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Tracey Emin's Return  
By Choire Sicha

Last week Monday, which was Halloween, Tracey Emin's new drawings were already in place in her gallery, Lehmann Maupin. But her new neon work was still being manufactured, though the exhibition would open on Saturday night. One piece, *Sleeping with You*, was being modeled from a long, jagged line that she had drawn on the wall by hand, and would be revealed on Saturday as a saddening and pretty falling streak of white light.

In her second and most recent solo show in New York, just back in 2002, the neon was blue and had spelled out the words "People like you need to fuck people like me."

Things were still being put into place on Monday morning, like a small, worn trolley cart filled with what looked like splintered lattice slats. Also, one unwitting preparator had moved a sculpture that morning, resulting in a bit of being yelled at by Ms. Emin. "I asked him if he knew exactly where it had been, and he didn't," she said later. "And neither did I."

After that, her tall art dealer, David Maupin, peeled off a few hundred bucks in cash—some walking-around money—and sent Ms. Emin out to the black car waiting.

In the car, distressed, she talked on the phone. At the gallery, she had been exhausted, and eagle-eyed for any signs of things about to go wrong: with the day's lunch, with the show itself, with anyone's behavior—a hyper-vigilance for disaster. She wore sneakers and black pinstripe pants; a little sea-foam sweater over her low-riding black strap top; a big, beige, knee-length London-chichi veloury and furry coat; and a gold necklace and earrings.

She has a gorgeous, scrunchy face, eyelashes like a giraffe, and a famously harsh and fun Margate accent that has mellowed with time. She is famously fearsome, and has been engaged in a war with notoriety for much of the last decade—a war fought mostly with herself, and only then incidentally documented by the tabloids. Much of that war was also fought with chemicals and sex. In London, she has been, for most of the last eight or so years, treated (to make an American translation) as a cross between Paris Hilton and Elizabeth Taylor—a damaged goddess, drunk and disorderly, both scorn-worthy and a boldface name that moves papers. Her famous *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-95*—believed to have been destroyed in the famous Saatchi warehouse fire in 2004—was a tent embroidered with names that met the title's description, and was widely construed to be about penetration rather than what it actually was: a more domestic and straightforward use of the word "slept."

The playwright Christopher Shinn once said something about why people think actors are crazy that applies to Ms. Emin as well: It's because they openly face horror every day, and this disgusts and embarrasses people. Ms. Emin is also described by associates as a diva, and she said much the same thing herself, with a twist: "I am an icon for gay men," she said.

Now, she is 42. ("But I'm all right," she said.) She doesn't smoke any more. Off and on—but seemingly mostly on these days—she doesn't drink. She texts a lot. She doesn't have blackouts on television programs and wander off-set. She sleeps only with her cat.

By 1 p.m., the car had gotten her uptown, to the converted mansion that is the Neue Galerie, where Ronald S. Lauder and Serge Sabarsky have lent their collections of drawings by Egon Schiele for an exhibition.

In that show, packed among the overload of biographical information, there's a copy of the last letter from Schiele's wife, Edith. She died three days before he did, both so young, in an influenza epidemic. "I love you eternally," Edith had scrawled, "and love you more and more immeasurably and boundlessly."

Those could easily have been words from one of Ms. Emin's drawings, which now circle the second room of Lehmann Maupin. Ms. Emin's work in general is sometimes like a sewn or drawn record of the sort of words one might issue while dying, or perhaps what a Laura Palmer might scream on the side of an abandoned road while illuminated by motorcycle headlights: I LOVE YOU AAAGH I LOVE YOU DO YOU HATE ME? I LOVE YOU HEY I LOVE YOU DON'T YOU LOVE ME? BECAUSE I LOVE YOU GODDAMIT HELLO I LOVE YOU.

The Neue Galerie also has a Schiele death mask. "See, he was good-looking," Ms. Emin said.

She read some wall text, which described how Schiele ditched his lover to marry better. "What a cunt," she said. She walked off. "They were all selfish and chauvinist cunts then, weren't they?"

Ms. Emin had eight solo exhibitions around the world last year. She used to make blankets—quilts, really, sometimes described as appliqué blankets. In her 1999 show at Lehmann Maupin, her first in New York, there was a blanket in which the largest text read "PSYCHO SLUT." She can't seem to make them right now, she said, because where she should see images, she sees only pounds and dollars. There's a waiting list of collectors for these blankets—"10, maybe 15 people," Ms. Emin said. "I know that doesn't sound like much." The list is actually a bit longer, and includes many museums. If any more blankets are made, they will probably fetch a price, give or take, of £100,000.

