Tracey Emin's Interest in Mysticism
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The only thing I am, really-well read in... is mysticism: moving into other dimensions through the understanding of time and space, whether its levitation or astral projection. It's the only thing I have ever studied with any interest...

-Tracey Emin, 1997

She is the messenger and her medium is herself: the biographical details of her working class background, her experiences as a sick child, her fear of ghosts, her musings over love, and her triumph as one of the most recognized artists in England. Tracey Emin's celebrity now reaches outside the inbred world of the Young British Artist phenomenon. Since her achievement of being short-listed for the 1999 Turner Prize, Emin has found an audience that transcends art world boundaries. Even as she utilizes the highly personal and private voice of a contemporary female artist in much of her work, Emin elsewhere appropriates the decidedly feminine performance strategies of the Victorian clairvoyant, who was permitted to transgress the gender boundaries of English society by ‘being a lady.’

Manifested in all its rules of propriety, being a lady was a persona characterized by personal passivity and formalized rituals of interpersonal decorum. Acting as such, Emin is able to ‘channel’ the power of a female voice to create a unified oeuvre – using her interest in late 19th and early 20th century manifestations of the paranormal to define a universal, and gender-less, soul. Emin’s performance of esoteric rituals, and their incorporation into a complex media matrix, reflects the philosophical theories and thoughts historically associated with mysticism. Mysticism informs Emin’s aesthetic, signifying a strategy of resistance, whether intentional or not, to the canon of the spiritual in modern art that has been predominantly defined by male artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian.

Critics have commented on the widely variable elements in Emin's work, which ranges from crafty appliqué blankets to textual works of written confession. Among these voices is that of Roberta Smith, who suggests that ‘stylistically, it ricochets between various Post-Minimalist conventions, early feminist art and installation art.’ If superficially Emin's work fails to adhere to expectations of a uniform style, it does exhibit amazing consistency in its exploration of mysticism. Emin has given “testimonials” in many interviews, between 1995 and her most recent show at White Cube2 in 2001, narrating a childhood in a
family psychically connected to, and with a solid faith in the powers of the paranormal. From her earliest years, Emin was imbued with an empirical understanding of the otherworld as she was frequently included in traditional spiritualist practices ordained by female role models. Her mother is reported to have conducted seances regularly in her home. In fact, her “mum” still owns the original Formica table under which Emin took shelter from unsavory spirits, a piece of furniture that remains 'special' due to its purported psychometric properties. Similarly, Emin recalls that her grandmother possessed psychic powers and still makes visitations to Emin to bring her comfort during times of unease. Emin is not embarrassed by such visions, nor does she keep them secret; she explicitly shares her understanding of this superior knowledge with many contemporary art world nihilists. In a recent interview in Frieze, Emin initiates the unknowing reader to the world beyond. ‘People imagine that they see the dead because they really want to, but it isn't quite like that. You miss people, you have to see them, and you are desperate to know what happened. So sometimes you feel them or imagine that they're sitting there. You see it, you sense it and then it's gone.’

Psychic connections extended outside her immediate family and manifest themselves in several of her works. Her Uncle Colin, who was said also to have possessed psychic powers, was decapitated whilst holding a pack of cigarettes when his Jaguar crashed. The assemblage Uncle Colin, 1997, first installed at the South London Gallery, is recognizably a type of memento mori in which Emin preserves his memory, with a golden Benson & Hedges packet displayed alongside a photograph of her uncle while he was still alive, seen proudly smiling, standing next to his car. What is not immediately evident however, is that the work represents an act of spiritual transmutation. Emin intended it to be a 'conscious' engagement with alchemical ideas: the ancient practice of transforming base elements into precious metal, or transforming ‘the individual into spiritual gold' - to achieve salvation, perfection, longevity, or immortality.' Thus, at the moment of impact, as Uncle Colin’s Benson and Hedges packet was transformed into the material properties of gold - ‘like real gold' as Emin says - his body transmuted into the immaterial properties of the immortal soul. Emin’s inclusion of this work within a major solo exhibition rested upon her confirmed belief in spirituality as necessary to art. Uncle Colin therefore becomes more than a ceremonial object. Emin bestows the everyday materials of her uncle's existence - the commodified cigarette packet and the photograph - with the aura of high art by placing it within the sanctity of an art gallery. Her more recent work, Reading Keys (1999), which she recorded in Cyprus with her boyfriend Matt Collishaw, suggests that initiates do not have to be blood relatives, just believers. The six-minute video casts Emin in the role of both her mother and grandmother, acting as the family soothsayer as she reads Collishaw's door keys, at which direction he promptly gets 'recut' to fit their relationship.

