

Garnsey, E. 'The Repeating Self: Sarah Lucas' Self-portraits (an experiment in art writing)', *Journal of Arts Writing by Students* Vol. 3/1-2 (Sep 2017) 91-106.

The repeating self: Sarah Lucas' Self-Portraits (an experiment in art writing)

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Abstract

In *Self-Portraits*, Sarah Lucas employs Barthes' notion of the punctum like an overused punch line: forcing an intentional moment when the puzzle pieces come together and trigger a 'prick'. To bring together the object of analysis – Lucas' self-portraits – and the text of analysis, I employ in writing the same intentional punctum (a rupturing of the prose through the written repetition of themes, arguments and questions) that Lucas employs through photography. This adaption in writing of Lucas' strategy of representation reveals further, and different knowledge, than other forms of art writing might in unpacking the central question, *what does repetition in Lucas' self-portraits reveal about identity and gender?* Repetition is fundamental to the ways in which Lucas both displays and disarms her 'self' through the photographic portraits. Lucas' repetitive visual vernacular leaves her identity paradoxically unstable – simultaneously constituted but punctured by that which it seeks to tear down – while the deliberate and repeated use of psychoanalytic citations and gender performance leaves Lucas inhabiting a state of inbetweenness.

Keywords

Sarah Lucas
Roland Barthes
punctum
gender
identity
repetition

Life is not about significant details, illuminated [by] a flash, fixed forever.
Photographs are. (Sontag 1979: 81)

A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (Barthes 1993: 27)

These photographic series all revolve around clues, and clues to meanings, that form a mode of address that ask the spectator to find and follow them into an emotional or intellectual response. (Mulvey 1989: 138)

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (1993: 27–47) discerns two co-presenting themes in photography: that of the *studium*, the general register of interest, and the *punctum*, the 'sting, speck, cut, little hole' that punctuates and disturbs the studium. For Barthes, the studium exists in the 'order of liking' while the punctum is a rupture, a moment that activates a photograph, a 'lightening-like' break that exists in the subjective, and exhibits what Barthes' deems the 'power of expansion', a power, often metonymic, that indicates potential. Not all photographs have a punctum; some photographs can "'shout," [but] not wound'. The punctum is that detail which the photographer did not intend, but which necessarily was photographed as part of the bigger picture and captures the viewer's attention.

[Insert figure 1 about here for print version of article]

Figure 1: Sarah Lucas, *Self-Portraits 1990–1998*, iris prints on watercolour paper, 12 prints, each 85×68 cm (framed). Copyright: The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Sarah Lucas is an artist who (re)uses photography.¹ In fact, she re-uses a variety of media, including sculpture and installation. Known foremost as part of the young British artist (yBa) phenomenon, Lucas' work was included in some of the most seminal British exhibitions of the 1990s, such as *Sensation – Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (Adams et al. 1997). In 1999 Lucas produced a portfolio of twelve photographic self-portraits, published under the title *Self-Portraits 1990–1998*² (Figure 1) by her gallery Sadie Coles HQ in an edition of 150. These self-portraits have been acquired by, and exhibited in, major galleries and collections, including the Tate and the National Portrait Gallery, United Kingdom. Matthew Collings (2002: 72) describes these photographic series as 'promo shots [which] museums could buy [...] to advertise their Sarah Lucases'. The self-portrait series builds a cult of personality around Lucas, which institutions can harness for publicity purposes: here is Lucas created by Lucas. However, the self-portraits are more significant than solely being advertisements. The series situates the artist in a visual language of her own making; they are 'one more piece of evidence that Lucas regards her works as materials which she sees as a vein to be mined just as much as other objects' (Dziewior and Ruf 2005: 109). The self-portraits break out 'of the confines imposed by the autonomous single image' (Mulvey 1989: 137) to implicate Lucas in a

strategy of repetition that displays a self-conscious engagement with her agency as human and object, repeatedly using images of her ‘selves’ – multiple – to disrupt and challenge notions of her own identity and gender. They simultaneously embrace the tradition of artist self-portraiture, while all the time mocking the cult of personality surrounding the *Artist*. The joke is on the buyer who ‘owns’ these manufactured—both in the sense of mass-made and artificial – portraits believing that they possess ‘real’ Lucases.

