

Sex, Gender and Body in the Conceptual Art Installations of Sarah Lucas

ATHIRA SADANAND

*Research Scholar, Department of English
University of Calicut, Kerala*

Abstract

Sarah Lucas is one of the leading figures of the generation of young British artists who emerged during the 1990s. She is a contemporary British artist who presents ordinary objects (like furniture and food items) in extraordinary ways in photography, installation and sculpture. She has consistently challenged the societal perceptions regarding sex, class, body and gender. Sarah Lucas is internationally acclaimed for her bold and controversial use of materials in her art. Spanning sculpture, photography, and installation, her works evoke the body in its physical, cultural, social, artistic, spiritual and psychic dimensions. Her artworks push the sculptural possibilities of bodily representation to question the way we comprehend and relate to the aspects of human experience such as death, gender and sexuality. This study aims to explore the extraordinary representation of body in the works of Sarah Lucas and how it helps the onlooker in defying gender norms followed by a patriarchal society.

Keywords: *Voyeurism, Sex, Modern Art, Sensationalism, Body, Gender, Feminism, Misogyny, Photography, Conceptual Art, Installation Art, Sculpture.*

Introduction

Conceptual Art

Conceptual art, (also known as **Conceptualism**) is art in which the concepts/ideas involved in the work are given equal or more importance than traditional artistic, aesthetic, technical and material concerns. Conceptualists discard any preconceived notions regarding art and according to them, art is possible with any kind of materials since its only purpose is to convey the initial concept. The idea behind this kind of visual art was first explored by Marcel Duchamp (the so called father of conceptual art), although the term was first used by Sol Lewitt in the early 1960s. Although Henry Flynt of the *Fluxus Group* (an international and interdisciplinary group of artists) had coined the term "concept art" in an article bearing the same name which appeared in *An Anthology of Chance Operations* as early as 1961 and Edward Kienholz had begun to formulate 'concept tableaux' in 1963, the term first achieved public

attention in defining a distinct art form in an article published by Sol LeWitt in 1967.

How can you recognize a piece of conceptual art when you encounter it? Generally speaking, it may be in one of four form: a readymade, a term invented by Duchamp for an object from the outside world which is claimed or proposed as art, thus denying both the uniqueness of the art object and the necessity for the artists hand: an intervention, in which some image, text or thing is placed in an unexpected context, thus drawing attention to that context: e.g. the museum or street; documentation, where the actual work, concept or action, can only be presented by the evidence of notes, maps, charts or most frequently, photographs; or words, where the concept, proposition or investigation is presented in the form of language. (Godfrey,7)

In most cases, conceptual artists tend to veer toward minimalism by using a fundamental and basic approach to convey their ideas. The humour and

satirical elements in conceptual art works are unparalleled. Due to its association with the Young British Artists movement of the 1990s, conceptual art became the umbrella term to denote all kinds of contemporary art that does not practice the traditional styles of painting and sculpture. The reason why the term "conceptual art" has come to be associated with various modern art practices far removed from its original goals lies in the problem of defining the term itself. The idea of conceptual art varies according to artists and cultures.

The purest definition of conceptual art would be that it is inquiry into the foundations of the concept art, as it has come to mean. Like most terms with fairly specific meanings generally applied, 'conceptual art' is often considered as a tendency. In one sense it is a tendency of course because the definition of 'conceptual art' is very close to the meanings of art itself. (Kosuth, 25)

The French artist Marcel Duchamp is considered to be the pioneer of conceptual art. One of his "Readymades" (the name he used to denote his conceptual works) was "The Fountain" which was rejected by the society of independent artists in New York. The fountain was a standard urinal basin signed by the artist with the pseudonym R Mutt. According to Duchamp, *Readymades* are the mass produced prefabricated, commonplace objects that are elevated to the status of art by the artist. But the artistic tradition refused to see it in that aspect and rejected his works. The US artist Joseph Kosuth was the only person who acknowledged the works of Duchamp and famously said "all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually". In 1956 the founder of *Lettrism* (an Avant Gardemovement), Isidore Sou, developed the notion of a work of art which could never be created in reality, but it could nevertheless provide aesthetic rewards by being contemplated intellectually. This

concept is known as *Art Esthapériste* ("infinite-aesthetics"). The current form of the Isouian movement known as *Excoördism*, defines itself as the art of the infinitely large and the infinitely small.

According to the philosopher and artist, Henry Flynt, concept art extends beyond visual aesthetics, encompassing diverse mediums like music and theoretical writings. The term assumed a different meaning when employed by Joseph Kosuth and by the English *Art and Language* group, who saw language as the primary components of art, challenging the traditional theories of visual representation. By the mid-1970s they had produced publications, indexes, performances, texts and paintings to this end and the first *dedicated* conceptual-art exhibition titled *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*, took place at the New York Cultural Centre in the same year.

Installation Art

The term "Installation art" came of use in the late 1970s. Installation Art's roots are often traced back to the great Conceptual artists like Marcel Duchamp, German artist Kurt Schwitters (*Merz*-object collages), El Lissitzky (*Proun* Paintings), Jiro Yoshihara (*Gutai* Group) and other early avant-garde Dadaists who chose to focus on making works that generated questions rather than crafting aesthetically pleasing objects. Allan Kaprow, in his significant piece *Words* (1961), installed rolls of paper with jumbled phrases and played audio recordings for the audience as they moved through the installation. *The Void*, a piece made by Yves Klein in 1958, featured a white empty gallery room, making space as object worthy of artistic attention, thus forming a new route for Installation art. *Through* (1983-1989) by Cildo Meireles made viewers move through a labyrinth of barriers, shattered glass, and other disturbing hindrances. *Through* was a critique of social

repression, consumerism, and political censorship. Bill Viola was another artist noted for his use of video technology to explore elemental human experiences. For his Installation titled *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983), Viola created a black cubicle with a viewing window through which audiences could see a small colour monitor. While the screen in the background showed an image of a snow-covered mountain, a voice slowly recited poetry, making this a calming and fully immersive art experience.

