Dr Alison Rowley
Fertile Objects: *Penetralia*, Sarah Lucas and English Modernism
19 September 2012

Source: Henry Moore Institute Online Papers and Proceedings
www.henry-moore.org/hmi

This article has been downloaded from the Henry Moore Institute’s collection of Online Papers and Proceedings, an online publishing facility bringing you the most recent developments in sculpture studies from both inside and outside the Institute. Here you'll find proceedings from many of the Institute's international conferences as well as the latest research from both up-and-coming and established scholars.

Copyright remains with the author. Any reproduction must be authorised by the author.
Contact: research@henry-moore.org

The Henry Moore Institute is a world-recognised centre for the study of sculpture in the heart of Leeds. An award-winning exhibitions venue, research centre, library and sculpture archive, the Institute hosts a year-round programme of exhibitions, conferences and lectures, as well as developing research and publications, to expand the understanding and scholarship of historical and contemporary sculpture. The Institute is a part of The Henry Moore Foundation, which was set up by Moore in 1977 to encourage appreciation of the visual arts, especially sculpture.

To subscribe our newsletter email: newsletter@henry-moore.org
www.twitter.com/HMILeeds
Dr Alison Rowley  
Fertile Objects: Penetralia, Sarah Lucas and English Modernism

In 1999 when Sarah Lucas was invited to give a lecture at the University of Leeds in a series of public lectures called *Objects of Sculpture: Contemporary Views of Women and Sculpture* she opened her presentation with a student work made at Goldsmiths and spoke about it as an early demonstration of her fundamental approach to making sculpture. ‘One of the things I found there’ she said, ‘and which still runs through my work a lot, is truth to materials…I’m in the tradition of following materials rather than dictating what the material might do.’ At the time this surprised students in the audience interested in Lucas’s punning, DIY aesthetic and familiar with her media profile as laddish joker amongst the generation grouped under the heading Young British Artists.

Of course the tradition of ‘truth to material’ in England is associated with Henry Moore and direct carving in stone. This is what Moore wrote in his contribution to *Unit One: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture* the book edited by Herbert Read published in 1934 to coincide with the first and only exhibition of work by the Unit One group of eleven English painters, sculptors and architects:

> Every material has its own individual qualities. It is only when the sculptor works direct, when there is an active relationship with his material that the material can take its part in the shaping of an idea.  

The year after Lucas’s lecture in Leeds came *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, her incisive intervention at the Freud Museum in London in 2000. It included ‘The Pleasure Principle’, (2000) installed in the dining room at 20, Maresfield Gardens, one of the best examples to be found in the sculptor’s work of Moore’s dictum broadly interpreted. While the sculpture’s idiom is *Sunday Sport*, the tabloid newspaper notorious for the sensationalism of its outrageous sex scandal splashes and photographs of naked women, pages of which Lucas used in early work such as ‘Sod you Gits’, (1990) there is nothing crude about the way ‘The Pleasure Principle’ is made. Not a trace, for example, of the untransformed squalor of Emin’s ‘My Bed’, 1998. In ‘The Pleasure Principle’ the underwear is new, pristine. There is no attempt to hide the electrical cords to the large light bulbs and fluorescent tube that stand in for breasts and penis, and each element of the piece does only what its shape, quality and weight will allow without forcing it. ‘I’ll use anything I can’, said Lucas in an interview in *Parkett* in...
1995, ‘I depend on the idea that art can’t be taken away from me by financial or material limitations…On the other hand the choice of materials is crucial to what the final piece is’.³

The precision of the intersection in ‘The Pleasure Principle’ of the two senses of economy in that quotation - financial and formal - shattered the Freud Museum’s prevailing atmosphere of reverential propriety: it’s a laugh to catch them out, the lower orders having sex across the master’s dining room table right under the old man’s nose. It is also a shock, a confrontation with the idea of the primal scene that reminds us of its displacements in the social world of Freud’s patients. Lucas brings them crashing into full view centre stage, the servants whose labour haunts Freud’s case-studies, who transmitted the knowledge of sexuality to their bourgeois infant and adolescent charges, later becoming screens for the projection of the unconscious desires of bourgeois adults for the mother and the father.