In Lucas’ *Self-Portraits* Barthes’ notion of the punctum operates in two ways, complicated by the tension between the unintentional and the intentional. First, the punctum exists in the manner of accidental wounding detail particular to photography, which Barthes outlines. Second, and more interestingly, Lucas employs the punctum like an overused punch line: forcing an intentional moment when the puzzle pieces come together and trigger a prick or in Susan Sontag’s (1979: 21) terms a quotation that disrupts the way in which the viewer is ‘thinking’ and seeing the photograph. In contrast to Barthes’ notion of the accidental punctum, Lucas consciously creates and employs a detailed visual vernacular – *repeated over, and over, again* – to drive this prick. It is a punctum made through the artist’s critical (although deniable) awareness of theory, but still experienced as a raw realization of elements coming together to say something (the something of which I will address) and to challenge the viewer’s perception of what they are looking at.³ While this is not the role of the punctum that Barthes necessarily intended, it is a novel way in which the idea of the punctum can

be understood, and complicated, in order to unpack the key question underpinning this article: *what does repetition in Lucas' self-portraits reveal about identity and gender?*

The way in which Lucas' photographs exhibit the punctum and use these 'pricks' to form quotations inform the first of two central claims. The first claim is methodological. In order to bring together the object of analysis – Lucas' self-portraits – and the text of analysis, I employ in writing the same intentional punctum that Lucas employs through vision. That is, I rupture the prose through the (re)appearance of themes and details. These themes and details take several guises throughout the article. Arguments return over and over again. Questions are posed multiple times, to the point where they become refrains. Scholarly personalities are habitually linked and cited to the point where analytic originality could be mistaken for banal circularity (or 'bad' academic writing). This methodological approach is used to actively engage with the key issues under discussion in relation to Lucas' self-portraits: repetition, authenticity and the making of the self. Readers of this article are confronted again and again with questions about what is real on what is original; and what is personal, just as viewers of Lucas' self-portraits are confronted with the same issues. In other words, the way in which the article is written is deliberately attempting to mirror the ways in which Lucas creates her self-portraits. This is done in order to effect a dynamic understanding of these photographs.

The adaption in writing of Lucas' strategy of representation reveals further, and different knowledge, than other forms of art writing might in addressing the second— theoretically focused – claim: that repetition in Lucas' self-portraits leads to a living death of identity and the displacement of gender. This claim will appear less pessimistic as I go on. In other words, repetitive exposure simultaneously supports and destabilizes Lucas' identity, while repetitive, self-perpetuating references displace conceptions of gender within the self-portraits.

In writing this way I must recognize my complicit subjectivity. Without wanting to 'speak' for Lucas or to close down an interpretation of Lucas' works, I want to use my experience of Lucas' photographs and interpretation of their visual punctuators to inform one way in which this photographic series may be approached. New forms of art writing have begun to appear more frequently as questions about what can be gained from the different forms seek to be resolved. Among them, T. J. Clark (2006) addresses the potential for close analysis of a work of art using a journal style of writing that charts a chronological narrative of subjective experience. Griselda Pollock (1996) intertwines letter writing with essay writing to engage with different responses and perspectives to the visibility of desire. Pollock (2007) also uses images to challenge dominant practices of display. Rosalind Krauss (1989) goes so far as to use song lyrics to segment her essay into recurring motifs, using this form to reflect:

[w]hat the relationship might be between the serial elaboration of an image, multiplying and reproducing it in a potentially endless chain, and a

notion of perfection in which each last member of a series is thought of as subsuming, and, therefore, effacing all earlier versions. (Krauss 1989: 153)

This concern is also pertinent to the work of Lucas, whose own serial elaboration of sexual motifs permeates her entire body of work, from photographs to sculptures to installations. Following (with some humility) in the footsteps of Clark, Pollock and Krauss by utilizing a form of art writing that is not strictly conventional produces an outcome that closes the gap between the visceral art object and its textual analysis and that brings the writing in line with, or at least closer to, the context of the artwork.

