

o6

Foreword

Lisa Le Feuvre

o8

Ordinary Things

Lisa Le Feuvre

16

Gallery 1

24

Living Dolls and Ordinary Things: On Sarah Lucas
Gilda Williams

32

Gallery 2

46

Sarah Lucas: Ordinary Language and Bodily Magic
Anne M. Wagner

54

Gallery 3

72

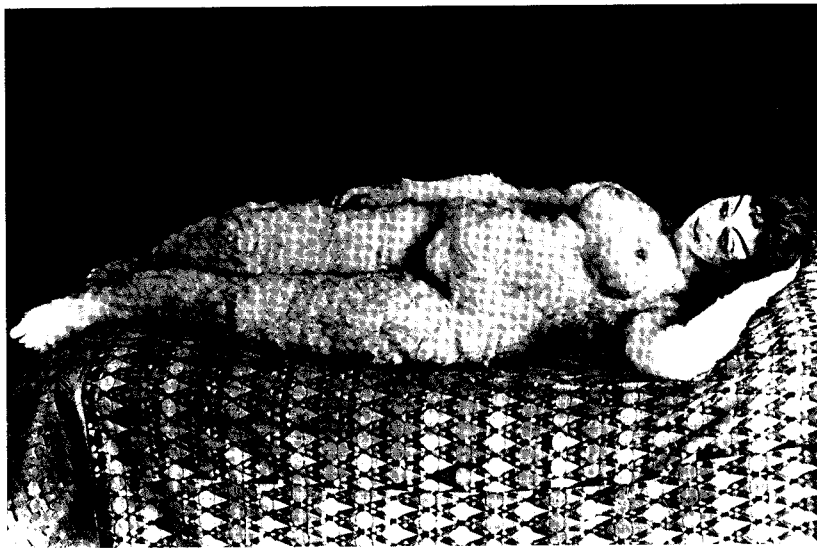
A Woman's World Is Never Done
Deborah Orr

78

Catalogue of Works
Credits

Living Dolls and Ordinary Things: On Sarah Lucas

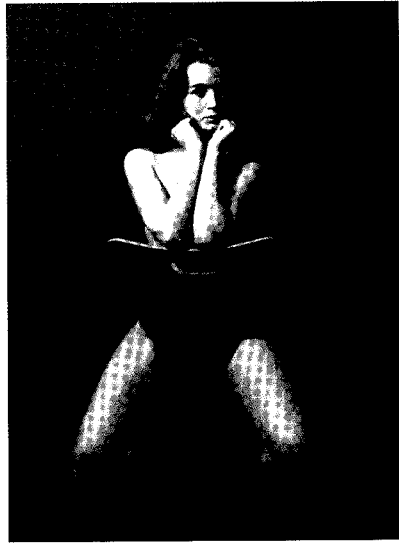
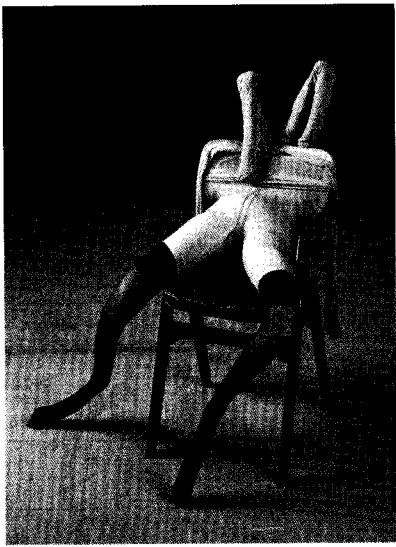
Gilda Williams



In what must be the weirdest episode in all art history, around 1918 the lovesick Viennese Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka commissioned a lifesize doll to replace his muse and former lover, Alma Mahler, who had recently left him for the dashing young architect Walter Gropius [Fig. 1]. Unhinged from pining for the beautiful Alma, the eccentric Kokoschka is known to have taken the giant doll everywhere, dressing and grooming her as well as travelling and dining publicly with his strange, lifeless companion. Eventually, delirious and humiliated, at the close of a drunken party Kokoschka decapitated his stuffed bride, finally severing his obsessive love for Madame Mahler in an intoxicated ritual of simul-homicide.