2

Critical accounts of Lucas’s work habitually and correctly cite European Dada and Surrealism as key resources for her practice. Duchamp’s ready-made - it goes without saying - and his conceptual eroticism: ‘Prière de Toucher’ is the title of another work Lucas first exhibited at the Freud Museum; there is Hans Bellmer’s doll story Les Jeux de la Poupée and Dorothea Tanning’s soft sculptures such as ‘Nu Couchée’, (1969-70) and ‘Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202’, (1970-73) made in the 1960s and 1970s. In this talk, however, I am interested in examining indications of Lucas’s interest in a characteristically English strain of Surrealism, which surfaced idiosyncratically in the fourteen sculptures and artist’s book exhibited at Sadie Coles HQ in 2008 with the title Penetralia. The subject of Englishness, or British-ness, is never far away in Lucas’s work and discussions of it. In a review of the Freud Museum installation for the Guardian in March 2000, Adrian Searle wrote of Lucas’s work as having at its best ‘a terrible pathos cloaked in a crass, knockabout, very English humour’.⁴ The strength of ‘Two Fried Eggs and A Kebab’ (1992) lies precisely in the confidence and pleasure with which she mobilises English colloquial language to deconstructive ends at the intersection of class and gender, robbing the metaphor of its power to demean by materially literalising it in the field of vision to disarming effect. There are allusions to defining moments in British imperial history in ‘All We are Saying is Give Pizza a Chance’ (2003) shown in In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, the exhibition curated by Gregor Muir of works by the late Angus Fairhurst, Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas at Tate Britain in 2004. In the Tate Channel video of the ‘In Conversation’ event between Sarah Lucas and Sadie Coles, organised in association with In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, Coles raises directly with Lucas the subject of British-ness in her work:
In works like ‘Cnut’, which is the sandwich with the male figure on it, with its classic 1960s meat paste and white bread sandwich, or the sculpture of Spam or the Spam and Coca-Cola zeppelins. They’ve all got quite a nostalgic trace of the fast fading working class culture of your parents’ generation. Your work often hints at this disappearing British-ness, like with the Charlie George show, or with works like ‘All we are Saying is Give Pizza a Chance’, and ‘Fuck the Egg Man’, and that you have a slight discomfort about the future and nostalgia for the past.

That whole kind of Englishness thing is a muse for me really… At the moment I suppose this whole thing about there being a war (This is a reference to British involvement in the invasion of Iraq in 2003) is quite close to me, for one reason or another. My dad was in two wars, and London when I was a child still had a lot of bomb damage and pre-fabricated housing and all that kind of stuff.

Which you link to a sense of unease – or you miss?

Both I suppose. I don’t know, I’m very romantic about things in a way - about all that…

Lucas tails off and Coles cuts in with ‘Purcell, Benjamin Britten, that kind of stuff’, and with that they laugh-off the most deeply felt exchange in the conversation.

It came as no surprise then, to hear sometime in the middle of the naughties, a cultural commentator on Radio 4 announce that urban grunge artist Sarah Lucas was these days listening to recordings of the English countertenor Alfred Deller in a house in Suffolk recently purchased with her friend and dealer Sadie Coles that had once belonged to Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears.

On the basis of even this brief sketch of Lucas’s sculptural intelligence and cultural interests, the arrival of Penetralia at Sadie Coles HQ in 2008 ought to be recognised as a logical development of her move to the country in the sense that it engages with one of the founding moments of modernism in English art hard to ignore, or to be actively embraced, if you inhabit a tangible legacy of the foremost exponent of modernism in English music.

