

The Voluptuous Self ¹

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The voluptuous self is a person who gratifies their senses, especially in an aesthetic, refined, or luxurious manner, while being gratified sensually by something means being marked by indulgence in sensual pleasures. However, the voluptuous self has a variety of complex aesthetic and philosophical meanings. For example, it can be contrasted with ‘the scrawny self’ (i.e.: within the customary yet decidedly male assertion that photographs of skinny women in their underwear are, compared with, say, Egon Schiele’s luxuriously sensuous painting of *The Reclining Woman* [1917], plain and ascetic forms of visual representation) (Figure 1).

¹ This essay, which focuses on the art of Tracey Emin, was written for *Brand Art Sensation: A Mass Debate*, a solo exhibition and public forum parodying celebrity art and luxury branding by Giulia Zaniol: 9th – 13th June 2015. The show, which took place at Gallery Different, Fitzrovia, London, UK, called into question three of Britain’s most influential art personalities; Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and Grayson Perry and how they have blurred the lines between luxury labels and fine art.



Figure 1: *The Reclining Woman*, 1917, by Egon Schiele.

The voluptuous self and voluptuous selfhood, however, are better comprehended as terms which themselves signify real desirous entities or things of the appetite ('I have *got to* sleep with him again'). They are not merely names for what are held to be simply fantasy lustful states or sexual states within which there is a prevalence of sensational feelings of delight over knowledge of one's voluptuous appetites, or of sensual desires over abstinence from the carnal voluptuous appetite of the flesh.

Voluptuous selfhood, for instance, is itself a form of knowledge, and perhaps of our desirous and carnal appetite for unmade, soiled, yet silky-

smooth beds. Furthermore, within the disciplines of psychoanalysis and psychology, philosophy and particularly theology, voluptuous selfhood's forms of knowledge, it might be claimed, are derived from Gods who themselves have reined in the immeasurability of their erotic desires, by withholding their powers, and contracting their capacities for the production of female secretions and male semen. Such fields are not only concerned with the character and operation of the voluptuous mind-within-the-body, with the role of pleasurable subjectivity and voluptuous personal histories as the basis for the construction of artworks from Jean Auguste Ingres' *Odalisque and Slave* (1839-40) (Figure 2) to Lucien Freud's *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995) (Figure 3).



Figure 2: *Odalisque and Slave*, 1839-40,
by Jean Auguste Ingres.



Figure 3: *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*, 1995, by Lucien Freud.

They are also concerned with the character and operation of the fleshly rhythms-within-the-dancing-body and its faculties, which communicate sensations and alternate forms of consciousness to potential wanted and perhaps unwanted sexual partners, by a sort of natural contagion that is both a universal condition of human agency and one of the most voluptuous of all desires to its beholders. 'Exploratory and teleological movements arise out of the periodic and rhythmic movements of all animal life', writes Alphonso Lingis (2011: 128-9):

Fish in the sea, butterflies and antelope in the savannah, birds in the sky dance.

Hands tease, ignite eddies of pleasure and torment in other hands.

The rhythmic and melodic movements generate a specific pleasure, an impersonal, intense energy, and the ecstatic experience of common humanity. Human society was not first assembled out of fear, but out of collective joy.

The voluptuous self in this sense is simply another name for this dancing body, a pleasurable, sensational, even shameless agency or pulsing and distinctly exhibitionist actor. One thinks of Venus, the goddess of all desire: the voluptuous self in question is seen entering the realm of gratification, of carnal conquest and submission, of ecstatic experience, from a shared

humanity of communal delight. Observed from the position of someone else, as Lingis' instance suggests, however, a human being can also become, along with Venus, a goddess or god of desire, of covetousness, fleshly appetite, and voluptuous amusement, a person who passes their time in all the indulgent pleasures. To say, for example, that desire as a form of knowledge gratifies the senses of the people it inhabits – as well as the people who look upon it – is also to say that such people are, at that precise moment, rendered more capable than others of human voluptuous feeling, empathetic enjoyment, and sublime and beautiful agency.

A surplus of smooth feeling over engagement with the domain of flat and undeveloped things, or a revelling in an inner realm of sensual satisfaction, which assures the prospect of pleasure, is the state of the voluptuous self. Such a condition entails the refusal, or incapacity, to recognize and engage with any external world that does not involve dwelling among the Gods of voluptuous delight. Nonconformist avant-garde artists of the twenty-first century, much like their nineteenth and twentieth-century predecessors, exhibit facets of this approach. Real withdrawal first into small and essentially exclusive yet luscious dream communities of lovers and friends (socially excessive displacement), then into a sort of lonely or familial but voluptuous exile accelerated by, for instance, sensational travel to 'hip' and 'artistic'

locations. Tracey Emin, for example, drove with her then lover Carl Freedman in a Cadillac from San Francisco to New York in 1994, stopping only to give readings from her autobiographical book *Exploration of the Soul* to finance the road trip (Figure 4).