Sarah Lucas's sculpture, 'Bunny' (1997) [Fig. 2], is also a kind of lifesize decapitated doll, provocatively suggestive of sexual fatigue and passive availability. Somehow the artist has transformed some ladies' tights and a pair of black hold-ups, roughly stuffed with cushion filling and a length of wire, into this haunted pair of stringy, deathly legs: boneless limbs that speak of uninterrupted (if unresponsive) sexual availability. The legs are 'shapely', we could say, but their contours recall more the weightless curl of a panther's tail than a living female leg. Seductive and willing, submitting to whatever forces surround her, 'Bunny' reminds us of Lewis Morley's photographic portrait of the luscious Christine Keeler; with nothing but a chair to cling to [Fig. 3], both ladies point towards a certain English taste for the obvious when it comes to eyeing the female sex.

Both 'Bunny' and her blue-stockinged sister 'Suffolk Bunny' [Cat. 2] are either happily exhausted — reclining in pleasurable abandon, arms flung back in ecstasy — or clamped forcibly to the chair, arms painfully pinned behind her. We are



uneasy about the obscenely exposed Miss Bunny: is she dead drunk, or just dead? 'Bunny' is a necrophiliac's centre-fold, as bored with desire as she is with violence. As we worry and grow embarrassed by 'Bunny', her legs open for all to see her stitched crotch, we discover ourselves on the same unstable mental ground as the mad Kokoschka, purchasing train tickets for his stuffed girlfriend. We must remind ourselves that *hey, this is not a real woman*: just some stuffed hosiery upon which we are projecting our prudish discomfort with the naked female form.

Poor dear 'Bunny': headless, voiceless, heartless, and empty. As with Gustav Courbet's 1866 painting, 'The Origin of the World', famously displaying a woman's splayed and dark-haired genitalia along with a good chunk of her mid-torso, it seems that — in some circumstances, let's be frank — a woman's head, face, and identity hardly matter much. On the one hand, we can so believe that 'Bunny' is alive we feel disturbed by her shameful vulnerability; on the other hand she is lifeless enough for us to accept that her body is chopped in two, and her entire upper half grotesquely missing. While we are perfectly aware that she's made of ordinary things readily available in the Ladies' Hosiery and Haberdashery department, she feels real enough for us to be squeamish about her graceless posture, her willing potential for more degradation and abuse.

All of Lucas' work functions this way: while perpetually reminded that we are just looking at common objects (buckets, shoes, stockings) we can't help but react to the lifelike energy that they emit, powerful enough to make us squirm in their presence. Lucas has talked about her art-making as a process of 'keep[ing] it alive' — maintaining 'a certain energy',¹ and in this she amply, almost miraculously succeeds. The artist selects her repertoire of ordinary things

¹ The artist interviewed by Jan van Adrichem, 'Things That Have to Come About', Sarah Lucas, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1996, n.p.



with almost supernatural levels of knowingness. We sense that Lucas experimented at length with her materials until they began somehow to gain an agency and a life of their own, such as the arachnophobia-inducing and newspaper-stuffed, intestine-like and slithering 'Big Fat Anarchic Spider' (1993) [Cat. 8]. Lucas possesses remarkable sensitivity for her unsettling combination of surface qualities, varying from the peculiar greyish-pink rubbery texture of canned meat, to the distasteful hairy flexibility of spider legs, to the scratchy and lumpen nature of nylon, to the rough cement-like exterior of hard-skinned vegetables or plaster. She works, in effect, like a classical sculptor, miraculously able to animate her inert materials with vast reserves of palpable, living energy. Her art can be finally assessed on the same terms as classical sculpture once was; just as Renaissance-era observers marvelled at sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini's skill at making Proserpina's marble thighs so temptingly pliable and alive [Fig. 4], we wonder how the fruits and soft furnishing of, for example, 'Au Naturel' (1994) [Cat. 6] manage actually to leave us blushing with embarrassment at their brash 'nakedness'.