By the 1990s, more involved viewer participation became a central concern for Installation artists. Carsten Holler and Rosemarie Trockel, for example, created *House for Pigs and People* (1997) which was a metaphor for social division. It consisted of a house partitioned into two by one-way mirrored glass. From the 2000 onwards Installation art has seen an increase in the incorporation of technological advancements into works that create even more immersive environments, such as in Maurice Benayoun's *Brain Factory* (2016). *Brain Factory* translates visitor's emotions into visual data through a 3D printer so that audience and machine work in unison to produce the artwork.

Identity and Form in Sarah Lucas's Works

Lucas came to the public's attention as one of the foremost contributors to the Young British Artists (YBA) movement of the late 1980s. Her works defies categorization, encompassing sculpture, photography and installation with a distinctive focus on extraordinary, provocative themes and unconventional materials. In her works, Lucas often uses everyday objects like furniture, food, buckets, machines, courgettes, tights, chairs, newspapers, lights, bed, toilets, and cigarettes as a substitute for the human body. Her art is usually filled with raw

sexual innuendo that subverts the male gaze and the clichés of what is considered feminine or masculine. Sarah Lucas exhibits the absurdity of gender stereotypes and the sexual dynamics of the observer and the observed. Lucas brought a raw energy to works that offered blunt (some would say, obscene or provocative) commentaries on sensitive topics including sexuality, gendering, body politics, female objectification and death. She represented the UK at the 2015 Venice Biennale where she exhibited her typically controversial installation *I SCREAM DADDIO*. Having become disappointed by the metropolitan art scene, she moved to the rural surroundings of Suffolk where she works from the comfort of her home. After exploring minimalist sculpture at Goldsmiths College, Lucas later drew inspiration from immediate sources like the British tabloid press.

One of Lucas's important works, *"Au Naturel,"* features a mattress, a pair of melons, a pair of oranges, a zucchini and a bucket, all arranged to suggest two reclining nude figures (a man and a woman). This installation confronts the viewer with raw, unpolished portrayal of the human form, challenging societal standards surrounding beauty and desire. Lucas fills her installations with humour and satire, using wit as a tool to disassemble preconceived notions. Her ability to combine the "weird" with the profound invites viewers to reconsider their assumptions about art and life. In the iconic installation titled *"Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs,"* Lucas constructs a self-portrait using fried eggs as breasts, confronting the viewer with a direct and irreverent exploration of femininity and the female body. The use of common materials like food items, clothes and furniture serve as a powerful argument on objectification and self-representation. The works of Sarah Lucas raises questions about

identity, gender, body politics, death, mental health, and the intergenerational transmission of experiences, inviting viewers to contemplate the interconnectedness of personal and societal narratives.

Lucas often employs visual puns and humour to depict what she considers as the absurdity of cultural biases and insignificant everyday situations. Her work is known for its satirical elements and its use of metaphor to attack gender issues and the pointless vernacular of the male working classes. In her sculpture *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992), she uses slang terms to define sexual organs: breasts are "fried eggs" and the vagina is a "kebab". Inspired by feminist Andrea Dworkin's writings, Lucas embarked on a quest for challenging the casual objectification of women and debunking the myth of female liberation. Her early self-portraits, like *"Eating a Banana"* (1990) and *"Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs"* (1996), critique the problematic views of female beauty in everyday visual discourses. Another controversial work of Sarah Lucas is *"Deep Cream"*. This sculpture is a cartoonish display of splayed limbs with 14 foot erect penis in bright yellow made of resin. Sarah Lucas loved mixing sexes in her art. According to her, one can never get to the bottom of complex concepts like sex and gender.

In this period of man, after philosophy and religion, art may possibly be one endeavor that fulfills what another age might have called 'man's spiritual needs'. Or, another way of putting it might be that art deals analogously with the state of things 'beyond physics' where philosophy had to make assertions. And arts strength is that even the preceding sentence is an assertion, and cannot be verified by art. Arts only claim is for art. Art is the definition of art. (Kosuth, 24)

Despite her association with strong feminist arguments, Lucas often works with everyday available items ranging from clothes to food. Her sculptures usually lack heads and are defined by genitals. Her photographs prominently feature her own face in self-portraits. Critical of the male-dominated contemporary art scene, Lucas expanded the boundaries of her practice to enable women's art to compete in traditionally exclusive domains. This positions her as a central figure in the late-twentieth-century shift in attitudes towards art created by women, influencing subsequent generations of female artists.



Au Naturel



Eating a Banana



I Scream Daddio



Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab



Self Portrait with Fried Eggs



Deep Cream

Conclusion

Lucas's installations often exceed the confines of traditional gallery spaces. Through clever placement and spatial manipulation, she alters environments, encouraging viewers to interact with the art and concepts in unexpected ways. Sarah Lucas's conceptual art installations have left a permanent mark on contemporary art. Her fearless exploration of identity, use of unconventional materials, and engagement with social issues continue to influence a new generation of artists. In short, Sarah Lucas's conceptual art installations challenge us to confront unnecessary social norms and engage with the

complexities of body politics. Through her fearless and unparalleled approach, Lucas has created a unique space in the realm of contemporary art, inviting us to reconsider what art can be and how it can shape our understanding of the world.

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