Paul Nash announced the formation of Unit One in a letter to the editor of The Times published on 2 June 1933. The group aimed to revitalise British art by embracing European Surrealism and...
abstraction; it stood, wrote Nash, ‘for the expression of a truly contemporary spirit, for that thing which is recognised as peculiarly of today in painting, sculpture and architecture.’ Three years later in 1936 Nash was involved in organising the *International Surrealist Exhibition* at the New Burlington Galleries in London and was invited by the magazine *Country Life* to explain his approach to Surrealism. In ‘The Life of the Inanimate Object’, published in May 1937, Nash framed in an English context what he considered to be the most ‘imaginatively exciting’ form of continental Surrealist expression: the ‘object’, specifically ‘l’objet trouvée’ by citing an essay by poet, novelist and communist Hugh Sykes Davies published in the 1936 book *Surrealism* (edited by Herbert Read). Sykes Davies refers to the famous voyage on the lake from Book One of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, ‘an act of stealth and troubled pleasure’ in which the poet experiences the feeling of being followed by a huge black peak on the lake’s horizon. Sykes Davies identifies the episode as one of many childhood memories from which Wordsworth ‘built up a mythology which has been of the very greatest importance in English culture’:

In its general outlines it conforms with the fundamental mythology of the human race; it is the systematic animation of the inanimate which attributes life and feeling to non-human nature.7

Nash’s own discovery of the ancient monoliths at Avebury in 1933 had been an early event in a sequence of encounters that led to a concept of animism he named the ‘object-personage.’ This is what he wrote about the visit to Avebury in his notebook:

The great stones were then in their wild state, so to speak. Some were half covered by the grass, others stood up in cornfields or were entangled and overgrown in copses, some were buried under the turf. But they were wonderful and disquieting, and as I saw them then, I shall always remember them. Very soon afterwards the big work of reinstating the Circles and Avenues began, so that to a great extent that primal magic of the stones’ appearance was lost. I made some rapid drawings and took several photographs.8

Two photographs taken at Avebury, ‘Stone Personage, Avebury’ and ‘Avebury Sentinel’ are included, along with images of nearby Stonehenge in *Fertile Image*, the collection of sixty-four of Nash’s photographs published five years after the artist’s death in 1951, edited by his wife Margaret Nash and introduced by James Laver. Those of us born in the 1950s are likely to be familiar with *Fertile Image* from the school art room where it was an example and resource for encouraging the artful transformation of our modest collections of bits of old twig, suggestive driftwood and marbled pebbles. In other words *Fertile Image* was one of the filters through which English Surrealism entered our consciousness.
You could say that Sarah Lucas has always been in the business of making ‘object- personages’, but of a provocatively disenchanted, pop cultural, urban kind at odds with Nash’s inter-war, Neo-Romantic affinities with nature – that is until Penetralia. Precisely because Fertile Image is part of my cultural formation the black and white photograph of the sculpture ‘Dayo’ used to promote the exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ (in a full-page advert for the show in the October 2008 issue of Artforum) could not but call to mind Nash’s photographs. From this perspective the cast in ‘Dayo’ of an actual penis – a fertile object – looks like a play on the book’s title in a literalising gesture typical of Lucas, an artist for whom language is so often a starting point. At Sadie Coles HQ in 2008 the fourteen sculptures were accompanied by Penetralia the artist’s book by Sarah Lucas and Julian Simmons, in which a chapter is devoted to each object, lovingly represented in a series of exquisite black and white photographs. The book’s frontispiece is a stark image of a ploughed field in winter light. The text, written by Simmons, reads:

…heading out into the ploughed fields, down across the stream, up along the double hedgerows straddling the ditches, around the woodland – attributed by some to be the forgotten location of St Edmunds chapel – and into the wild patch of set aside land: this is the macrocosmic body we daily traverse (– the protector, or muse who slowly imparts their prototypical hoard).

These are the potent loci where we turn, where paths converge and diverge. There are more than a score of such paths across the body, each Penetralia having its origin upon them.9

Shades here of Nash’s discovery of the ancient monoliths and the meaning they came to have for his art, but if Penetralia recalls his neo-romantic concept of genius loci at the lyrical end of the spectrum of manifestations of Surrealism in English art in the 1930s, the titles of Lucas’s sculptures: ‘Druid’, ‘Whand’, ‘Eros’, ‘Martyr’, ‘Owl’, ‘Imp’, ‘The King’ point elsewhere, as does the esoteric tenor of Simmons’ book text:

They’re us and we’re them. Autoeroticism of miraculous objects – the god objects, affirming them we begin this work…these are the duogrames and diagrams composed of, Wood, Flint, Phallus, Digit, Shell, Bucket. Penetralia protector of prototypical objects.