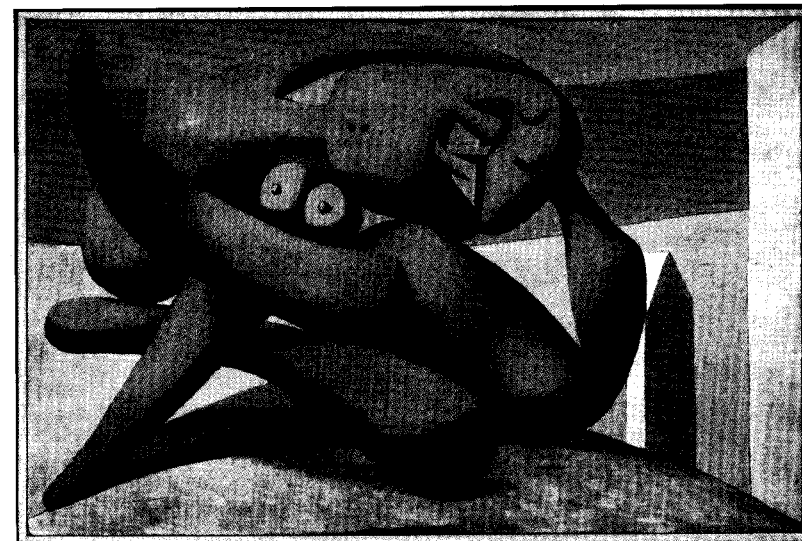
'Au Naturel' seems to giggle at its own crude symbolism and sophomoric humour. In this well-known sculpture, an old double-mattress leans heavily against the wall. A nippy pair of melons have been inserted into the fabric; below these at crotch level we find a vacant metal fire bucket and, together, they summarily describe the naughty bits of an eager female. 'She' appears awkwardly at rest alongside an erect cucumber with two chubby oranges, her ever-ready male partner. Slumped and exhausted against the wall, sagging and a little tattered, the tufted mattress seems to replace the dimpled flesh of the missing, hyper-

sexualised — if invisible — couple, who have been reduced solely to their erogenous zones, eternally poised for more sex. The double-mattress seems both to materially fill-in and to unite forever the two absent, living bodies, each mattress button perhaps suggesting the indentation of a probing finger.

However sketchy, these are obviously post-coital bodies: 'barely keeping it together', seemingly 'undone' and 'in pieces' from the ongoing efforts of their copious lovemaking — or not? Is this an implied double portrait, as I am suggesting, or actually a still life: just some foodstuffs and houseware carefully arranged by an artist, no different from their seventeenth-century Dutch, painted precedent? We are left forever wondering, with some embarrassment, whether it is our or the artist's dirty mind animating that gaping bucket, the mattress, the greengrocer's goods. In some ways 'Au Naturel' is even more unnerving than a real naked couple literally lying there, since we must also cope with the recognition that the pair's raw 'nudity' exists, in fact, only in our overactive, lurid minds.

The same applies to 'Unknown Soldier' (2003) [Cat. 5]: a bulky pair of boots and a ludicrously phallic neon light tube suggest the bare essentials of a body, this time the skinny male alone. Is it just me, or does this scant, three-piece assemblage hint at an episode of quick anonymous sex with a lusty young member of the armed forces — somewhere behind the barracks, roughly propped up against the wall like the long straight neon tube itself? Where 'Bunny' can hardly stand on those feetless floppy legs of hers, the 'Unknown Soldier' is nothing if not erect in that sturdy footwear, standing proud for all eternity. 'Stud boots', indeed. The descriptive qualities of the sculpture — faceless, nameless, and energy-filled; oddly satisfying despite its extreme basicness — seem to replicate the nature of the implied brief encounter itself. Pointing towards the once-radical neon tube artworks of Minimalist Dan Flavin, Lucas is irreverent not just towards loose sexual behaviour and a deity of recent art history, but also with regard to the nature of the war memorial, i.e., the 'Tomb of the Unknown Soldier'. In Lucas' 'Unknown Soldier', our nation's heroes seem more devoted to the age-old British tradition of the quick shag than to nobly defending kin and country.

