



# Emma Hart

Camden Arts Centre / July — September 2013  
File Note #80 Emma Hart *Dirty Looks*



Clipboard (detail from *Dirty Looks*) 2013  
Ceramic / Courtesy the artist



Clay Napkins (detail from *Dirty Looks*) 2013  
Ceramic / Courtesy the artist

Kathy Noble

# Dirty Looks

*'Life is a cut-up. As soon as you can walk down the street your consciousness is being cut by random factors. The cut-up is closer to the facts of human perception than linear narrative.'*  
William S. Burroughs<sup>1</sup>

*'The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical; art was an instrument of ritual. ... The earliest theory of art, that of Greek philosophers, proposed that art was mimesis, imitation of reality.'* Susan Sontag<sup>2</sup>

Perception is individual; no-one can ever fully experience the precise viewpoint(s) of another person. Yet, the notion of collective experience has been socially and politically important for centuries, used as a tool to frame, or represent, 'universal' ideas in order to encourage a form of mass identification in all realms of life—from a fickle advert for anti-aging cream to complex considerations of class, race and identity. Therefore, what is 'real' and what is 'represented' can become binary propositions, particularly within contemporary photography and image making. Jacques Lacan's notion of the 'real'—an inherent, authentic truth that we all experience, and that cannot be expressed via language—is a preoccupation for artist Emma Hart, born from the frustration of rarely finding, or recognising this 'real' within art, particularly in what she describes as the 'serene' tradition of contemplative gallery-going.

Before studying photography at Croydon College, Hart worked in a call centre and these dual experiences have influenced her greatly.

<sup>1</sup> William S. Burroughs quoted in Synne Genzmer 'Cut-up or Out of Control On William S. Burroughs and His Art' in Colin Fallows and Synne Genzmer (eds) *Cut-Ups, Cut-Ins, Cut-Outs: The Art*

*of William S. Burroughs* (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 2012), p.32.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013), p.5.

Hart describes photography as a ‘neat’ and ‘polite’ medium that is harnessed by consumerism to ‘cut the world into segments’ in order for us to be able to consume them easily in bite-size portions. This serves to sanitise the content of the image and protects us from the ‘real’ in life—the embarrassing, messy, sometimes disgusting and chaotic world that we occupy and where daily tasks we perform (such as going to the supermarket or getting the bus) are a kind of sensory bombardment that can be extremely stressful or overwhelming. Photography instantly frames and therefore to some extent aestheticises this, removing any sense of contact or immediacy. Hart originally began working with photography and video in an attempt to change the way we consume imagery, in order to ‘disrupt the visual rhetoric and smoothness’ of photography. The work presented in *Dirty Looks* aims to address this experience of everyday embarrassment as a political position, in an attempt to demand more ‘life out of art’.

The ‘merging of art and life’ as artist Allan Kaprow termed it, has many historical examples; from early Dada, 1960s happenings, art as a form of activism in the 1970s and 1980s, via relational aesthetics in the 1990s, artists have created experiences that are simultaneously both artwork and ‘real’ life. This type of performed situation is pertinent in relation to Hart’s interest in what she describes as the ‘performance of rhetoric’ in real-life situations, such as the call centre she worked in—where conversations are scripted, serving to frame and control the experience in a similar way to how a photograph frames a moment in the lens. However, Hart’s interest in the relationship between art and life is the antithesis of the somewhat Utopian world of Kaprow’s ‘real-life’ situations. As writer and spoken word performer William S. Burroughs describes, a linear narrative, or photographic representation, can never reflect the multiple sensations occurring simultaneously in our lives. It is this attempt to create a fuller experience of reality through fractured experience that underlies Hart’s combination of sculpture, sound and image in *Dirty Looks*.

*Dirty Looks* is filled with tongues. The tongue is symbolic for Hart, as it is both an internal and external body part, reflecting her ongoing interest in the (increasingly blurred) boundary between private and public. In the same way that the call centre or service industries have become a public intrusion into one’s personal life, photography captures private moments to be made public (YouTube and other similar websites have made this kind of ‘performance’ of the ‘self’ frighteningly ubiquitous). Hart’s tongues are ceramic, made from fired, glazed and painted clay. However, Hart has never previously worked with clay. She stumbled upon the

medium whilst doing a residency at Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridgeshire. Quite literally, as soon as she laid her hands on it, she knew it was a material she needed to use and began to experiment with making different forms—the first of which was a tongue. As such, she is self-taught and the resulting forms are, in some ways, naïve and brutal.

Yet this aesthetic is also purposeful: the tongues materially conjure the sense of embarrassment of the everyday that Hart is addressing. These tongues are also comical: shiny, mottled pink and lumpy; they are chubby, snake-like creatures, with lives of their own, purposefully inserting themselves into, and asserting their-selves out of, the objects in the room—as if screaming ‘Lick me!’, ‘Talk to me!’, ‘Eat me!’. Similarly, artist Paul Thek created multiple dismembered body parts during his life-time, such as the *Technological Reliquaries* series (1964–67). Casts of different parts of his body made in reaction to the controlled aesthetics of Minimalism’s use of ‘everyday’ industrial materials, he wanted to make something that conjured both desire and repulsion. The uncanny sensation evoked by Hart’s dismembered tongues—they are both grotesque and sexual—alongside their hand-made aesthetic, seems in opposition to the recent wave of slickly made sculpture inspired by the ‘flat’ digital world.

