

GLADSTONE GALLERY

frieze

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

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Ideas of Place in the 56TH VENICE BIENNALE
SARAH LUCAS interviewed by Sarah Hall
SIMON DENNY / OLAF NICOLAI / DANH VO

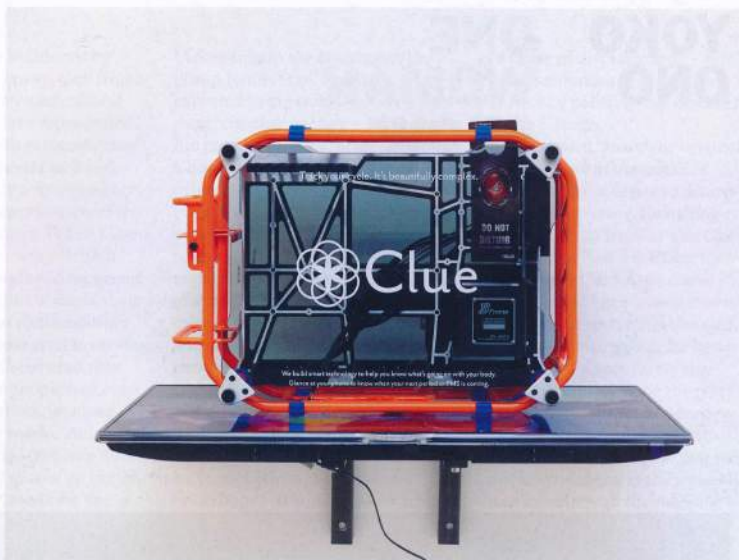


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Simon Denny
Berlin Startup Case Mod: Clue, 2014

Courtesy
the artist and Galerie Buchholz,
Berlin/Cologne

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A
NATURAL ELEGANCE



Novelist *Sarah Hall* talks to **Sarah Lucas** about sculpture, sexual politics and representing Britain at this year's Venice Biennale

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A few months ago, I visited Sarah Lucas's home and studio in Suffolk, where she was working on her new sculptures for the British pavilion at the Venice Biennale. As one of the most talented and provocative artists around, Lucas makes work that is unpredictable, intelligent and very funny. I was keen to have her thoughts on creativity, politics and British culture, and what it means to represent her country. We'd never met before, and I wasn't sure what to expect or what our conversation would reveal. My theory is that artists are often much more articulate and enlightening than writers when discussing their work, which might seem counter-intuitive, but frequently holds true. Certainly, Lucas was warmly generous with her answers. I came away moved to think even harder about the complexities and philosophies of her work, its relationship to place and the present, with the human body and mind and, in so doing, to think harder about my own.

SARAH HALL

Your sculptures recall a word a philosopher once told me about – 'contraspective': meaning two or more opposing things that work well together. Some of your work confronts me with my ideas about sexuality but it also pushes me in different directions: it resists being interpreted as purely feminist. Your works challenge what I think politically, but I also find them sexy and funny.

SARAH LUCAS

I once ran into someone I had been at college with in New York and he said: 'You must have such a bad view of sex to make these things.' It took me by surprise, but I think that, to a certain extent, I probably did – and still do – have a bad view. It's partly to do with all the stuff that surrounds us, in the tabloid newspapers or in sport. It's not that I'm trying to report that or adopt it as my kind of style; it's in the mix of the things I make. Although, sometimes the things

'I've always had the notion, because it seems so glaringly true, that a nice pair of tits goes down well.'

SARAH LUCAS

I make surprise me, because I don't think them up before I do them. Often they have an element of horror, although obviously I want to make things that have got some sort of power.

SH *Do you think there's a component in your sculpture that is, in a sense, reclaiming female sexuality in the same way that the word 'nigger' or 'cunt' have been claimed in order to diffuse their viciousness – to do something proactive with it and reverse its energy?*

SL Definitely. I have consciously thought that. I've always had this problem of explaining things too much or feeling that I need to justify things, because I grew up in an environment where people were endlessly arguing and being self-righteous. I even felt guilty about going to art college because it seemed a bit frivolous. At some point though, I thought, 'Well, I don't have to know the answer.' That was a very liberating moment: understanding that the power is in the power of the thing, not in me trying to be aggressive or being one way or the other. It gave me a kind of strength.