With this methodological venture in one hand, I turn to address the theoretical focus in the other, which begins with the following question: *what does repetition in Lucas' self-portraits reveal about identity and gender?*

Although Lucas has been the subject of many exhibitions her work remains largely under-theorized, being clouded by the banner and the hype of the yBa movement. The two existing monographs on Lucas' work (Collings 2002; Dziewior and Ruf 2005) and the in-depth analysis of her sculpture *Au Naturel* (Malik 2009) posit the idea of repetition and re-use as central to Lucas' *oeuvre*. Prinzhorn (Dziewior and Ruf 2009: 9) describes Lucas as using a 'strategy of repetition [...] [where] [e]ven original ideas are repeated until they become self-referring'. However, this strategy of repetition needs to be explored further and repeatedly so in order to understand why it is so important to Lucas' work and what it means.

Before engaging with the idea and process of repetition in Lucas' self-portraits, it is necessary to consider the following questions: *what is repetition and what does repetition mean?* In Lucas' self-portraits repetition appears to be a doubling of herself in image after image. Reiterating concepts, duplicating themes, re-using objects and ideas to the point where they reach clichéd regularity. However, the performance of these actions implicates repetition in a more deeply uncertain strategy. Eik Kahng (2007: 20–21) believes that repetition is a symbolic structure, not merely a *technical* process, which 'has become necessity for the activation of meaning and value. It provides the possibility of evaluation and thus, a means of validation, not in terms of distance from a prior original, but in terms of its very perception'. By allowing an object to be repeatedly perceived and assessed, repetition 'reinscribes rather than diminishes the aura of the prime object', as opposed to Walter Benjamin (2009: 437), who implicates *technical* reproduction as diminishing the aura of an object, creating a lack of 'unique existence in a particular place'. For Kahng, repetition gives life to an object; for Benjamin, repetition sucks the life out of an object. In these instances the medium of repetition bears significance on its meaning.

The meaning of repetition similarly bears significance on its medium. Jill Sheridan et al. (1996: 1) link repetition with the obsessional, saying '[t]o be obsessional is to be possessed of abnormally persistent and unforgiving drives. Repetition is a characteristic manifestation of such drives'. Formulated by Sigmund Freud (1922) the notion of drives – psychological motivations, such as the uncanny and the fetish – rely

on repetition as a quality of the concept. Margaret Iversen (1994: 452) summarizes Freud's intention when she says '[t]he "compulsion to repeat" is [...] the hallmark of that which cannot be assimilated and subdued', a compulsion that Freud deems necessary in order to come to terms with a traumatic experience, most notably the central catalyst of castration anxiety. For Freud, repetition bears the mark of psychological impetus motivated by trauma. In Barthes' terms this relates to the punctum – the trauma of the photographic plane – that creeps up and pierces the visual field. In Hal Foster's (1996: 132) Lacanian-based terms, 'the traumatic [i]s a missed encounter with the real [...] the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated'. Repetition is 'the real'. Things become real through repetition, at the same time that real things are trauma repeated.

On the one hand, the mode of repetition is linked to the symbolic structure or aura of the object, while on the other the substance of repetition appears grounded in the psychological (Davis 1996). For Gilles Deleuze (2004) repetition is linked to both. Deleuzean repetition bears a key relation to identity:

I do not repeat because I repress. I repress because I repeat, I forget
because I repeat. I repress, because I can live certain things or certain
experiences only in the mode of repetition. (Deleuze 2004: 20)

Deleuze (2004: 19) posits repetition as 'truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself'. Repetition is symbolic,

the main order of difference. It is difference that determines identity, and thus all repetition is the repetition of difference. No identity is the same, but all identity is defined by orders of difference, and therefore, repetition. Deleuze's concept of identity as constituted by repetition and difference is unstable in the metaphysical and the post-structuralist sense. In relation to Lucas' work it is this instability, and opening up of difference, that is the most important aspect to be gleaned from Deleuze. It is this instability that brings me back to the following question: *what does repetition reveal about identity and gender in Lucas' self-portraits?*

Arguably dividing identity and gender is problematic because the two concepts are indexically related. However, in Lucas' self-portraits there appears to be a difference in how she constructs identity and how she constructs gender. While each category retains some of the other, it is most useful to divide the two in order to consider and elucidate how each difference is being constituted, and destabilized, through repetition. First, let us consider identity.