This dimension of Penetralia, dominant in the book, catches up the murkier threads of mysticism, mythology, folklore and the occult running through British art of the twentieth century so fascinatingly explored by Michael Bracewell and Alun Rowlands in their co-curation of The Dark

This article has been downloaded from the Henry Moore Institute’s collection of Online Papers and Proceedings at www.henry-moore.org/hmi. Copyright remains with the author. Any reproduction must be authorised by the author. Contact: research@henry-moore.org
Monarch: Magic & Modernity in British Art at Tate St Ives in 2009. In this context Penetralia can be understood as an instance in the twenty first century of the periodic reemergence of the ‘magical thinking’ in English culture Bracewell writes about in his catalogue essay for The Dark Monarch exhibition:

The lineage of Neo-Romanticism (broken off, art historically, in the middle years of the 1950s through the new ideas being pursued by artists and critics in the developing post-war worlds of Pop and mass media) can be seen to resurface during the 1960s in a fresh attempt to reconnect with nature and magic in the face of cultural materialism, militarism and a society fixated on commodity and consumption.10

The work of Derek Jarman, included in The Dark Monarch exhibition, is a leading example. He made his own Journey to Avebury in 1971 recorded in super-8 film chosen for its painterly qualities at the time when the growth and popularity of portable video technology (the portapak) was putting pressure on the economic viability of the small gauge film format and signaled the beginning of the end of analogue moving image capture and projection altogether, mourned by Tacita Dean’s installation Film, at Tate Modern in 2011. In an environment of the increasing dominance of digital media in art making in the first decade of the twenty-first century I have a hunch about Lucas’s sculpture ‘Pigs Elation’, the porcine family group with winged piglet that was part of her contribution to In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida. Though cast in bronze the surface of the three pigs is entirely covered in tiny multi-coloured glass beads. What on earth are we to make of this sculptural group? Hear pixilation when you read the title, however, and the piece makes sense as a punning affirmation of Lucas’s commitment to the three dimensional materiality of the object. Note the piglet is pushed along on the kind of makeshift trolley used in the studio for moving sculpture.

Reviewing Penetralia for Frieze magazine in 2009 Dan Fox described the sculptures as ‘perversely old-fashioned: like some lost, psycho-sexual phase in mid-20th century British art – 1950s Lynn Chadwick, William Turnbull, Kenneth Armitage…’11 Aspects there may be of sculptures such as Chadwick’s ‘Conjunction’ of 1953 and ‘The Seasons’, 1956 in Sarah Lucas’s ‘Imp’ (2008), and reminders of Turnbull’s ‘Idol’ sculptures of the mid-1950s, or even ‘Horse’ of 1954, but Penetralia displays none of the traumatic ‘iconography of despair… excoriated flesh, frustrated sex, the geometry of fear’, which according to Herbert Read characterised developments in British sculpture after the second world war.12 I think it is an earlier moment of English sculpture Penetralia reaches back for, one that includes Barbara Hepworth’s ‘Two Forms’ of 1933 in Tate’s collection, and ‘Figure’ and ‘Carving’ from the same year, objects that no longer exist but photographs of which appeared in 2005 in Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture, Anne Middleton
Wagner’s rich and important study of the efforts of British Modernists, Hepworth, Moore and Epstein to revitalise sculpture in England in the three decades from just before the first world war through the mid-1930s. Wagner argues that what typifies their work is ‘the combination of its special materialism, its sense of the dense aliveness of stone’ and ‘its reliance on the maternal body as the great new subject for sculpture’.13 Let’s take first the idea of the ‘special materialism’ of stone as articulated by painter, poet and art critic Adrian Stokes in 1934 in *Stones of Rimini*:

