The Problem of Originality in the Work of Sarah Lucas

Known for her crude, sexual, and satirical assemblage sculptures and photographs, generally featuring genitalia or other sexually explicit elements, Sarah Lucas is one of the most brazenly idiosyncratic artists to emerge from England in the 1990s. Arising during the punk and grunge scene of London, she is known for her shameless and wild persona, represented both in her art and appearance. She once stated, “I took very seriously the idea of art being unique.” In contrast, there are recognizable similarities in her work to that of artists of previous decades. While her seemingly genuine bad-girl attitude aligns with her work, after delving into her extensively inconsistent portfolio, one may find that her work is not as original as she claims, which may be a work of art in itself.

Lucas was born in London in 1962 to an impoverished household and unhappily married parents. She attended London College of Printing and Goldsmiths College, graduating with a Fine Art degree in 1987. At Goldsmiths, Lucas befriended several artists that exhibited similar boisterous styles and values, later known as the Young British Artists, or YBAs. The friends exhibited together in the 1990s before gradually evolving into their own individual careers. Their scandalous works made a robust impact on the London art scene as punk culture began to fade and grunge style emerged, initiating a ripple of outwardly apathetic and inappropriate attitude in postmodern art. Lucas has affirmed on record that she does not think much in planning her work; she simply creates anything that will cause a bewildered and embarrassed response. In an interview
discussing her art regimen with The Independent, she explained, "It's not really a thinking thing for me. It's really my hands doing it more than my head." When asked about her crude sense of humor, she responded, "The embarrassment factor can be quite important because then you know you've touched a nerve, even with yourself."3 Her experimentation with seemingly unrelated objects is an homage to the earlier Dada movement, except they are almost entirely fueled on sexual innuendo. She works with considerably unremarkable materials such as nylon tights, boots, vegetables, cigarettes, furniture, and eggs and places them in erotic positions, makes them appear as flesh, or generally changes their entire manner in any number of ways, relying on her observations of society. She frequently tries to change her materials and approach, not wanting to be the “eggs person” or the “tights person.” Lucas is also adamant in arguing that her work is simply what she likes and is not a reflection of herself, but what she sees in the world around her.4

Lucas does not only rely on everyday objects; she also creates casts of her partner’s genitals. These casts imply less spontaneity than her other works, and contradict her argument that she does not place herself in her art; showcasing the penis of her partner and publicizing that fact, rather than utilizing the genitals of an anonymous donor, speaks to her desire to personalize her work. When questioned on her phallic emphasis, she simply responded that she creates penises because she does not have one. 5 For example, Oboddaddy 1 (2010) is a human-sized penis sculpture made of plaster and rubber, set on a pedestal almost half its height. Priapus (2013) is the name of the Greek god of fertility and male genitalia, as well as a hormone replacement for those who suffer from erectile dysfunction. The sculpture was created from cast plaster and concrete, featuring a large penis attached to a handle.
Lucas also creates self-portraits in satirically provocative poses, such as the attitude-laden *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996), a photograph featuring Lucas leaning back in a chair with her legs sprawled apart, two fried eggs covering her breasts, and a feisty facial expression, as if challenging the viewer to argue with her. *Human Toilet II* (1996) displays a nude, vulnerable Lucas sitting on a toilet in a small, cramped space, covering her body with the cistern of the toilet and gazing out of the window. It implies that she has become the toilet, a thing that you expel waste into. *Eating a Banana* (1990) comprises of a black and white photograph of Lucas with a banana placed mockingly seductive in her mouth and staring the viewer down out of the corner of her eyes. Again, she is challenging the viewer, raising questions on gender role reversal, as she appears androgynous with a short hairstyle, leather jacket, lack of makeup, and slack expression while performing a common sexual innuendo in pop culture. Gender reversal is a common theme in her work, often incorporating phallic appendages onto female forms or otherwise forcing the viewer to question the role placed on the subject, driving a theme of ambiguity.

In fact, Lucas does not consider her femininity an important factor into her work. She does not fit under the textbook definition of feminine, in neither her butch appearance nor forthright persona. She feels that women try to fit into a certain stereotype to appropriate into their societal role as women, and she has no interest in it. Lucas appears to live an independent lifestyle with her partner, residing in a small town away from the bustle of London, sticking to her cottage and only leaving when she is ready to show her work. And yet, she claimed in an interview that “the idea of artists slaving away in isolation” has never appealed to her. 