'Dolls' like Alma, 'Bunny', and Christine — or the creeping 'Eve' (2006) [Cat. 3], advancing stealthily out of her chair-back — are meant only to occupy the private space of play; they cause trouble in the public places where Kokoschka or Lucas have dared introduce their bizarre concoctions. Dolls are special objects, intimate friends but not-quite-alive, suggestive of the innocence of childhood as well as adult perversity. As Charles Baudelaire writes, our shifting relationship with the doll in late childhood marks the passage into adulthood, 'our first metaphysical stirring' when we grasp that the beloved plaything who invited our affections is unworthy of our devotion. Such a stirring can turn aggressive, even violent, advises Baudelaire, as the enquiring child attempts to 'get at and see the soul'



2 Charles Baudelaire, 'The Philosophy of Toys', 1853, in Hal Foster, 'Philosophical Toys and Psychoanalytic Travesties', in *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semicapitalism*, Sternberg, 2011, p.22.

3 Rainer Maria Rilke, 'On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel', 1913–14, *ibid.*

of the toy, banging and slapping it, eventually breaking it open to discover, as Hal Foster writes, 'its utter soullessness'.² This is our first adult discovery, as Rainer Maria Rilke writes, when the doll is 'unmasked as the gruesome foreign body on which we squandered our purest affection'.³

Sarah Lucas' work seems forever suspended in that very moment, the brief instance hinged between childhood and adolescence. Her art seems arrested for all eternity in the short space of early puberty, in that giggly, boy-crazy (or girl-crazy) period when almost any object — obscenely shaped melons, courgettes, and corn husks; ladies' tights; mattresses; bras — trigger squeals of embarrassed giggling. Everything feels alive with the suggestion of forbidden activity, as our one-track minds ponder the impossible distribution of too many arms, legs, tongues, hands, faces, and fingers during sex.

The imagined impossibility of knotted, airborne gymnastics during sex is literalised in the tangle of fleshy tubing comprising her obscenely meaty 'NUDS' (2009–) [Cat. 11–14]. Pronounced like 'duds', 'NUDS' are looping tubes of pantyhose filled with pillow stuffing intertwining in ecstasy, their mottled surface able to suggest all at once fine marble, uncooked sausage, and lumpy thighs. One thinks of Picasso's 'Figures on a Beach' (1931) [Fig. 5] in which the Spanish artist wildly redistributes in space the fragmented human body. Picasso's Cubist reworking of the human form was motivated perhaps not so much for the sake of 'Modernist experimentation' or some such noble pursuit, but simply because this way Picasso could see *all at once* every sexy body part of interest to him — breasts, buttocks, tongues, and bare limbs — without having to choose between the front or back of a desirable naked body, the way traditional nude paintings were

forced to do. The 'NUDS' — all phallic symbols and fleshy crevices, gaping holes and slithering limbs — seem imploding orgies, swallowing themselves whole in cannibalistic ecstasy.

The 'NUDS' suggest the presence of figurative marble sculpture and the stony gravitas of the British abstract tradition, say a Barbara Hepworth or Henry Moore. So reminiscent are they of heavy sculpture that we struggle to keep in mind that they are almost weightless, pillow-like things that we could bounce off the walls or play keepy-uppy with. Lucas carefully provides her 'NUDS' with weighty MDF and breeze-block plinths, wisely endowing the sculptures not only with the presence and presentation of traditional sculpture but the literal, physical weight that they lack in order to bind them to earth (and the art gallery), and offset their true nature as a tangle of dry goods.

What renders Lucas' sculpture so extraordinary is the glaring contradiction between the straightforwardness, even the puerility of her subject matter — food, sex, animals — and the intense sophistication of her sculptural language, all weights and counterweights, shadows and shades, solids and voids, the organic and the inorganic. Lucas has invented a vocabulary of sculptural materials — plaster, nylon, concrete, wire, comestibles — that is distinctly her own; despite allusions to Surrealism, Cubism, Minimalism, Pop, portraiture and still life, art has never quite looked like this before. The artist pays close attention to old-fashioned sculptural concerns such as the way her objects attach to the world — whether rudely propped up in 'Au Naturel' or 'Unknown Soldier', or nearly squashed to the floor in 'Big Fat Anarchic Spider', or emerging solidly from the floor, more plinth than sculpture, in 'Spam' (2004) [Cat. 26]. Traditional sculptural questions of weight and balance are addressed again and again: 'Galaxia' (2011) [Cat. 16] contrasts the gaping void of heavy concrete blocks with the arched lightness of limb-like protruberances, while in 'Druid' (2008) [Cat. 28], a dildo-like object achieves a precarious equilibrium, poised like a phallic dradle on a rough wooden block.

