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Tracey Emin
Interview with Simona Vendrame

Simona Vendrame: *It's hard to talk to you about your work without discussing your private life because your work is so deeply interconnected with your personal experience. In fact, your work can even be seen as a sort of cathartic walk down memory lane to those personal dramas in your past that seem to want to came back, perhaps to be digested and then reworked. Judging from the interviews you've given in the past. it seems that it's you who wants to tell us everything about your life, even the most intimate details. On the other hand, one can't avoid the suspicion that instead it might sometimes be the media that indulges in the more salacious details of your life, either to arouse the public's attention or because they grasp only the most obvious, superficial, literal aspect of your work, instead of digging deeper.*

Tracey Emin: That's certainly true, but that's the kind of attitude you'd expect from journalists. Unfortunately even some of the art critics have at times lingered over my personal story when examining my work and have come away with the impression that my artistic career is limited to a kind of narcissistic self-absorption, to just explaining my life experience—as if I were following in the tradition of the "doomed" artist who publicizes his or her pain, counting on its shock value. A lot of people think that my art is not sincere, that it is a carefully studied and packaged product. But it makes me feel better to see that average people on the street ask for my autograph and say, "You're all right, Tracey!" Art is for the people and it's their opinion that I'm most interested in.

Simona Vendrame: *In your biography, the name Margate keeps coming up —the little city on the southern coast of England where you were born and where your family still lives today. You go back there every now and then, but you ran away from it, if I'm not mistaken, when you were fifteen.*

Tracey Emin: Magic and mysterious Margate! It's the place where l spent my childhood and adolescence. Yes, I literally ran away from Margate at the age of fifteen, and I went directly to London. Margate is a typical town on the coast where wealthy English people used to spend vacations, with elegant old houses that recall the past glories of a town which has come down in the world in the last few decades. Actually, Margate isn't an

ugly place. I just left like any other person who leaves their little provincial village in search of the excitement that only a big city can offer.

Simona Vendrame: *You left school at thirteen; then two years later you went to live in London alone, far away from your family, who weren't all that well-off and couldn't really support you. So l guess you had to find some way to make a living. You still kept up a good relationship with your mother and, most of all, with your grandmother, the owner of the famous armchair that you decorated and used for some of your performances in the United States, in which you sat and read passages from your book,* Exploration of the Soul.

Tracey Emin: Yes, in London I worked in lots of different jobs to support myself, like clothes shops, shoe shops. I was very lucky not to be involved in things that were illegal. After doing all sorts of things, meeting all kinds of people, I finally went to art school, to Maidstone College of Art, in 1983. I was twenty by then and to me it seemed a long way from school. I went home once in a while to see my family and to spend as much time as possible with my grandmother, who gave me the arm chair you are talking about when she was 90 years old. I traveled all over the States with that armchair and with my boyfriend at that time, the critic Carl Freedman. It was a fantastic road trip, we felt like Bonnie and Clyde, all thanks to my Nan. I managed to earn some money as well.

Simona Vendrame: *From what I have read about your life, your trip to the States was a happy interlude in the midst of moments of great suffering and loneliness. There was a that time when you stopped making art or even believing in art, when you lost all faith in yourself and saw no future.*

Tracey Emin: Yes, there were some very difficult times, like when I decided to have an abortion. That happened twice, and I was devastated both physically and mentally, even though the pain was different each time. The first time I was totally overwhelmed by a pain so deep and so sharp that I lost my belief in others, in God, but especially, as you said, in myself, in my abilities, both as an artist and as a human being who wants to be loved. The second time I suffered in a way that was equally devastating, but I had more of an awareness of what I wanted and what I had to do with my life. It was as if I had made a pact with the Devil: I'd give him the life that was in my womb, and in exchange he would give me the chance to express my art completely, without having to contend with the responsibilities of being a mother. That was back in 1990. A lot has changed since then.

Simona Vendrame: *So you think that being a mother and an artist are incompatible? Do you mean for yourself in particular, or do you believe it is an objective problem that*

affects all women artists, and in general any woman who wants a career?

Tracey Emin: I want to answer your question without offending anyone. It's true that a lot of contemporary artists are also mothers, but I must say that the ones I know are always feeling guilty— guilty about their child when they dedicate themselves to their art and guilty about their work when they devote themselves to their child. In my case, if I had a child I'd never be able to work the way I'm working now and the way I hope to work in the future. Even my mother and, before her, my grandmother, always told me that although they were happy to have had children, if they could have gone back in time they wouldn't have had them. From the moment my mother had me and my brother, she stopped thinking about her own career and completely took on her parental role. She had wanted to be a dancer but she had to give up her dream. I'm not giving up my dream. My mum always worked, in spite of having a family, but having a job is different from having a career. You know what l mean, don't you?

Simona Vendrame: *But I'm not sure that a career is incompatible with motherhood. It's also true that being an artist is not exactly a career, but rather a way of being—it's certainly a total commitment to a way of life which pervades every atom of your existence, leaving very little space for anything else. But without getting into postfeminist debates, I wanted to ask if you think the conflict between being an artist and a parent exists only for women, or also for men to a different extent.*

Tracey Emin: Maybe, but I'm not a man, how the hell would I know?