Lucas is an artist rife with contradiction in a variety of ways. Indubitably, that could be what makes her so intriguing.
Critics and viewers alike have noticed Lucas’s inconsistencies and strong resemblances to artists of previous years. In considering her formal art education, one can assume that she has knowledge of artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Louise Bourgeois, and Pablo Picasso. Duchamp’s renowned *Fountain* (1917) readymade is a common reproduction of Lucas’s, as featured in *Is Suicide Genetic?* (1996), *The Old In Out* (1998), and *Cnut* (2004). The three compositions consist of toilets in different media. *Is Suicide Genetic?* is a color photograph depicting a toilet with the title handwritten inside the bowl with a thick, rust-colored substance reminiscent of excrement. It features a black seat with white flecks and no lid. The water directly under the text is brown, and the bowl appears to be stained. The floor of the bathroom is a grungy, dark brown concrete with flecks of white scattered around the surface. The wall consists of painted white brick and the toilet rests in a left-hand corner, so the joining of two walls is evident. The light source is directly overhead, made apparent through deep shadows under the toilet and inside the crevices of the bowl. *The Old In Out* is an installation of nine yellow, green, or brown cast polyurethane sculptures in the form of a lidless toilet placed around a room. *Cnut* features a concrete body cut off at the shoulders sitting on a stainless-steel toilet. In these, Lucas takes a basic, unremarkable object, like Duchamp, and transforms it into a jest, as if to contend, “If he can do it, why can’t I?” She pushes the context further by giving each one a satirical or expositional subject, forcing the viewer to consider vulnerability.

There are also strong resemblances between the work of Louise Bourgeois and Lucas. For example, Bourgeois’s *Fillette* (1968), an obviously fleshy phallic appendage hanging like a meat carcass, bears strong similarities to Lucas’s *Oboddaddy 1* (2010) and *Priapus* (2013), both blatant sculptures of penises. Lucas calls attention to the ambiguity or doubt in the subject matter of *Fillette* determining that doubt to be absurd. *Nice Tits* (2011) and the *Nud Cycladic series*
(2010) are reminiscent of Bourgeois’s *Le Trani Episode* (1971) in its exploration of organic, feminine forms. While *Trani* is made with bronze, *Tits* and *Nud* are created with soft, flesh-colored nylon stockings and stuffed with polyester fibers. *Trani* is also elegantly crafted while Lucas’s works are more grotesque and discomforting. Though both *Trani* and *Tits* may resemble breasts, Bourgeois’s appears more gracefully while Lucas’s are more brash and crude, pulled tight and repeated in varying sizes and shapes.

Lucas’s *Bunny Gets Snookered* series (1997) bears a conspicuous likeness to Picasso’s *Large Nude in a Red Armchair* (1929). The bizarrely distorted and mutated forms of *Snookered* almost seems like a three-dimensional version of Picasso’s work, with twisting limbs and fleshy forms. Lucas creates seven of these abnormal figures, implying a rowdy party grown out of control with two forms sitting on top of a pool table, in juxtaposition to the single form in Picasso’s work. Like the *Nuds*, the forms consist of polyester stuffing inside nylon stockings, but are featured in a variety of colors, including beige, brown, blue, and red. The legs of the stockings are also wearing thigh-high stockings. The forms are leaning back in a variety of chairs with two arms for heads. Lucas creates a colorful, darkly comedic and grotesque scene similar to Picasso’s uncomfortable portrait.

Curator Martin Prinzhorn argued that, “There is scarcely one work by [Lucas] that does not recall to the mind of the observer something already made in the history of art.” However, when asked in an interview of her influences, Lucas remarked, “I don’t really have heroes. I take an interest in a lot of people and things. But I pick them up and put them down. I’d be hard pushed to trace influences as I don’t keep a record of any sort – only what can be read into the work, and that could be down to you.” Despite this quote, the striking resemblance of Lucas’s sculptures and photographs to works of other famous artists appears to be deliberate. She
reproduces the outer subject matter of other artists and places a bizarre twist on them, attacking both the viewer and the art world as if to question its validation as fine art. Her tendency to replicate and evolve other satirical, assertive, or confrontational works such as the aforementioned artists is, in itself, a proof of further ridicule, as if to ask, “Is this bizarre enough to be fine art yet?” She removes and transforms the notability of legendary art into a mockery, attacking the art world for their over-absorption of avant-garde, forcing derisive, innovative, or otherwise scintillating oeuvres to become standard, solemn, garden-variety museum work. The irony of this, of course, is that her work has been featured in museums such as Tate Britain, though this is a further passive aggressive attack against curators and museum visitors, that she can noticeably poke fun at art but still infiltrate its scene.

