

## Artforum October 2011

### Tracey Emin: Hayward Gallery

By Barry Schwabsky

I don't think I've ever seen quite so much pussy in an art exhibition. Tracey Emin's retrospective "Love Is What You Want," curated by the Hayward's Ralph Rugoff and Cliff Lauson, could make even Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* seem almost neuter by comparison. In what is by now a vast oeuvre, represented here by 160 works, the most recurrent image is of a woman with her legs spread, showing her vulva, often masturbating, Emin wants her art to originate from the essence of her being, and, like any good 1970s gender essentialist, she believes the essence of her being is in her sex. At the same time, though, she also senses that the expression of this essence can never be direct or immediate but must always take a detour-must always be mediated. Thus, for instance, her hand writing, a direct expression of the body, is not typically presented as such- it appears in a distanced manner: reproduced in neon, embroidery, or monoprint, which, in spite of its resemblance to straightforward drawing, is the reversed trace of a mark that was made on a plate rather than on the paper itself. One of the most remarkable manifestations of Emin's drawing is the DVD projection *Those who suffer love*, 2009; the nervous, shuddering quality of her wiry, scribble like lines is amplified by the spasmodic rhythm of the animation, which perfectly communicates a sense of the work's subject: masturbation. And again, the actual drawing is put at a distance.

"My emotions force the drawing out of my hand," Emin has said; but whether she acknowledges it or not, what comes out of her hand is also out of her hands- in the sense that it is ultimately detached from herself. Expressing the inner self means giving up its inwardness; its traces become what Norman Mailer once called "advertisements for myself" – a shift embodied here by neon slogans, for instance. It's not surprising that from the beginning, Emin has shown an ironically unironic belief in herself as an entrepreneur as much as an artist, or rather, an entrepreneur insofar as she is an artist (See, for example, her project from 1992-93, for which she offered collectors the opportunity to invest in her "creative potential" almost before she'd even had a chance to show promise, let alone accomplishment.) As autobiographical as her work may seem-and much of it consists of collected memorabilia of a life lived- it is less about the empirical Emin than about the construction of a figure of creative potential whom others can identify with, "invest in."

But, especially as time goes on, there is another side to Emin's work that, without eschewing the autobiographical element that is so blatant throughout her oeuvre, makes it much more tacit. Emin herself, in an interview with Rugoff, defines her large sculptures as metaphorical. It's the titles that give these often-shambling assemblages of reclaimed timber and other materials their umbilical connection to the self: *Knowing My Enemy*; 2002, *Sleeping with You*, 2005-their use of the first and second person suggests direct address, but the implied speaker and interlocutor could be anyone. Still more recently, Emin has been making paintings as well. They afford her new scope for awkwardness. Like the sculptures, they are metaphorical

rather than declarative; despite the evident influence of Cy Twombly, they are wordless, unlike so many of her drawings, though they share much of the same imagery. And the more abstract, the more metaphorical, and the more evocative of corporeal experience. With regard to the paint drips in *A Rose*, 2007, Emin remarks, "They excite me and remind me of my own physical adventures." In becoming less diaristic, her work is becoming more available for the evocation of anyone's adventures without recourse to identification with the artist's. We can all identify with a drip.