Simona Vendrame: *At any rate, I believe you have said on a few different occasions that you sometimes hate your work because it's the only thing you have managed to create; it's all you have, whereas you would like to have created something else in your life besides art. I suppose you are referring to love, to deep and lasting human relationships. I often get the sense, both from your conversations and from your work, of a profound loneliness.*

Tracey Emin: It's true. Sometimes I hate my work because I realize that it represents my loneliness and that I don't have anything outside of my art. In those moments I feel like destroying it. I wish I had never created anything, and I wish that there were other things in my life, like every other fucking normal person. I would like to have something in my heart, because when you come down to it, my work is something material. I probably want to love, but most of all, to be loved—I have a deep need for true, genuine relationships. Without truth you can't grow as a person, and of course, then you can't grow as an artist either.

Simona Vendrame: *In* The Theater of Cruelty *Antonin Artaud maintains that our happiness is always built on others' suffering, and that truth is itself cruel in that it makes no allowances for compassion. In that sense, the Theater of Truth is the Theater of Cruelty, and once you have started down that road, you have no choice but to follow it to the end because the search for truth becomes a mental attitude that you can no longer give up. I get the impression that your whole way of being is very close to Artaud's, who by the way loved to draw and would infuse his drawings with the terrible suffering he experienced because of his illness and the tragedies in his life. You also like drawing, and you transfer your pain and the feelings from your childhood and adolescence onto paper.*

Tracey Emin: I like drawing, it's true, and that's not the case for all artists, especially today. I also like making videos, making blankets and other objects. What interests me is the idea that possesses me in a given moment, that is in my heart, my brain, that is *me.* Then I absolutely must express it, and it doesn't matter with what means—that will depend on the moment. As for the truth, I agree that it can be cruel, but personally, even though I have discussed my life openly, I have tried not to drag in people who would rather not be mentioned by name. After the first few years, when I had an enormous rage inside that I had to vent in some way, I've tried to be less aggressive in facing my past and I've tried to "censor" what comes out of my mouth so that the truth refers to myself and doesn't affect those who have entered my life in various times and various ways.

Simona Vendrame: *Getting back to the various techniques you use in your work, do you usually make the work yourself, or do you get help in the actual execution of it?*

Tracey Emin: I have to tell you that I'd love to create a blanket from beginning to end, in fact I've done it. Sewing the single pieces together relaxes me; it's manual activity, but it's a way to recompose the scraps of my memory. The problem is that then I don't want to sell it; I want to keep it for myself. At any rate, completing a work like this takes a long time, and so I have to have help—as you can see, my assistant is stitching a blanket—but it's only for the material execution of the work, which I have already designed in detail. If I personally finished every detail, I'd never have time to concentrate and to think to create other works.

Simona Vendrame: *In all your work, but especially when you use sewing, like in the blankets or the tent inscribed with the names of all the people you've slept with, what really stands out is memory and nostalgia, personal information made concrete through the experience of manual work that joins with memory to transform the object into a kind of relic. Touching one of your blankets or going inside your tent is like coming into contact with the sacred and the profane at the same time. Profane because we are after all dealing with girlhood memories, and sacred in that the subjective dimension cancels*

itself out in a feeling of loneliness and universal loss, beyond a specific place or time, where Tracey Emin's memories merge with our own. I know that you took some philosophy courses, and that you really love Spinoza, who stipulates the unity of being and the connection between the concept of God and the concept of nature in a pantheistic vision of the universe.

Tracey Emin: Yes, I love Spinoza because I find in his work my personal vision of the world, in which every moment of our existence is connected to every other moment in one endless time, without any distinction between past and future. The very life that we live on earth is only a part of a great journey, which we all share, to a place we are all heading. I know that another place exists. That's why sometimes l can't wait to leave this life as soon as possible, to get to the end of it, because I know that something better is waiting for me. For a long time I wished I had never been born; I had the feeling of being out of place in this world. I blame it on my twin. My soul somehow got caught up in his; before I knew it, I was here.

Simona Vendrame: *Are there other philosophers or thinkers that you feel particularly close to?*

Tracey Emin: I like Nietzsche. He's like pornography for the mind, but these days I don't read much. I am not interested in that kind of culture. I'm not looking for inspiration in the world around me; I'm looking inside myself, in the stories from my past and my present. All my work revolves around personal experience, around my memories and fantasies. In that sense I guess you can say my work is narcissistic, in that it is the mirror of my interior image, of my life.

Simona Vendrame: *Your private life is marked with excesses: a frenetically active sex life, which you yourself say began too early, at age thirteen, after you were raped as a child; two abortions; and a long period of alcoholism. All of this is now in the past but it must be part of who you are and how you perceive reality. An artist is a witness who observes and interprets from a distance what others cannot see because they are so immersed in their individual experience. The artist takes in phenomena like a lightning rod, giving them back to the world in their universal dimension, distilled from subjective experience to get to their bare essences. Taking this to the extreme, I might compare artistic experience to the Passion of Christ, who suffered and atoned for our sins by turning his pain into a cathartic event for all of humanity.*

Tracey Emin: I understand what you're saying. Yes, I believe that, as an artist, I have a responsibility toward others and a destiny that prevents me from living a "normal" life; by "normal" I mean a life like the majority of human beings lead. In a way I feel like a

witness who, through my work, is compelled to transform feelings and concepts belonging to individuals in every place and every time, into something objective and universal. It is as if my life — however I decide to live it — and not only my art, is a symbol of something else, something out of my control and my understanding. I only know that I have to continue in my search, and that when the moment comes, I will rejoin the All.

Simona Vendrame: *If Spinoza is right, and you are as well, it means that we will someday find ourselves in one big entity, all together, without distinguishing between you, me, us, them ... it would be wonderful. I hope it happens.*

Tracey Emin: Yes, l guess we should all be faithful to our dreams.

Tracey Emin was born in 1963 in Margate. She lives and works in London.