She made her rise fairly contemporaneously with the artist Damien Hirst, who once was notoriously constantly drunk, and is now 40 and has graying hair and two sons and lives on a

farm, and who was the first living Briton to be paid one million pounds for a piece of art. While Mr. Hirst's success, and that of many of the other Young British Artists who are decidedly Ms. Emin's contemporaries, may have much to do with being purchased early and often by mega-collector Charles Saatchi, Ms. Emin said that she actually didn't "allow him to buy my work until 1997." Since the early 90's, Mr. Saatchi was buying up much by the London artists—but Ms. Emin's earnest work doesn't really fit in with the heavy-on-the-irony shock-and-wow Saatchi context. Also, the vast amount of control his collecting has over an artist's financial prospects was fearsome as well.

There was a Schiele drawing of a woman in perspective, from knee height, that Ms. Emin was incredibly taken with. And the fashion in some of the drawings—not the actual drawings made by Schiele for fashion purposes, but one depicting a girl in a swirly, poufy, stripey colored skirt turned up completely around the crucial regions—that she thought was balls-out gorgeous. "Imagine Marc Jacobs doing that," she said. And the 1910 self-portraits: amazing. "Yeah, it's brilliant," she said.

Ms. Emin waited in line for a seat in the Café Sabarsky. In London, she never waits for anything. There, she's recognized on the street more often than not. She's used to it, and so what anyway? "But then David Bowie comes over on the Tube with a baseball hat on, so ...." Still, being out of London is like an unnerving vacation. In the café, she ordered the goulash and a salad—and the spaetzle came with it, which was delicious. She was captivated by a number of women who were eating there alone, particularly a woman of possibly 60, who sat by the window, not reading her paper.

"The second one, I wasn't happy about," Ms. Emin said of her most previous New York show. "It was like getting married on your birthday." It was the very first show in Lehmann Maupin's then-new Rem Koolhaas–designed space, and surprises and uncertainty upset her. More and more friends would be arriving in New York for just the weekend as Saturday approached—which Ms. Emin didn't understand, as she suffers from terrible jetlag. She said that although her primary market is in London, it's important to show in New York—and she worries quite a bit about reviews, in part at least because it's not good when word gets back to London that an artist has bombed in New York. This time, she took the installation so seriously that no collectors were allowed in for early peeks. It wouldn't be until the Wednesday before the opening, after a week and a half of work, that proper appointments for collectors would be permitted.

In Ms. Emin's new book, a really quite good memoir called *Strangeland*, she recounts an earlier trip to New York. "The last thing I remember is having mad sex on a pier looking out across the Hudson River as the bats flew above us, and little ships glided past like shooting stars. Woke up Sunday feeling great."

This trip would clearly be different, although there were still parties every night. Tuesday would be something for Yves St. Laurent, and Wednesday was something about Elton John,

and Thursday was a Fendi party, and Friday was some foundation party, and on "Monday I'm flying to L.A. to see the Rolling Stones."

The café's staff brought her some cake in a bag to take away. In the Neue Galerie's gift shop, she looked at everything and bought a good book of Schiele drawings, and also a copy of Hermann Hesse's *Demian*, which she gave to The Transom, though she said it didn't need to be read, as it might not have held up, or just might not have been actually good, as she thought it had been when she read it many years ago. The introduction has an epigraph. It reads, "All I really wanted was to try and live the life that was spontaneously welling up within me. Why was that so very difficult?"

By 6 p.m. on Saturday night, half the work in the show would be sold; the least expensive drawing in the show is priced at £3,000. And by 7 p.m., Sting, looking healthy and as if his face had been buffed and waxed, would slide in. Trudie Styler, his wife, would walk as if she had something horribly wrong with her pelvis, as if terrible amounts of yoga had led her to a bad place. *Vogue's* Hamish Bowles and Miami artist Naomi Fisher would smile, and Cecilia Dean, the *Visionaire* queen, would wear a severe black trench coat and extreme, barely-there shoes that none of the women present would be able to stop looking at. A limo would pull up out front and one blonde, two blondes, three blondes and a small boy-child would pop out. Ms. Emin would wear big oxblood or rust-colored boots with buckles on the side and a ruffley white top and look great and even just plain normal-nervous. In the back room of the gallery, a washy film would play, shot in Cyprus, of a dog at the seaside slowly, sadly licking its left rear leg and then shuffling off away from the beach. "To know your smile, the touch of your skin," Ms. Emin's scratchy writing flickering on the film would plead, "I love you."