SH *When you use visual jokes and slang in your work, like the 'bucket fanny' in Au Naturel (1994), do you think there's a kind of reality to it that's lacking in some other forms of 'high' art? I mean, it's posed, classical even, but it has an everyday quality. It's like a joke from school.*

SL Yes, actually, jokes and slang tickle me and I enjoy them conversationally. They make a kind of cloud of ideas that keeps everything lively; it all falls into place between the object and what I actually decide to call it. Suddenly, each part completes all the others.

SH *I'm always asked, as a writer, if I decide upon the titles of my books first or if it's the other way around. If you're writing a novel, you're always thinking about the story. Are there narratives around pieces that you're working on, and do they alter? For example, your sculpture Unknown Soldier (2003) includes boots and a neon striplight and could be interpreted in a sexual way – as a cheap encounter, an erection – but it also reminds me of morgue lights: those really bright lights that you need when you're putting body parts together after someone's been blown up, say. Do such narratives go through your mind when you're making sculptures, or is it looser than that?*

SL I don't really start with a story, although, especially if I'm working on a body of work for an exhibition, once I've made a couple of pieces that I believe in, or that seem good, then I want to know who they are and how they relate to the other pieces. But it's not premeditated, it's something that evolves as I'm doing it. And I wouldn't be very convinced by a show unless I'd got to that point.

SH *I'm not going to ask you too much about your work for the Venice Biennale because I know you're after an element of surprise with the show, but how do you feel about representing Britain? I think you were one of the people who signed the letter against Scottish independence?*

SL I was, actually, although I have mixed feelings about it. I did that quite selfishly, because I like the idea of it being part of the United Kingdom. I even like the idea of a united Europe. I don't see divisiveness as really helping anything, although if I had been Scottish and had the chance to jettison English politics, I think I'd be very tempted. What do you think?

SH *Well, I don't know. I like the idea of an enlightened and better politics. I didn't find the idea of the vote very anti-English, although there were aspects of anti-Englishness to it.*

SL Well, you grew up quite close to Scotland, in Cumbria.

SH *I did. Things like land reform are important: Scotland is a place where big chunks of land are owned by very few people. So, it's extremely unequal. But, at the same time, Scotland generally has very left-wing or liberal politics. So, at some point, these two things have to start butting up against each other. I'm quite interested to see what the reforms would be.*

SL Yes, I hope we still get some.

SH *Are there any pressures on you in terms of representing Britain?*

SL I don't know if there are really, because it's entirely up to me what I do. On the other hand, it's like being in the Olympics or something. People often ask me if I consider myself a British artist, which I do and I don't. I just concern myself with the show. Do you feel like a British writer?

SH *I get asked a lot if I feel like a Cumbrian writer, and it's almost as if there's only one other writer from Cumbria, and that's William Wordsworth. It's like there's an exotic quality to being a rural writer now.*

Previous page left
Tit Teddy Rohan, 2013,
pantyhose, fluff, steel wire,
95 x 57 x 25 cm

Previous page right
Luvah, 2008,
plaster, steel wire, wood,
34 x 20 x 20 cm

Facing page
Diego (detail), 2014, pantyhose,
fluff, steel wire,
wooden table, bricks,
117 x 75 x 75 cm

Courtesy
the artist and Sadie Coles HQ,
London

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I don't consider myself to be one, but the literary world is so focused on London and the city, that if you're writing about Nottingham or Carlisle, there's an exoticism to you. It's ridiculous, really.

SL People ask me all the time if moving to the country changed my work, which I suppose it did, because circumstances always affect you. When I first came here, though, I didn't actually move lock, stock and barrel from London. This house was a weekend place. And when I started to really enjoy myself here, I thought I should try and make some stuff that is from here. So, with Julian [Simmons, Lucas's partner], I collected a lot of stones and sticks and things.

SH *What kind of stone?*

SL Just bits of flints; they're quite nice shapes. I had a show that was entirely made out of things like that and I was very scared about how it might go down, because I put a lot of willies in it as well.

SH *Well, they do exist everywhere.*

SL Yes, exactly. It seemed like an important threshold to go through.