What does repetition in Lucas' self-portraits reveal about identity? The (un)real

Lucas' *Self-Portraits* complicate the genre of self-portraiture because they do not appear to be of her 'self' or to proffer a consistent idea of 'self', contrary to the long associations of the self-portrait genre with being a 'professional performance – or at least its record – [where] [...] the representation of that performance is inseparable from the representation of the [artist]' (Sheriff 1995: 475). In describing Lucas' *Self-*

Portraits, Collings (2002: 60) states '[w]hile we know she really does look like that [...] [the self-portraits] don't seem to express the "truth" of what it is to be her'. Each image appears to present a staged Lucas, who is conscious of what is being portrayed, striking a pose for the camera, using props to constitute a persona, being aware of the agency of her body and image. Lucas' 'professional identity' is unsteadied by her deliberate performances, which are surprisingly mocking and entirely serious. Whitney Chadwick (Rideal 2001: 14) suggests that self-portraiture – particularly for women – activates a complex staging of the self for the self:

[f]or the woman artist, the difficulty and paradox of being both active, creative subject – a maker of meaning – and passive object – a site of meaning – can only be resolved through performing the self.

Lucas embraces this resolution of the 'performing of the self', but she does so in a way that is ambiguous (in Deleuzian terms unstable): using humour and suggestion to transform her image. Lucas accomplishes this ambiguity, or multifarious demeanour, through the re-use of ideas and objects throughout her *oeuvre*, continually self-referencing. Poses, cigarettes, fruit, eggs, underwear, vessels and toilets reappear as Freudian sexual innuendos: overt visual metaphors for body parts and sexual difference, deliberately casting Lucas in a theatre of crude psychoanalytic jokes – many of her own making (Figures 2 and 3).

[Insert figures 2 and 3 about here]

Figure 2: Sarah Lucas, *Self Portrait with Mug of Tea*, 1993, iris print on watercolour paper, 85×68 cm (framed). Copyright: The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Figure 3: Sarah Lucas, *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs*, 1996, iris print on watercolour paper, 85×68 cm (framed). Copyright: The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Mignon Nixon (2002) posits this re-use of objects as a Surrealist technique used:

[...] to undermine the aesthetic autonomy of the work of art by recasting it as an object of psychic use [...] a means to revive awareness of the powerful unconscious investments in objects that the convention of aesthetic autonomy represses.

By using repeated objects throughout her work Lucas revives a kind of multifaceted material autonomy, drawing upon Kahng's idea of repetition as encouraging perception, thus increasing the aura of that which is repeated, but at the same time allowing adaptation of its meaning(s), drawing upon the objects' ingrained psychological investment so that the presence of an object may transform the meaning of an image, while also imbuing the image with any previous associations that the object may have. Yilmaz Dziewior suggests that Lucas' integration of her artworks into one another creates a:

[...] self-referring and self-assured cosmos which is self-empowering in nature; it also allows her to modify the artistic method prominently established by Marcel Duchamp – the dislocation and decontextualization of existing objects – by using her works of art the same way he used Readymade [...] [which] revitalizes the uniqueness and autonomy of each work, but at the same time she gives it a greater presence – and correspondingly increased popularity – by giving it more exposure. (Dziewior and Ruf 2005: 109)

By using objects and postures over and over again Lucas creates a readymade visual vernacular: a language and mode of symbolism that she can call upon to construct a complex web of intertextuality, which continually repeats and transforms her identity as it relates to the repetition of difference and things outside of itself, an identity plagued by – in Malik’s (2009: 75) terms – the ‘banal register’ of sexual puns that undercut the images and at the same time reinscribe the images afresh. This process is both ‘real’ and staged, (un)real.