A figure carved in stone is a fine carving when one feels that not the figure, but the stone through the medium of the figure has come to life. Plastic conception on the other hand, is uppermost when the material with which, or from which, a figure has been made appears no more than so much suitable stuff for this creation.’ 14

As Julian Bell put it in 2002 reviewing a new edition of Stokes’ essays for the *London Review of Books*, ‘During the previous thirty years, while the word “plastic” was extending its reach from the art school lecture to the realm of household goods, there had been an avant-garde revulsion against all it implied in terms of willfully imposed form…and modern mass production values’.15 In *Mother Stone* Wagner quotes a passage in which Stokes worries about the effects of the new artificial materials on the human imagination:

Synthetic materials take the place of age-old products in which fantasy is deposited…Mountains and pebbles still exist. But so far as stone loses its use as a constructive material, it loses also power over the imagination. Civilised man is surrounded by objects the intensity of whose imaginative import will continue to diminish…16

At the very beginning of her Leeds lecture in 1999 Lucas put her work in dialogue with Damien Hirst’s pointing out that the difference between his approach to making sculpture and hers was Hirst’s disregard for truth to materials in his habits of fabrication. (One outcome of which, I would argue, has been the tendency to confuse materially lifeless objects with metaphors of death observable in Hirst’s own statements about his work as well as those of critics and commentators). Thirteen years later, endeavoring to understand the place of *Penetralia* in Lucas’s oeuvre, I find it helpful to echo her 1999 starting point and locate the work again in relation to Hirst’s. This is also timely because while Lucas’s work has been on show at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, Hirst’s was showcased throughout the summer at Tate Modern in Jubilee and Olympic London. The year before *Penetralia* was shown at Sadie Coles HQ White Cube Preparing for this talk I watched again *Two Melons and a Stinking Fish*, the TX documentary about Sarah Lucas made in 1996 by Vanessa Engle for the BBC and the Arts Council of England. In the opening shot Lucas talks about her approach to making work,
and as she speaks she casually manipulates wire and matches to make an open work sculpture in the shape of a penis - a version of it called ‘Things’, appears in the Catalogue Raisonné dated 1992. During the course of the film the sculpture is completed and ignited, and the final sequence shows Lucas contemplating the charred object, now collapsed, but nevertheless represented sculpturally by the camera in a 360-degree pan. Watching now from the faux-Druidic perspective of Penetralia the burning sculpture in the TX film looks like a little wicker man. In Two Melons and a Stinking Fish Lucas talks about her formal interest as a sculptor in the penis:

…from the point of view of a sculpture, rather than an image, the penis just works out perfectly because it is a completely self-contained form. If you were going to make a vagina then you’d be making a sort of wibbly thing - you know without making a caricature - something very difficult to decide where the edges are…I mean to me if you are making a penis you are virtually making a vagina in any case because it’s just the inverse of the penis really, just a perfect fit or something.  

The idea returns in Penetralia actually enacted in the fabrication process. The book Penetralia contains some technical information about the casting process.

Every erection is original… Each plaster mold was unique – made in one piece without seams, taking fifteen or so minutes to form around the establishing member. Later the cast, in bony calcium-cement plaster, provided the enduring and only positive – the mold sacrificed in its separation from the resulting phallolith. In the presence of ‘Dayo’, ‘Eros’, ‘Swan’ and ‘Luvah’ in the gallery I had imagined the casting sessions as an event in classic Lucas mode, a mixture of hilarity and tender care: we know she worked with her partner Julian Simmons as model and I thought of Louise Bourgeois grinning impishly with ‘Fillette’ tucked under her arm in Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1968 photograph, and what she said about it in 1989 in a conversation with Alain Kirili.

A.K. In certain of your sculptures there are explicitly sexual forms, for example in ‘Fillette’ [Little Girl], which includes both masculine and feminine elements.

L.B. Mapplethorpe took a photograph of that sculpture, ‘Fillette’, in which I am holding it in my arms. Which means simply that from a sexual point of view I consider the masculine attributes to be extremely delicate; they’re objects that the woman, thus myself, must protect…Perhaps this is childish; you’re asking me what I think but this is the origin of the word ‘fillette’. The word ‘fillette’ is an extremely delicate thing that needs to be protected. And to displace these attributes onto something that is dear to me in fact, the attributes of my husband. It’s very complicated.
A.K Very profound!