Although some critics have intimated how mysticism and the esoteric fit into Emin's art, many have disregarded its consistent presence in her oeuvre. Susan Corrigan noted that the central subject of the exhibition 'I Need Art Like I Need God' ‘draws on ideas inspired by fantasy - Ouija boards, imaginary conversations with Kurt Cobain, star crushes.’ Yet Corrigan failed to recognize that even if pure fantasy, it is a fantasy Emin consciously pursues with the devotion demanded by
religion. For instance, a year after the closure of her ‘The Shop’ in 1995, which Emin ran with her best friend and fellow yBA star, Sarah Lucas, she continued to explore esoteric practices through rituals held at her public space, The Tracey Emin Museum. In an unpublished interview, Emin reveals how she would get drunk at night, blindfold herself and allow images and text to come to her, recording these impressions on paper without interfering with the automatic process she employed. Emin described to me another ritual where she would ‘imagine’ the faces of all the dead people she had known, blindly drawing her mental images and sometimes even ‘feeling someone hold her hand’.

If these performative ‘acts’ of clairvoyance and works involving psychic processes in Emin’s early oeuvre appear inconsequential, or merely an ironic postmodern play on ideas of the occult, there is significant information to counter such skepticism. The historian of comparative religion, Hal Bridges, defines mysticism as the ‘selfless, direct, transcendent, unitive experience of God or ultimate reality, and the experient’s interpretation of the experience’. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Emin answered his question of why her works do not look religious thus, ‘I am not religious in terms of being christened or whatever; I don't believe in that kind of thing... I like the idea of all things connecting...’ ‘Pantheism?’ Obrist asked. ‘Yes... So when you think about the world and its structure and everything, all things connect.’ The pantheist experient, often discussed in the mystical writings of the German Romantics and Symbolists, is someone who ‘regards the oneness that characterizes mystical experience as the ultimate reality,’ and that ‘ultimate reality may be denoted as God, the One, Brahma, nirvana,’ depending on the culture specific to that of the mystic.

In 1992, instead of pursuing her artistic career, Emin took a job as a tutor of young adults with Southwark Council. It was then, as she subsequently noted in an interview, that she took a philosophy course at Birkbeck College, ‘And suddenly my brain, it was like doing exercises in a gym and your muscles waking up. It was brilliant’. However, it took several years for such brilliance to ferment and materialize, as Emin made no art that embodied such philosophical concerns until after she opened ‘The Shop’ with Lucas in 1993. Emin’s enlarged philosophical preoccupations were nicely summarized in a joint installation made with Lucas, From Army to Armani, 1993, shown at the Galerie Analix in Geneva. The ephemeral work featured two director-style chairs around a table covered by a coloured umbrella, their backs draped with black tee-shirts stenciled in white ‘God is Dad,’ and ‘Nietzsche is Dead.’ Two large-scale photographs showing Emin and Lucas standing in front of their shop were mounted on the wall behind the installation, providing evidence to confirm that, yes, it was at this site where they, the ‘experients’, contemplated the metaphysical and interpreted their existential experience. Although it conceals her renewed concern with the spiritual beneath a glib surface, From Army to Armani attests to the importance of Emin's philosophical studies, including her interest in the writings of Spinoza, the Dutch philosopher whose publications such as Ethics, 1677, espoused theories that questioned a Calvinist materiality of God. Central to the formulation of Romantic pantheistic thought, Spinoza’s ideas were recognized by Nietzsche as being formative to his notions of the self. Thus, the installation not only examines the history of questions concerning the eternal spirit - it also makes a larger statement surrounding the commodification of spirituality. After Nietzsche's death, the development of a capitalistic culture could make art act as a commodity. Moreover, with God
being present in all creation - even Dad - the backs of souvenir tee-shirts could act as pulpits for a pantheistic belief through mass-marketed slogans.