What does repetition in Lucas’ self-portraits reveal about identity? Living death

The self-referential in Lucas’ self-portraits becomes self-empowering. Within this empowerment there is an ever-present tension between repetition being used to create her identity, while simultaneously corrupting and destabilizing her identity. This

auratical tension is indicative of the intertextuality that Lucas employs through repetition and reference, and it is this intertextuality that becomes key in relation to Lucas' identity or lack thereof. For Barthes (1977: 142–47, original emphasis) these metonymic chains lead to 'The death of the author'. The connectedness of writing – '[t]he text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' – leads to the death of the authorial voice. Barthes believes that the imposition of an author is limiting, signifying the closing of the writing:

[...] [a]s soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself [...] the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death.

Applying Barthes' views about authorial writing to Lucas' works reveals how the artist's continual self-referencing and use of a readymade vernacular leads to the removal of her authorial voice: the dislocation of her identity as 'artist'. Lucas implicates her self-portraits, not as self-portraits at all, but as inter-connected images of her 'self' as one who embodies a web of cultural references not only of her own creating but also of a wider art historical practice.⁴ Seen in this light, Lucas' *Self-Portraits* are not limited to one interpretation but are ambiguous, bordering on ambivalent, using a repetitive visual web to fragment her identity and image, fractured by the exponential differences that ultimately lead to the 'death of the artist'. By that I mean that repetition constitutes an identity within Lucas' self-portraits that is not

static, being enacted and repeated to the extent where the individual identity of the artist disappears and is replaced with chains of difference, citation, innuendo and implication. The inherent paradox within Lucas' works is that repetition continually reaffirms her identity while simultaneously killing it. This is living death.

Lucas' self-portraits encourage the viewer to think about how iconic imagery works. What makes Lucas' self-portraits iconic is their sense of mystery (Collings, 2002: 60). It is precisely the idea of mystery that is inherently linked to the instability of Lucas' identity. This returns to the central question.

What does repetition reveal about gender in Lucas' self-portraits? Mystery

Figure 4: Sarah Lucas, *Eating a Banana*, 1990 (details), iris print on watercolour paper, 85×68 cm (framed). Copyright: The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

The idea of mystery connotes two contrasting facets of gender. First, mystery evokes the mythology of a woman concealing hidden pleasures and curiosities, the femme fatale, the myth of Pandora, where the mask of 'womanliness' conceals interior danger (Mulvey 1992). For Lucas, this mask is a human skull, a cavernous, dead, bone (Figure 8). Second, mystery refers to being unclear, or muddying defined concepts, which is ostensibly what Lucas seeks to achieve. Jessica Evans (2000: 109) posits that problematizing the 'category of woman' is a 'radical' way for some feminist photographers to refuse 'the Enlightenment assumption that more knowledge

of objects equals progress'. Lucas employs a strategy of representation – based on a rhetorical gaze, androgynous dress and, again, overtly sexed citations, particularly in reference to the fetish (Figure 4) – to question the assumptions that underpin this 'category'.⁵ This strategy of representation resists what Laura Mulvey (1975: 11) describes as the 'passive/female':

[...] [i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly [...] women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.

Lucas consciously uses the gaze to complicate her image as a mode of resistance. In half of the self-portraits Lucas stares directly, and matter-of-factly, at the viewer: bluntly challenging, daring the viewer to look back at her. Lucas' deadpan expression – which appears defying, challenging – does not encourage laughter, nor does she prevent it. As Collings' (2002: 51) points out, Lucas' work is as much about being bluntly rude as it is about making crude jokes about gender difference. Rather, Lucas' gaze is unsettling. In the other six self-portraits Lucas consciously avoids eye contact, deliberately looking away from the camera lens and the viewer, refusing to acknowledge their presence.