L.B Very profound, People won’t necessarily understand.

A.K At some point this touches on the truth of sculpture.²⁰

The press release for the 2008 Penetralia exhibition provided a dictionary definition of the word:

1. The innermost parts of a building, especially the sanctuary of a temple.
2. The most private or secret parts; recesses: the penetralia of the soul.

In technical terms in Lucas’s sculptures with cast penis the word Penetralia defines the status of the mold: the secret part of the process, the invisible inverse of the cast of the penis, but tacit in its form: in Lucas’s own words the ‘virtual vagina’. What I take to be the logic of Alan Kirili’s comment on what Bourgeois says about ‘Fillette’: that it touches on the ‘the truth of sculpture’, is that her merging of imagery, male and female, active and passive coincides with the fundamental relationship that defines sculpture, namely its articulation of relations between negative and positive space. Similarly the sexuality of Penetralia touches upon sculpture’s ontology but at the same time as it engages historically with the moment in British modernism when truth to materials was associated with the life of stone. It is as if the process of casting the erect penis is a jesting enactment of Henry Moore’s words:

Every material has its own individual qualities. It is only when the sculptor works direct, when there is an active relationship with his material that the material can take its part in the shaping of an idea.

At the same time, made in productive relations with Simmons as model, Penetralia is a serious, embodied gesture indicating a desire to imbue sculpture with new life.

I want to bring this talk to a close by suggesting that underlying Penetralia is the idea of regeneration in broader terms than the rejuvenation of sculpture alone, implicit I think in ‘The King’, the weird and wonderful centre-piece of Ordinary Things in Gallery Two. To which king does the sculpture refer? I propose it is the enigmatic Fisher King of medieval romance, the maimed king of Chrétien de Troye’s Percival and the Story of the Grail who, in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s version of the legend, is wounded in the genitals by a spear. The wound will not heal and the kingdom is laid waste. Encountering the maimed Fisher King Percival fails to ask the question that would heal the wound
and restore the health of king and kingdom. The Fisher King is a symbol of sexual anxiety and a metaphor for the decay of societies and civilizations: In 1922 he fishes in the Thames of T. S. Eliot’s London – the ‘unreal city’ of *The Waste Land*. This is not to suggest that allegory is uppermost in the mind of Sarah Lucas when she starts to make a sculpture, far from it, but on more than one occasion she has said that there is a lot of content in her work. There is evidence enough of her interest in Arthurian legend, it resonates elsewhere in *Sarah Lucas: Ordinary Things*. Where did we last see the two giant concrete marrows currently gracing the austere modernist façade of the Henry Moore Institute? As an element of ‘Percival’ (2006) the sculpture installed at the Snape Maltings in Suffolk.

Sarah Lucas has been referred to as the ‘sleeper’ (in the sense of a secret agent) of the group of artists that found fame in 1990s Britain, shunning the limelight, deepening the work:21 I’d put that idea a different way and call her its Merlin.

---

1 Audiotape of the lecture made in 1999 by the University of Leeds, currently held in the archives of the Henry Moore Institute.
6 *Unit One: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture*, p.10.
9 *Penetralia* by Sarah Lucas and Julian Simmons, 1998.
12 Introduction to the *New Aspects of British Sculpture* exhibition at the 26th *Venice Biennale* in 1952.
16 Adrian Stokes, quoted in Anne Wagner *Mother Stone* p.156.
17 *Sarah Lucas Exhibitions and Catalogue Raisonné* 1989-2005, p. 120.
18 Transcribed from *Two Melons and a Stinking Fish*.
19 *Penetralia* artist’s book by Sarah Lucas and Julian Simmons, p. 7.

This article has been downloaded from the Henry Moore Institute’s collection of Online Papers and Proceedings at www.henry-moore.org/hmi. Copyright remains with the author. Any reproduction must be authorised by the author.
Contact: research@henry-moore.org