Given Emin's interests in mysticism, it is unsurprising that she was attracted to works by Edvard Munch from a very young age, acknowledging him as one of her most important aesthetic influences. Munch came under the influence of mysticism when he moved to Berlin in 1882, hopeful of finding international recognition and instead finding himself amid some of the most influential European thinkers at the end of the nineteenth century. As Carla Lathe has noted, Munch's opening exhibition at the Verein Berliner Kunstler in 1892 caused a scandal, and his work was embraced by a group of radical literati and dissident artists who debated, published, and wrote on topics concerning satanism, spiritualism, and Theosophy. August Strindberg and other avant-garde writers, such as the Swedish critic Ola Hansson, the German critic Franz Servaeas, and the doctor Stanislaw Pryzbyszewski, frequently met to discuss their interests in mysticism, the occult and Nietzschean philosophy at the bar Zum schwarzen Ferkel (The Black Piglet), becoming Munch's closest friends and influences in Berlin until his departure in 1903. Pryzbyszewski, a medical student at that time, formulated his own theories regarding 'synesthesia', which hypothesized that vibrations of the brain could create projections between two minds. These formed 'auras' and 'thought waves' could create invisible bridges between two people. Ola Hansson introduced Munch to Nietzsche's writing, emphasizing his call for an art, which would 'Rausch,' or produce a frenzy, and eventually Munch became an admirer of the philosopher as well as a beneficiary of Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche. In addition, Munch accepted Emanuel Swedenborg's theories regarding auras, which he believed could be seen around people, and reaffirmed such ideas by reading related texts, including Spiritualism and Animism, 1890, by Aleksandr Akzasakov. So closely aligned was Munch with these mystical thinkers that he is known to have exhibited several paintings, including The Kiss and The Scream, at the studio of Hilma af Klint. A Swedish portrait painter who discovered abstraction through the writings of Blavatsky, Besant, and Leadbeater, Klimt established a Spiritualist group of women. Under the direction of spirit guides and with the aid of a psychographic recorder, the group experimented with automatic drawing as a means of artistic expression. As Bernard Smith establishes, Theosophy, spiritualism, and anthroposophy were integral to the formulation of the modern esthetic during the early twentieth century, especially in Germany, Russia, and Vienna.

The most obvious means by which Emin fashions herself and her work in the tradition of male modernist artists such as Munch is by creating an oeuvre of personal confession, situating her life and body as its source, its corpus. Munch's work is often critically discussed in terms of his biography, especially his magnum opus The Frieze of Life, an installation that included The Voice, 1893, The Vampire, 1893, The Scream, 1893, and others, which he initiated in 1893 and exhibited in various arrangements until the late 1920s. These works have been subject to continual interpretation as a reflection of Munch's struggles with the deaths of his mother and favorite sister while a teenager, the trauma associated with unrequited love affairs, his 'madman' reputation within conservative art circles, and his struggle with alcoholism. Arne Eggum's appraisal of Munch is not so remote from the headlines that surrounded Emin's flurry of success. She has been nicknamed 'Mad Tracey from Margate' - her reputation appliquéd into history by her own hand in the blanket, Mad Tracey From Margate, Everyone's Been There, 1997. Emin clearly takes a cue from Munch's tumultuous life, making the 'story' of her life into a narrative art of which the tabloids cannot get enough, and which Emin continues to exploit through her lucrative adverts for Becks Beer and Bombay Sapphire gin. In a video entitled Curriculum Vitae, 1995, Emin visually catalogues every detail of her apartment whilst reciting her entire life story in the form of a résumé. The viewer is exposed to all the particulars of Emin's life, from the
intimacies of her rumpled bed to the trash in her bathroom, becoming a voyeuristic witness of the stuff of her life, which is paramount to her art. Where Emin carefully manipulates Munch's art of personal confession is in her inversion of its gender. She substitutes the life of the male 'genius' with the experiences of a woman artist, her successful career regaled in a first-person female voice.