In *Human Toilet II* and *Human Toilet Revisited* (Figures 5 and 6) Lucas uses strategic nudity, the downward angle of the camera and the abjectness of the toilet to evoke the feeling of voyeuristic peeping; she is smoking on the john [*sic*].⁶ The viewer interrupts a private moment. However, Lucas has invited this interruption, this rupture with excremental privacy. She is naked, but her nakedness is unrevealing. The deliberateness, and conscious performativity, with which Lucas displays herself transforms the gaze from one of active male looking to one of interference and invasion. The visual abjectness prevents the image from being interpreted as ‘phantasy’, complicating the idea that Lucas is a woman being looked at. The artist is resisting. The image is resisting. On the one hand, Lucas undermines and challenges her spectacle by redirecting the gaze out from the image, employing a rhetorical gaze. On the other, she becomes complicit in her construction as spectacle, using her deliberate complicitness to disrupt ‘being-looked-at’. This is mystery.

[Insert figures 5 and 6 about here]

Figure 5: Sarah Lucas, *Human Toilet II*, 1996, iris print on watercolour paper, 85×68 cm (framed). Copyright: The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Figure 6: Sarah Lucas, *Human Toilet Revisited*, 1998, iris print on watercolour paper, 85×68 cm (framed). Copyright: The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

What does repetition reveal about gender in Lucas’ self-portraits? Displacement

In the words of Judith Butler (2009: 263), gender is ‘real only to the extent that it is performed’. It is not an essential, universal, biological attribute; rather, it is a performance of social constructs (Butler 1990: 10). To be a ‘woman’ is:

[...] to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (Butler 1988/2009: 358, original emphasis)

This idea of performance further complicates Lucas’ ‘looked-at-ness’. She says ‘I like to play around with gender stereotypes [...] All these meanings are constructs, and they’re quite fragile really’ (Dziewior and Ruf 2005: 30). In her self-portraits Lucas wears a kind of uniform, culturally signified as a ‘masculine style’ of dressing: jeans, T-shirt and work boots. Her hair is cut short and she adopts an assertively confident body language: legs apart, ‘manspreading’, ‘ruling the roost’. Lucas constructs herself in a state of inbetweenness, she is not performing ‘the feminine’, she is not conforming to binary constructs of woman/man. Instead, Lucas consciously uses ‘masculine’ signifiers to complicate her performance as subject and object. This inbetweenness creates the sense of mystery – a sense of the unknowable – that is integral to the repetition of gender within Lucas’ self-portraits.

Lucas exploits this sense of mystery in order to resist and challenge the ‘category of woman’. In part this is accomplished by the overtly sexed citations that she invokes, and the readymade vernacular – already discussed – that destabilizes her identity.

Lucas is conscious of her agency in terms of gender, playing on the recurring psychoanalytic concern of a woman’s lack of the penis. While she resists and challenges the ‘tradition’ of the active male gaze, she simultaneously uses this knowledge to create sexual puns and humourous punch lines that perpetuate and confound the undercurrent of castration anxiety: ‘the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure’ (Mulvey 1975: 13).

[Insert figure 7 about here]

Figure 7: Sarah Lucas, *Got a Salmon On #3*, 1997, iris print on watercolour paper, 85×68 cm (framed). Copyright: The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Lucas uses repeated phallic imagery – in the Lacanian sense of signification (2006: 579) – to emphasize this lack (once again the repeated psychic object surfaces). In *Got a Salmon On #3* (Figure 7) Lucas matter-of-factly stands in front of a public bathroom, staring outward, holding a large fish. The fish, a symbol of fertility that is blatantly dead, becomes a phallic signifier, standing in for Lucas’ lack (Dziewior and Ruf 2005: 110). This is emphasized by the title, which is slang for an erection (Malik 2009: 35). In *Self Portrait with Skull* (Figure 8) Lucas substitutes the implied vagina

for a human skull, the skull becomes a phallic receptacle, a death driving vanitas.⁷ In *Eating a Banana* (Figure 4) Lucas eats the phallus. In *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* (Figure 3) Lucas uses eggs to draw attention to breasts – a trope she often performs – while at the same time she opens her legs to reveal the anxiety-causing ‘black hole’, a cavernous shadow – also appearing in other works in the form of a mug, a bucket a skull – that she repeatedly uses to signify the same lack. Lucas exploits ‘the full embarrassment value of the motif[s] in order to escape the usual interpretation, or rather, to go beyond [them]’ (Prinzhorn in Dziewior and Ruf 2005: 9).

