

ARTFORUM
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By Jan Avgikos

"Girl talk" never much enjoyed the primetime exposure it has long deserved until last year, when the House Judiciary Committee chose to post transcripts of Monica Lewinsky's intimate phone conversations with Linda Tripp on the Internet for all to read. I particularly liked the part where Tripp tells Lewinsky she's starting to "think like him" and then muses over how she would like to kick him in the balls until they were flat like little pancakes. It's a perfect example of the "discourse": direct, uncensored, unfettered by gentility or reserve, and, when appropriate, graphically violent. Of course, we all know you should never kick anyone in the balls (even if it seems like a good idea at the time), but the point of "girl talk" is that the speech itself is liberating, even a substitute for action when action may be impossible.

We haven't heard a lot of "girl talk" in the galleries of New York lately—but that's nothing new. Male rants, after all, are considered cultural; female rants, premenstrual. Same ol' same ol'. If it's still the case that transgressive behavior by women is dismissed as simple "acting out," you get the sense that that's just fine with Tracey Emin, an artist who revels in hysterionics— mostly in relation to love gone bad.

There's nothing particularly enlightened in Emin's talk. And yet, despite her hard-baked litany of abuses suffered and her often scatological subject matter, she has a charming way with language. In her most recent show, she marries passionate, handwritten phrases—"Every Part of Me's Bleeding"; "My Cunt is Wet with Fear"— with cool blue neon. You feel her willful occupation of Conceptual art's formal turf (think Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, Joseph Kosuth) as well as her wicked put-down of its pompous austerity and authority. It's even better when her rapacious bombast lands on one of the most treasured of feminist-art icons, the handmade quilt. Emin trades in the flowery phrases found in ladies' heirloom handiwork for turbo-charged, Medusan rage directed at all the guys who've done her wrong. In *Psycho Slut*, 1999, the eponymous words are (mis)spelled out (PYSCO SLUT) in big, bold lettering appliqued at the top of the quilt, as are phrases plucked from the maker's inner monologue: "I didn't know I had to ask to share your life"; "You see I'm one of the best"; "You know how much I love you."

Whether she's out exploiting her exploiters or just on a roll—maybe both—the girl won't be shut up. Emin, who's been nominated for this year's Turner Prize, has found a way to parlay her life into art. Like other self-styled "sensationalists" (Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, et al.), she pushes the limits of decorum, though she's a lot more vociferous about her personal life than the rest of the lot. But if every inch of her story could be the living truth, there's plenty of artifice here as well. The 100 names applied on the interior of her best-known work, the tent titled *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963–1995*, 1995, includes her twin brother, with whom she "slept" while they were both in utero. There's tease and seduction here, and lots of play with "giving 'em what they want."

We feed on private lives splayed open for all to see. We mark the passage of time by the next big "breaking story"—there's always one cresting on the horizon. At any given moment, in any given place, cameras are capturing sobbing victims' eyewitness accounts of terror. As a culture, we get off on this stuff. That's the climate of reception for Emin's work in the land of CNN, and her art is perfectly suited for it, telling stories about a character named Tracey, a sex-crazed girl on the loose at thirteen who suffers so much abuse that finally nothing matters. Then she finds herself in art, taking the "talking cure" before live audiences or in luridly confessional videos, pouring out the gooey core of darkness that she examines as the perpetual function of her art.

Such is the force of Emin's bitching rant that even benign objects are cast in a sinister light. One need only look at the broken-down wooden shack transported from the English seaside to Emin's New York gallery (*The Hut*, 1999) to know that something bad happened to her there. In *The Interview*, 1999, an installation of miniature juvenile furniture, the trappings of "childhood" comprise another kind of crime scene. Two tiny chairs (and slippers) are arranged in front of a little portable TV, and there's Tracey on the screen—and not just one Tracey, but two, sitting at opposite ends of a couch and going at each other in a vicious war of words redolent of self-loathing. Now in her mid-thirties and desperate (at least in appearance) to figure it all out, thinking aloud that maybe she shouldn't have had that abortion because it's 99 percent certain she won't get pregnant again, her rant is approaching the level of a roar. It's a wild ride, this trip to hell and back, and Emin's art is just beginning to break the sound barrier.

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