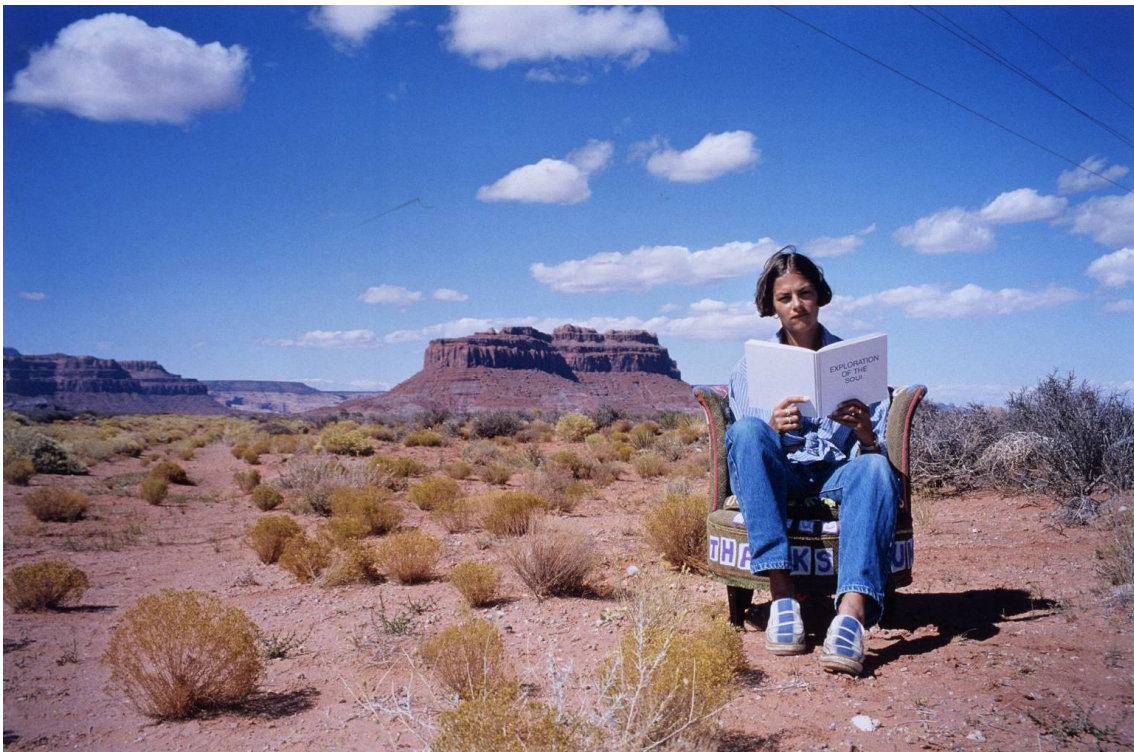


Figure 4: Tracey Emin sitting in an armchair in the middle of Monument Valley, a stunning setting in the Arizona Desert, holding *Exploration of the Soul*.

Similarly, we might point to Emin's use of apparently mind-altering drink on a British Channel 4 live television programme in 1997 where, fresh from exhibiting at *Sensation* at the Royal Academy of Art in London, and ostensibly discussing that year's branded Turner Prize, intoxicated, she, unashamed, slurred her words and swore before walking off the set:

I'm leaving now, I wanna be with my friends, I wanna be with my mum. I'm gonna phone her, and she's going to be embarrassed about this conversation, this is live and I don't care. I don't give a fuck about it. (Longrigg 1997).

A range of factors shapes all voluptuous artists' personalities and their artworks, such as Emin's *My Bed* (1999) (Figure 5).



Figure 5: *My Bed*, 1998, by Tracey Emin.

In different ways, artists like Emin simultaneously loathe to let the possibly unhygienic taste of voluptuousness dissolve out of their mouths *and* display an eagerness to advocate Percy Bysshe Shelley's (2009[1815]) 'voluptuous pantings' and 'sweet kisses' as a fashionable mode of life. Emin's socio-cultural conduct and contradictory production of inelegance and vanity in the artwork that is *My Bed*, for instance, resulted in the creation of yellow stained bed sheets and used condoms, empty cigarette packets, and underwear

complete with menstrual stains. And in each of these instances, debatably, the taste of voluptuousness, voluptuous pantings, and sweet kisses as a fashionable style of life or death are also combined (Emin's *My Bed* was staged as it had been when she had resided in it for a number of days feeling suicidal owing to relationship problems). Emin's socio-cultural and inconsistent production of vulgarity and pride, for example, is both partly inspired by the 'disobedient' public and private life of Princess Diana (Emin mounted an exhibition in 1999 called *Temple of Diana*), or somehow pre-determined through her seemingly natural appetite for historical and cultural artworks driven by ideas of voluptuous want and destruction, disorder, and, especially, love.

Voluptuous selfhood in its contemporary sense is a comparatively novel historical development, reliant on the emergence of ideas and experiences of an increasingly fragile individuality and controversial forms of individualism, which, like that of Princess Diana, can only be fully achieved in spectacular death in the present period. This is a process closely bound up with the innovative notion of the artist as a singular yet fragmentary and irresponsible, alert, erratic, naïve kind of individual, exceptionally original and imaginative, even violent, but about *themselves* and their own revels rather than about those of other people. It is a process subject, in fact, to visionary yet

voluptuous ideas that may have been instigated by the perfumed Gods of sentimental kitsch or – as Emin appears to believe – by the rejection of cynicism and the debasing, estranging effects wrought by hate, the intellect, and personal isolation. Voluptuous selfhood, then, has itself already had a deeply wounded history of self-advertisement and provocative transformation from fine art to fashion brand.

References

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