SH *Do you find that you want to shrug off people's perceptions or assumptions? With literature, you're always pegged as something.*

SL Do I want to avoid getting pigeonholed? Yes. Even by myself. I've got a low boredom threshold. So many artists do the same thing for years and years, and they're known for it, but I've been very wary about that. I mean, it's the absolute opposite of my reason for wanting to get into art in the first place. I just wanted to do something interesting with a bit of freedom in it, really.

SH *Do you think that approach dictates the materials you choose to work with?*

SL Yes. If I've been using a certain material for a while – say I've been stuffing tights – the last thing I'll think is: 'Oh, I'll crack on with tights again.' I'll want to do something else. But that does, of course, open up quite a repertoire of different possible materials.

SH *What's that sound? Is that a peacock?*

SL It's the clock. It's got a different bird sound for every hour.

SH *Oh, OK! Apparently the Australian bushranger Ned Kelly had a peacock, because they're good guards. As soon as they hear anything, they become really noisy.*

SL There used to be one in the village for years. I think a fox got it in the end. But it was independent; nobody owned it. I don't know where it came from. It had

a bit of an affair at one time with a cock pheasant, although I don't know if he was gay. You'd see it in the road sometimes with all its feathers out.

SH *Oh, the pressure of being a peacock!*

SL Yes. [laughter]

SH *There were some peacocks in a wildlife park near my childhood home, and kids used to run around after them and try to tread on their tails to get a feather. It was really cruel. There were also wolves in an enclosure, which I loved.*

SL Oh, really?

SH *Yes, my new novel is about wolves and it's probably because of that cage in the wildlife park in the middle of Cumbria. It was bizarre, fascinating!*

SL They kind of suit the place, somehow, don't they?

SH *They do. The main character in my book is a wolf biologist originally from Cumbria. She's quite promiscuous and not too likeable at first, which has made some early readers uncomfortable. The question of women and sex and power is quite complex. British sexuality still has this reputation of being repressed while, at the same time, it seems as if everyone is desperate for a view of tits. I'm breastfeeding at the moment,*



'Despite the amount of women getting killed and all this stuff about paedophilia — in TV dramas and the news — if I put a penis in a gallery, well, that's shocking.'

SARAH LUCAS

and you become really aware of people looking at you and whether or not they're horrified by what you're doing, although obviously that's what tits are supposed to do. Your work makes me think hard about attitudes towards sex in this country.

SL For Venice, I've made some topless muses, but they're really topless: just half a body. A couple of years ago, I was making mostly things with tits, after making a lot of knob sculptures. I've always had the notion, because it seems so glaringly true, that a nice pair of tits always goes down well. I actually started it when I was doing a show with the art collective Gelatin, who are four blokes. And I thought: 'What am I going to do with them?' So I decided to be super feminine and I started making things with tits. I like playing about with those kinds of things. In terms of sexuality, well, I don't know. I think this whole bimbo look that everyone's aspiring to — the plastic surgery and celebrity thing — whenever you watch telly or read magazines, it all seems to be about that. And when I was actually thinking a bit more about feminist issues in the 1990s, the early '90s especially, I didn't really expect it to go the way it has gone. Did you?

SH *No! It's almost like we're being tricked into buying more products. I mean, fair enough, spend money on whatever you want to, that's fine. But it does seem like a roll-back.*

SL Whatever you want to do with your appearance is also fine: you know, everyone wants to look nice. But if the majority of people decide to look like bimbos then, increasingly, if you don't, you supposedly don't look nice, because everybody's point of view is so adjusted to that. And it's weird.

SH *Apparently, with plastic surgery, the ideal look for a woman is meant to be about 35. And, although surgery has supposedly advanced, you can always tell when someone's had something done. It's horrible, because there's no expression left on the woman's face.*

SL And it's all about sex; gigantic lips are all about provoking people sexually. Apparently you can't look at someone without sex being on the table, but I think it's a myth. I've always had a deep-seated reservation about sex. I was very reserved about everything

when I was a child, and very easily embarrassed. For some bizarre reason, I always felt responsible for everything — even if something just happened to come on the telly. I had this kind of antenna about it, and I still use it when I'm making art, to work out what might be provocative or what isn't. We're bombarded with this stuff all the time. I find it weird and get so tired of it. If you look at women's magazines, it's page after page of women with their mouths open just a little bit.