[Insert figure 8]

Figure 8: Sarah Lucas, *Self Portrait with Skull*, 1997, iris print on watercolour paper, 85×68 cm (framed). Copyright: The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Throughout her self-portraits Lucas does not adhere to one gender position; instead she represents and performs genders in a way that uses stereotypes to question and dislodge themselves. Lucas performs what ‘is both funny and strangely threatening’ or unsettling in an effort to break down oversimplified conceptions of gender that rely on essentialization.⁸ The directness and intensity of her gaze – and her resistance of the gaze – ruptures the innuendo that she deliberately, and repeatedly, invokes so that she performs neither ‘man’ nor ‘woman’, but uses the symbolic order of both to rupture and resist the signifiers of the other. This is displacement.

What does repetition in Lucas' self-portraits reveal about identity and gender? The end

The concepts of identity and gender within Lucas' self-portraits are fragile precisely because she consciously manipulates, undermines and questions the founding bases of such concepts. Lucas uses repetition to achieve this fragility. Her self-referencing, circulating visual vernacular paradoxically supports itself while destroying itself, leaving her identity unstable, living but dead, simultaneously constituted but punctured by that which it seeks to tear down. The deliberate and repeated use of psychoanalytic citations and gender performance leaves Lucas inhabiting a state of inbetweenness, displaced. The written recurrence of arguments, questions and citations throughout the article highlights the repetitive exposure that simultaneously supports and destabilizes Lucas' identity, and perpetuates and displaces conceptions of gender within the self-portraits. Adapting Lucas' strategy of representation in writing draws attention to how this repetition is fundamental to the ways in which she both displays and disarms her 'self' through the photographic portraits. Therefore, in answer to the question *what does repetition in Lucas' self-portraits reveal about identity and gender?* (Un)real: living death, mystery, displacement. These punctums are deliberate pricks that leave me bruised.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Craig Clunas, the editors of this Journal and the anonymous peer reviewers for their invaluable comments and guidance.

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Notes

¹ Jessica Evans suggests ‘photography and art are viewed as antinomies, the term “photographer” detracting from the ability of the artist to transcend the machine of the camera’ (in Carson and Pajackowska 2001: 105).

² Due to copyright restrictions, the electronic version of this article does not include images of the photographic series. The complete series can be viewed online in the collection of the Tate at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lucas-self-portraits-1990-1998-66686>.

³ Lucas maintains a distance from her critical awareness of theory, often claiming that her aim is ‘to make art “light”’ (Dziewior and Ruf 2005: 11). However, her work is heavily informed by art historical discourse, which she most frequently alludes to in the titles of works, such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1992); a reference to Sigmund Freud’s essay.

⁴ Lucas’ practice should be seen as part of the genealogy of self-portraits by female artists, including Helen Chadwick and Jo Spence (see Whitney Chadwick in Rideal 2001).

⁵ Mulvey describes knickers as ‘well-worn fetishist items’ in ‘Fears, fantasies and the male unconscious or “You Don’t Know What is Happening Do you, Mr Jones?”’, in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989: 8).

⁶ Griselda Pollock (2003) uses '[*sic*]' to identify male systems of language.

⁷ Collings (2002: 8) suggests '[t]he skull is a metaphor for death, while its eye sockets [make] a visual pun on testicles... a symbol for life'.

⁸ Susan Bowers (Dotterer and Bowers 1992: 21) describes the grotesque as 'both funny and strangely threatening', being 'profoundly of the body', characterized by exaggeration and hyperbole.