditions placed upon the new entrants striving to succeed at enfranchisement, at becoming white and becoming American. In his article-manifesto ‘Immigrants and whites’, Noel Ignatiev asks what is the turning point in the metamorphosis of Irish, Southern Italian, Greek and Jewish immigrants into white American citizens, and suggests it may have something to do with buying property in the suburbs, as a sign of financial and social success combined with aspiration (17). Jacobson looks into how the revelations of the horrors of Nazi Germany ‘catapulted American Hebrews into the community of Caucasians in the mid-twentieth century’ (188) and examines how the polarisation of racial conflict in combination with the developments in urban planning, presumably responding to but actually (re)producing that conflict, also had the same effect, ie the fast-track enfranchisement of South and South-Eastern Europeans and Jews into whiteness.

This is admittedly a very cursory and sketchy outline of the theory of ‘probationary whiteness’. Moreover, the fabrication of whiteness is as particular to each national context as patterns of migration are, while the degree of flexibility of racial and ethnic classifications, especially in reference to immigration, is not the same in Europe as in new nations like the US. All the same, this formulation seems to be relevant to the present discussion for two

specific reasons. Firstly, Jacobson comes up with the intriguing suggestion that the precarious and fluctuating distinction between whiteness ‘proper’ and probationary whitenesses overlaps with the opposition between purity and impurity. This is quite different from the white supremacist argument that equates whiteness with racial purity. Instead, the classification of whiteness is emptied of any content, consisting of nothing more than the act of policing and protecting the boundaries of that category. ‘Emin’ straddles disparate categories, she hovers over an array of blurry divisions, and not simply in terms of race. Some are too messy and uncomfortable for many to tolerate; is she an artist, a media personality, a celebrity? Is this fiction or confession? Art or life? Secondly, the term ‘probationary’ applies to ‘Emin’ in more ways than one. Her designation as ‘a natural’ – and, occasionally, a ‘primitive’ – places her value as an artist on shaky ground. So long as ‘Emin’ is a natural, she is naturally in danger of losing her touch. The refusal to evaluate Emin’s art has become a motif in much critical writing, in favour of other points of focus. The essays in the Venice Biennale catalogue *Borrowed Light* by selectors Andrea Rose, Rudi Fuchs and Toby Forward oscillate between a reverberation of familiar critical topoi: defensiveness, enthusiastic endorsement and an ultimately conservative, not wholly convincing attempt to wedge Emin into the canon of the great masters.

At the beginning of this article, I proposed to read ‘Emin’ in quotation marks, as a kind of signifier. As such, she has multiple meanings, far from exhausted here. As a woman artist, ‘Emin’ has become yet another allegory for land and homeland; she is ‘pure Margate’ and typically British. She is, in some ways, a symptom and a sign of both the failures and successes of second-wave feminism, as Betterton has argued. For others, she is the emblem of the worst excesses of the yBa generation, albeit paradoxically viewed as an outcast of that group at the same time. Yet she is also a sign of absences and failures. As sign, she metaphorically embodies persistent shortcomings in getting to grips with intersectional

identities and comprehending the nuances of whiteness, and intimates some uncomfortable home truths about race and gender in contemporary British culture. Finally, it also signposts art critical and art historical inadequacies in making sense of autobiographical art and dealing with intransigent, slippery hybrids. While such inadequacies are being addressed in feminist scholarship (see Smith and Watson; Fanthome), for the most part, 'Emin' continues to be purposely confined in her quotation marks.

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