In *Dirty Looks* Hart mixes the language of exhibition display—plinths, frames and other strategies—with functional objects. For example, a cupboard with a set of water cooler taps has a long tongue-cum-shoe-horn lolloping out of it, as if vomiting it up. Amongst the sculptures appear different images. These include what Hart describes as ‘sexy nature’—a hysterical, glossy, over the top form of nature—and ‘spillages’. However, rather than presenting them as pure images these become objects, stuck to the ceramics, or supported by them. Hart’s interest in spillages arises from thinking about what she terms as ‘excess moments’ where something is split, said or done by accident, forming a ‘crack in the symbolic surface’ of the ‘real’. Alongside the images, this idea manifests itself via tongues bursting through trays, as if there to seep up spillages, thus avoiding stains. Hart sees stains as a similar form of ‘evidence’ to the photograph—the remains of something that has happened, but without the full details of what actually occurred.

Listening is a very different experience to looking; sound can be tuned out, forming white noise, or at least different layers become more or less distinguishable, as if our ears and brain are a radio tuning in and out of the channels around us. It is only since the advent of photography and broadcast that we are able to see multiple things concurrently via a lens. The creation of ‘immersive’ video works and environments by artists over the last few decades can be read as an attempt to enable the viewer



M20 Death Drives 2012 / Mixed media and video

to experience multiple situations simultaneously. Yet this seems akin to the deficit Lacan believes occurs when attempting to describe the 'real' by language. In opposition to this, Hart herself has used video and sound to create more fractured and confusing situations; for example in her previous work *M20 Death Drives* (2012) (which retraces a near-fatal car crash Hart experienced when she was eighteen) she presented a video complexly reflected and split across rear-view mirrors, unified by her narration. In *Dirty Looks* Hart also uses sound as a unifying device; drawers and cupboards containing partially concealed television monitors from which choking and coughing sounds emanate, again blur the boundary between public and private, and, like the tongue, is again a human presence without a body.

Susan Sontag begins her seminal essay, *Against Interpretation* (1962), describing art's early ritualistic purpose relationship to its later theorisation as a form of mimesis. This is relevant to Hart's work, in terms of art's relationship to the 'real' but also because she, more fundamentally, seems to be questioning the value, or purpose of art today. Yet, for me, art exists because it is an alternative 'real'; one that is the artist's own view or route through the world. As such, Hart's autobiographical experiences may have informed her work, but she consciously uses them as a critical tool; one that is in opposition to the constructed, thus supposedly normative, collective or universal experiences produced to be consumed.

Kathy Noble is a curator and writer based in London

**Emma Hart** (b. 1974, London) lives and works in London. She has presented solo exhibitions and performances in galleries in the UK and internationally. These include: *M20 Death Drives*, Whitstable Biennale, Whitstable (2012); *TO DO*, Matt's Gallery, London, Outpost, Norwich and CIRCA Projects, Newcastle (2011/12); *Word Processor*, Stanley Picker Gallery, London (2012); *Jam*, Cell Project Space, London (2011). Selected group projects and exhibitions include: *Nought to Sixty*, ICA, London (collaboration with Benedict Drew) (2008); *Performa 09*, New York (collaboration with Benedict Drew) (2009); *Reclaim the Mural*, Whitechapel Gallery (2011/13). Residencies include Camden Arts Centre (2009) and Wysing Arts Centre (2012). She received an MA in Fine Art from the Slade in 2004 and completed her PhD in Fine Art at Kingston University in 2013. In 2012 Hart was shortlisted for the Jerwood / Film and Video Umbrella Awards. Hart is currently shortlisted for The Jarman Award (2013).

#### Reading / Viewing List

- Kathy Acker *Blood and Guts in High School* Grove Press (1989)
- Georges Bataille *Story of the Eye* Penguin Books (2001)
- Samuel Beckett *Not I* [[http://www.ubu.com/film/beckett\\_not.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/beckett_not.html)]
- Bonnie Camplin <<http://www.ubu.com/film/camplin.html>>
- Louis-Ferdinand Céline *Journey to the End of the Night* Alma Classics (2012)
- Spartacus Chetwynd <<http://www.ubu.com/film/chetwynd.html>>
- Clark Coolidge (Ed.) *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations* University of California Press (2011)
- B.S. Johnson (Writer) *Fat Man on a Beach* [Broadcast on ITV] (1974)
- Franz Kafka *The Castle* Wordsworth Editions (2009)
- Stanley Kubrick (Dir.) *A Clockwork Orange* Warner Bros. (1971)
- Audre Lorde *The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* Kore Press (2000)
- Sarah Lucas, Angus Cook, Angus Fairhurst  
*Sarah Lucas: After 2005, Before 2012* Koenig Books (2012)
- Ann Quin *Three* Dalkey Archive Press (2001)
- Elisabeth Sussman, et al. *Paul Thek: Diver, A Retrospective* Whitney Museum of American Art (2010)
- Ryan Trecartin <<http://www.ubu.com/film/trecartin.html>>

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—Sample call centre script

‘How can you convey truth in a vehicle of fiction?’

—B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* (1973)

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*Best in Show* (detail from *Dirty Looks*) 2013  
Ceramic / Courtesy the artist