One might argue that all artists are influenced by other artists, raising the question of whether art can be purely original at all. Lucas herself admitted that she is inspired by many people but does not keep a record of her influences. Because of her denial of satirizing famous works, one may consider that she does it subconsciously, superficially coming up with concepts or subjects on her own that she does not actively recall belonging to other artists. While it may appear a coincidence that many of her works appear like those of renowned artists, it is a known detail that she earned a degree from an art college where she was compulsorily exposed to art history. To say that she did not know of these artists would be an erroneous assumption. Under this conjecture, Lucas is openly rejecting her formal training, considering the rigidity of the traditional art world an absurdity.

Lucas considers imitating art to be an art form itself. This is often seen in varying degrees of contemporary work, from such artists as Kehinde Wiley, Banksy, and Sherrie Levine. Kehinde Wiley’s renditions of traditional motifs and decorative patterns highlight the disjunction
of African Americans in historical fine art. For example, *Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps* (2005) is clearly based on the Jacques-Louis David painting, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1801), with a contemporary black male sitting on the same horse from the original painting.

Banksy has been a prevalent anonymous street artist in the past few decades. He combines satire and political activism with dark humor, as seen in *Dismaland* (2015), starkly contrasting with the well-known Disneyland in California. He also created *Girl With a Pierced Eardrum* (2014), a play on Johannes Vermeer’s *Girl With a Pearl Earring* (1665), an almost identical development spray-painted on a wall but featuring an ADT security alarm over the pierced hole of the ear.

Sherrie Levine places emphasis on the notion of originality by photographing published photographs by male artists, essentially pilfering the work of others to make a statement. She publicly acknowledges that her work is not original, but that it remains art because it bursts with attitude, stressing that they transform into a feminist work of power.  

While Lucas may not be as extreme an imitator as Levine, the same question may be asked for all of these artists: Is it better to publicly acknowledge that one is paying an homage to a work of art, or is it better to take an initially preconceived composition and twist it into a satire of its original form without admitting it? And does it matter? Coincidently, Lucas’s fellow YBA and colleague Damien Hirst has been criticized in recent years for plagiarizing several of his most well-known works. In 2006, he was quoted, “Lucky for me, when I went to art school we were a generation where we didn’t have any shame about stealing other people’s ideas. You call it a tribute.” As Lucas attended Goldsmiths at the same time as Hirst, it would seem plausible that she would embrace the same philosophy. In response to the issue of Hirst, art lawyer Henry Lydiate argued, “In the visual arts, it became customary practice to make explicit reference – hommage à – in the title of a new work to an earlier artist or work that served as inspiration or
influence; as a mark of respect or indebtedness, and/or as a clue or context.” After all, in the words of Picasso, “bad artists copy; good artists steal.”

Lucas is not plagiarizing; she is simply making her statement known on the irrationality of the art world by out-bizarring the bizarre. As Lydiate stated, countless contemporary artists reference works of the past in respect. Lucas is different in this manner in that she is condemning, not necessarily the art itself, but its public reception. Though she has become financially successful through her public delivery and is featured in galleries in multiple countries, she feels guilty about earning money for what she does. She lives in a modest cottage in the countryside of Suffolk with no neighbors in sight, and does not have a studio; she simply works wherever she finds room. She believes that art should be a private matter, something created either alone or with friends but not placed on a pedestal.

Whether she is reproducing to mock the art world or whether it is purely anecdotal, it is clear that Lucas is a thought-provoking artist. She would struggle in her oeuvre if she did not rely on the influence of others for the base of her works. Of course, this might be true for all artists; after all, what would art be if it were not shared with others? While she does maintain a steady level of satire and context throughout her portfolio, her inconsistencies in media, process, and subject matter and her contradictory beliefs make her a complex public enigma. For this reason, the people that admire her work are the very people she is mocking, as if they are looking through a two-way mirror and missing the joke. This becomes an art in itself as a master of manipulation. After all, when journalist Christina Patterson asked Lucas if she considered her art original, she responded, “I think so. Yes. I suppose I do.”
Notes

3 Patterson.
4 Ibid.
6 Cooper, 116.
9 Ibid.
12 Patterson.
Bibliography