SH *It's a slack, kind of semi-ecstatic look. I don't know what it is, but it makes women look stupid. Of course, now we're meant to be able to discuss sex in Britain, as though we've been liberated. But when you crack open all these things, really it just comes down to the fact that because we can, say, talk about anal sex, then girls are expected to do it.*

SL And not only that, there's the endless fascination with what I call 'ordinary pervery', as opposed to 'classic pervery', which might be tickling the cheek with a flower. One of the nice things about making art, and I imagine about writing, is that it's an opportunity to be objective, because you've got something separate that you can look at. And I think that's also the purpose of reading or looking. I've seen people become very self-conscious in front of some of my sculptures — partly because the gallery is a public space and partly because they suddenly realize they're surprised by it. Despite the amount of women getting killed and all this stuff about paedophilia — in TV dramas and the news — if I put a penis in a gallery, well, that's shocking.

SH *I know. Even the possibility of the male equivalent of a Sun newspaper 'Page Three Girl' hardly ever seems to be discussed. You're not expected, as a woman, to want to look at the male form, really. And, of course, women do. I mean, I'd love to see a cock on page four every day.*

SL Or even a hairy bum!

SH *Even a hairy bum. And I'm all for book covers of men but the publishers just will not allow it, not even a lovely nude male back.*

SL And they won't have hairiness either.

SH *Apparently, women like to look at women and women buy books, so that's the audience they're going for. A man, a naked man, is supposedly not going to work as a cover.*

SL It's totally weird. There's a long way to go, I suppose. I very rarely buy newspapers or watch the news. But it's funny, it doesn't matter how tragic the news has been, there's always a nice story at the end.

SH *The donkey that got liberated!*

SL I think it would be better if it was a pair of tits, just this little thing at the end of the news that cheers everyone up. It's weird what's acceptable. Conventional society doesn't actually see what the conventions are: they're not questioned. It's like we're not aware that there are even rules. We assume that this is the natural way of things, when it isn't. It's quite a deliberate structure, really.

SH *In my novel The Carhullan Army (2007), there's a woman who ends up being a soldier; I discovered that it's troubling for an audience to read about a female soldier at the moment, because we don't expect them to be on the front line. And women are generally considered to be milder, as if they don't have it in them to kill.*

SL It's so much to do with expectations and training. I mean, there is the obvious thing of having or not having a knob, but what does that mean? If I don't do any gardening or don't ride a bike for years, then the first time I do it, it makes me ache; if I do it every day, it doesn't. I'm constantly asked if I'm a feminist and it's such a tricky question to answer because I always get the sense that whoever's asking it knows exactly what they mean by it, which might not be what I mean by it. We've got a few more women at the top and more opportunities for women but, largely, things haven't changed. Take what you're supposed to wear. Men are never subject to the same kind of scrutiny. All the women on TV totter around on heels; it's just ludicrous! None of them is allowed to be anything other than a certain age, wearing make-up and fitted clothes.

Eros, 2013,
cast concrete and crushed car,
1.3 × 2.7 × 1 m

Courtesy
the artist and Gladstone
Gallery, New York

'It can be quite useful to make something that people dislike, because they sort of need it. What is or isn't beautiful is arguable.'