'Spam' appears a giant lump of canned ham; like the colossal hotdogs and soup cans of American Pop art, this is an artwork nauseous with the excessive availability of cheap food. Lucas has replaced the original ingredients of the world's favorite luncheon meat (pork shoulder, salt, modified potato starch binder, sugar, sodium nitrite) with a spectacular lump of polystyrene, jesmonite and paint; which recipe will prove more nutritious is anybody's guess. Like Ed Ruscha and his 1962 painting of speeding, flaming Spam, or like Warhol, whose 1950s fancy cookbook illustrations of elaborate profiteroles and *vol-au-vents* pale beside his vibrant imaging of Campbell's soup, Coca-Cola, and the other cheap foods he really ate, Lucas' images best the foodstuffs that strongly evoke the everyday meals of her upbringing — sausages, fried eggs, kebabs, Spam, pie. Even when not pictured directly, Lucas' personal energy feels everywhere. In photographs we see her perfectly regular features, her unsmiling complicity

'Concrete
cas,
Eum Boijmans
1996, n.p.

with the camera. To me she always looks like a younger, North London version of Sigourney Weaver — far tougher and more androgynous, without the Hollywood buff but heaps more charisma, driving life into her art.

Mostly Sarah Lucas' sculptures are preoccupied with the most fundamental subjects: eating, having sex, being alive. The food-based sculptures, endlessly decomposing and requiring replenishment, speak strongly of death. And these basic subjects are represented in even more basic form: a woman is reduced to some fruit and hardware, a man to a caricaturish ensemble of fruit and veg. Perhaps the theme in Sarah Lucas' work isn't sex but *availability*; cheap food, cheap sex, and cheap thrills are well-matched by her cheap materials: bargain basement women's tights, old newspapers, groceries, wire hangers, stuffing, mattresses, cement blocks.

Dolls too are, by definition, endlessly available; stupidly compliant, they gain life only when animated by their living owner who is free to adore the thing irrationally or torture and kill it; whatever feels right. In contrast with Kokoschka's fetish — but identical to Bernini's marble masterpieces — Lucas' 'Bunny' or 'Eve' are in fact *not dolls* but works of art; they are statues, in effect. As artworks, 'Eve' and 'Bunny' are unavailable to human touch, and here lies their contradiction. While seemingly begging to be rearranged and manhandled by a deranged Kokoschka-esque figure, perhaps casually ripped apart, as statues 'Eve' and 'Bunny' exist within the privileged and protected sphere of art. The fatal flaw with Kokoschka's stuffed doll — what made her so deserving, dammit, of her final shredding — was that this Alma was far too available. Without the real Madame Mahler's teasing and withholding, seducing and denying, all replaced by the doll's vacant willingness, she turned utterly detestable. 'Bunny' and 'Eve' instead maintain their distance; they will not be mistreated. 'Trashy' on so many levels, Lucas' ladies nonetheless exist forever in this oddly privileged space of the blessed and the damned, the sacred and the profane, crudely laid bare yet museumified and venerated.

We can never fully determine the rightful place for Lucas' artworks: do they belong in this centre for the study of sculpture, the Henry Moore Institute, or shoved in the bin? This is not to question their undeniable status as artworks, only an attempt to determine why they are so relentlessly disturbing, such undefinable, ontological perplexities. As the late Angus Fairhurst wisely wrote, in Sarah Lucas' sculptures there is 'no saving grace', no moment of redemption, no certainty about them.⁴ Lucas always resists adding some final artistic flourish to help us feel dead certain that her work falls resolutely on the noble side of art, rather than that of ordinary things. We are forever uncertain whether to cherish or react against Lucas' provocative art, and again we're behaving like the desperate Kokoschka, ambiguously possessing his upholstered lover, alternating between ecstatic cries of 'You are divine, my love!' and self-loathing: 'Jeez, this is pathetic'. Sarah Lucas will never come to his or our aid in deciding which epitaph better suits.