Emin not only redefines Munch's public persona, rhetoric and confessional style, she also redraws his aesthetic, which vacillated from romantic symbolism to raw expressionism. Perhaps no work acknowledges Emin's conscious debt to Munch's mystical works and ideals more profoundly than her video Homage to Edvard Munch and All My Dead Children, 1999. A two-minute work that Emin filmed in Norway on the docks near Munch's studio serves as the ending to the continuous reel of videos. Often mislabeled The Scream, after Munch's canonical painting, the video captures Emin curled face-down, lit from above by a full moon. The camera tilts down the side of the dock, recording light reflecting off the water's surface, twinkling in a random pattern, whilst the viewer's equanimity is punctured by the shriek of Emin's scream. The wailing continues as the camera tilts upward to the dark sky, the glimmering water evanescing into a blinding oval in the shape of a distorted sunspot. The video ends with a full screen shot of the sun, an image reminiscent of those in Leadbeater's and Besant's Thought Forms. The pain of Munch's scream, its expression no longer limited to the silence of pigment and color, is rendered real, its veracity confirmed through Emin's personal experience. Furthermore, Emin makes esoteric theosophist teachings visible by recording the transformation of matter through its etheric stages. In The Ancient Wisdom, 1897, Besant charts the transformation of the basic chemical elements through 'etheric stages', which begins with the most solid form - physical matter - and ends in the fourth form - an image of oval energy. Allegorically, Emin's video charts a journey of the universal soul from the material depths of the woman's womb to the metaphysical heights of the sky.

Though some critics, as well as Emin herself, might question this rewriting of Munch's spiritualism as not purely feminist, Emin's work is neither fixedly polemical nor simply 'pure'. However, as Alex Owen has shown, Victorian women who participated within Spiritualism were not consciously enacting a feminist programme; their agreement to 'play' the role of the medium, whether authentic or fraudulent, was voluntary - and more important, resisted dominant constructions of femininity. A similar strategy of resistance consistently manifests itself in Emin's work from her early career to the present, finding its expression in a wide variety of media. With Emin's rearticulation of Munch's visual and rhetorical techniques through the voice and body of female experience, his avant-garde, spiritual works and principles are recast. Emin uses art history as a portal to aesthetic power and the modernist artist as her camouflage. What better medium to actualize her voice than Munch's legacy? By inheriting the established role from the female medium of the Victorian era, where experience was the focus of mystical and occult concern, Emin repositions the ambiguous status of the female artist into the center of contemporary aesthetics.

Tracey Emin's work is being featured at the Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York City.
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Tracey Emin, CBE, RA (/ˈɛmən/; born 3 July 1963) is an English artist known for her autobiographical and confessional artwork. Emin produces work in a variety of media including drawing, painting, sculpture, film, photography, neon text and sewn appliqué. Once the "enfant terrible" of the Young British Artists in the 1980s, Tracey Emin is now a Royal Academician of the Royal Academy of Arts. Tracey Emin catapulted into public consciousness in the 1990s. With her came controversy, individuality and absolutely no-fucks-given, and she’s remained a figurehead of the British art scene since. From tents adorned with the appliquéd names of everyone she ever slept with to the infamous installation of her post-break up bed presented as it was after several weeks of drinking, smoking, eating, sleeping, having sex and spiralling into a breakdown. Of course, an artist cannot control their reputation and exposure when they’re gone; however, when interest in an artist spikes after their death, as has occasionally been the case, it naturally helps if things have been put in place to push things in the direction of their choosing.