SARAH LUCAS

- SH** *I'm not quite sure how to frame this question, but I was thinking about it on the way here. I'm told that I'm a really disturbing writer, although I feel that I'm still a slave to beauty. I suppose you must be thinking about the aesthetics of space and how it all works when you're constructing something. The relationship between beauty and aesthetics is obviously a complicated one. Sometimes, I feel like I want to shrug it off completely and just be an ugly writer, but that would mean horrible sentences.*
- SL** There are definitely needs I have to satisfy, whether it's a certain elegance or how a sculpture sits with itself. I always want each object to be very self-contained, to stand up for itself, to be good in itself. That's tremendously important. I mean, you can make ugly sculptures that have power; I think it can be quite useful to make something that people can dislike, because they sort of need it. What is or isn't beautiful – whether it's a sentence or a sculpture – is arguable. As an artist, I have to satisfy myself, although often I make something that you wouldn't expect to be beautiful. And that is quite empowering.
- SH** *With language, it's certain sounds that affect people. It's not just about the image or the content, it's about the sound of a sentence, particularly with poetry. That's going to affect someone and do whatever it does – stir them up.*
- SL** There are things that a material will do quite naturally, and there are things you have to force it to do. Generally speaking, forcing the material to do something results in an ugly or contrived object, whereas what the material actually wants to do has its own natural elegance. And I tend to stay on the side of that most of the time.
- SH** *On the natural elegance side?*
- SL** Yes.
- SH** *I read an interview where you were talking about trying to keep some energy, trying to keep something alive when you're working with it.*
- SL** All the contrivance or the forcing can take energy away from an object and make it very stiff. A kind of flow is important, which I suppose is what you're talking about. The flow of language.
- SH** *How do you find a balance between planning what you're going to make and your automatic or intuitive response to a material?*
- SL** I'm actually quite a thinking sort of person and just making something is a bit of relief; it's almost like twiddling your thumbs. I might sit here with a bit of wire and just start to mess about – not thinking about it too much or even thinking about something else completely – and something starts to happen. On the other hand, say you're listening to certain music or in a particular mood, it will be translated in the material, and how your hands work. So, those things do find their way in. Then, at a certain point, if I'm thinking about one thing in relation to another, I bring back in a lot of those ideas, or other notions that might be relevant. I don't have a plan at the outset; there's no easy way to describe that kind of process.
- SH** *Yes, I know: it's hard. People assume you can't possibly have just started a novel with a ringing voice in your head. Although, a lot of the time, people think that, as a writer, you're just sitting around waiting for inspiration. Which is both wrong and right.*
- SL** People like to say: 'Oh, hard work gets you everywhere' and they belittle inspiration. But you need a certain amount of conviction to bother embarking on something, without necessarily knowing exactly what you are going to do. It's the enthusiasm – the fact that you are curious about something, whatever that might be. Without that, and if you're a bit depressed, it becomes very difficult to even start, because you just think: 'Well, what's the good of that?'
- SH** *What is your failure rate?*
- SL** Very low.
- SH** *I mostly keep things, too.*
- SL** I don't ditch much. But, then again, once you ditch anything you forget it. It's gone. That's what I mean about having the conviction. There are times when it's just as hard as it ever can be: it's back to square one. I remember being at college and I made a few things that I thought were really good and a few that I thought were really, really bad, which I just wanted to incinerate.
- SH** *Technically bad or conceptually bad? Or both?*
- SL** Just actually bad: things that wouldn't even hold together and that were monstrous and cumbersome. One, in particular, was like a big boomerang all covered in bits of broken mirror. It was completely unwieldy. I just wanted it out of my sight. And, quite often, these things are also not easy to dispense of. It's depressing cluttering up your life
- with a load of things. People say: 'Keep working, it will eventually come good.' But unless you have a gigantic studio, every time you make something that you don't like you have to live with it. I really hate it. So, I try to do things that I think are going to work out.
- SH** *Somebody once described a first draft of a piece of writing as having a great energy to it. As though before you get to the kind of brushed-velvet quality at the end, it's got a true energy to it, and you can lose that if you go back over it too many times. But, then, if you're actually constructing something, physically constructing it, I imagine the relationship is different?*
- SL** I used to think: I just want to see what this does. And, if it's any good, I will never make it again. I don't go in for too much polishing up, really. That frees me from having to worry about things like whether it's going to last or not. Right now, I like the way the things are shaping up. It's quite a fresh new approach for me; the things I'm making now I haven't done before. So, yes, I really am excited about them. ♦♦
- Sarah Hall is a writer who lives in Norwich, UK. Her novels include Haweswater (2002), The Electric Michelangelo (2004), The Carhullan Army (2007) and How to Paint a Dead Man (2009). Her new novel, The Wolf Border (2015), is published by Faber & Faber.*
- Sarah Lucas lives in Suffolk, UK. Her solo show at the Whitworth, Manchester, UK, runs until 19 July. Her British Council commission is at the 56th Venice Biennale, Italy, from 9 May until 22 November 2015.*

*Pepsi & Cocky, 2008,
chair, kapok, wire, pantyhose, fabric,
dimensions variable*

*Courtesy
the artist and Sadie Coles HQ,
London*

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