

Burnt Memories

In 1995 Tracey Emin, then a little known artist in her early thirties, stitched some text and the names of everyone she had ever slept with onto a tent. Playing on the interpretation of the word ‘slept’, she included the names of not only lovers but also friends and members of her family (including her twin brother). The work proved a turning point in her career. Displayed in a number of exhibitions of the work of young British artists, and later bought by the advertising executive and art collector Charles Saatchi, the work quickly became seen as an iconic example of 1990s ‘Brit-art’. But it was destroyed, along with hundreds of other artworks, in a fire that swept a warehouse in East London in 2004, only nine years after it had been made.

Emin first made a textile-based work two years before *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* 1963–1995. The quilt *Hotel International* 1993 was named after the hotel her father had run and in which she had grown up. It included many confessional details of her youth, spelt out in capital letters or hand-written on smaller bits of fabric. The combination of sewing (conventionally, a feminine practice) with texts representing seemingly raw and uncensored memories marked Emin’s work out as both original and challenging.

From the beginning Emin presented herself and the story of her life as part of her art. For the first day of the *Gramercy International Contemporary Art Exhibition*, held in the Gramercy Hotel in New York in 2004, Emin stayed in a bed covered with the *Hotel International* quilt that was for sale, though this was something of an involuntary performance. She later confessed, ‘I’d never been to New York before and I couldn’t understand the jet-lag thing so I stayed up all night at a party. When the Gramercy opened I was too exhausted to get out of bed, so people just came and met me.’ Demonstrating a willingness to court and exploit publicity, as well as to engage directly and openly with a broad public, she briefly became one of the most popular ‘exhibits’ on show.

Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995 was first displayed in a group exhibition called *Minky Manky*. Held in the South London Gallery in 1995, the show aimed to deal with ‘fundamental questions of existence’ and investigate the artist as ‘an expressing subject’. Although people had to crawl into the igloo tent in order to read the texts, the work proved an unexpected highlight of the show. One reviewer wrote:

One of the few pieces that actually looks like it has come from a life that is not wholly concerned with being a professional artist is Tracey Emin’s Everybody I’ve Ever Slept With 1963–1995 (1995). This piece, perhaps Emin’s most resolved work to date, comprises a tent whose interior is plastered with the names of all those the artist has slept with – in every sense

Tracey Emin born 19638

Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995

Appliquéd tent, mattress and light

122 x 245 x 215 cm

– and is far less voyeuristic than earlier, more directly autobiographical work. The object itself and, more evocatively, its peculiar musty smell, bring out a thousand childhood and adolescent memories of travel, holidays, private spaces and intense experience in a way that allows the viewer's own memory to mingle with the artist's rather than be overwhelmed by it.

Two of the most poignant names in the Tent were 'FOETUS I' and 'FOETUS II', referring to Emin's two abortions.

In December 1995 Emin, though still little known outside the art world, established The Tracey Emin Museum, in a former mini-cab office on Waterloo Road in South London. She opened the Museum – a combined exhibition space, studio and shop – two afternoons a week, and would talk about her work with visitors. For curator Patrick Elliott, 'This was a peculiarly direct and unnerving way of experiencing art, and it marked Emin out as a new and completely unique voice in British art.'

Emin had been inspired to make *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* 1963–1995 partly by a Tibetan tent she had seen in an exhibition. Within Tibetan culture nomadic Buddhists use tents as a place for solitude and meditative thought. Emin wanted her tent to be similarly a portable shelter and a place of meditation, with the tent's themes of sleep and sex suggesting a mystical understanding of life. When the tent was included in the Minneapolis exhibition *Brilliant! New Art from London*, she specified that it be installed in a quiet place. But her instructions were disregarded and the tent was sited next to a loud video work. Then, as later, people saw the tent primarily as confessional rather than contemplative. For Emin, however, the piece was about intimacy broadly understood, and the tent had a memorial function: she said that making it was like 'carving out gravestones'.

The inclusion of *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* 1963–1995 in the 1997 exhibition *Sensation* at the Royal Academy, London, helped make Emin a household name in Britain and lodged the tent in the national psyche. Featuring 110 works from the collection of advertising executive and self-confessed 'artoholic' Charles Saatchi, the exhibition was one of the most controversial shows ever held at the Royal Academy. However, it proved an enormous popular success, with over a quarter of a million visitors and extensive media coverage. The exhibition toured to Berlin and New York, reinforcing the international celebrity of Emin and her tent, as it was popularly described.

In the early hours of 24 May 2004 a devastating fire destroyed a warehouse in which the art-handling company Momart stored most of the art in its care. It is thought that burglars attempting to steal electrical equipment from an adjacent unit started the blaze. The fire spread quickly and within hours the whole complex was alight. Fifteen pumps were called to the scene and water was poured on the site for two days. Over a hundred works in the Saatchi collection, including *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* 1963–1995, were lost, as well as several hundred other pieces by leading British artists.

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Some British journalists seized on the opportunity to express satisfaction at the destruction of works by artists they saw as over-hyped and over-priced. Countering the sense of shock, even trauma, experienced in art circles over this overnight destruction of so many artworks, some suggested that the 'Brit-Art' artists could easily remake their works. To underscore this point, the *Daily Mail* commissioned a woman to remake Emin's tent, as if this could be a substitute for the artist's lost work. The article headline read: 'Bad news, Mr Saatchi: Tracey Emin's £40,000 tent has gone up in flames. But the good news is the Mail has made you another (and it'll only cost you £67.50!)' (*Daily Mail*, 27 May 2004).

Approximately 100 artists lost works in the Momart warehouse fire. Some said they could attempt to remake their works; most, including Emin, felt this would be impossible. She later said:

It's a seminal thing. It was that moment and that time in my life. It's me sitting in my flat in Waterloo sewing all the names on. It took me six months to make. It just fitted inside my living room, which was 10ft by 12ft, and the TV just fitted inside the tent. I couldn't remake that time in my life any more than I could remake the piece.

For the families of deceased artists, the loss of works was particularly painful. Fifty paintings by Patrick Heron (1920–99), including several major canvases, were destroyed. Four months after the fire, his daughter Katherine spoke about the emotional and personal aspects of the loss of so much of her father's artistic legacy:

Even at the worst stage of people burning books, actually, somewhere, the manuscript or the idea or the story stayed, and even if you lost the score of a piece of music, or if you lost a choreography, they can be recreated, because they exist by being reproduced. The thing about something like a painting or a sculpture or any other artefact-based art form is, once it's gone, it has gone. It's so absolutely final. The first thing is, I think: Thank God nobody died. People always come first. But the second thought is that, actually, the whole life of somebody like my father was about his art, every single thing was focused on his art, and if a substantial amount of his work is destroyed, it's like denying his existence, a denial of life.

Text—

Jennifer Mundy