

## Michelle Grabner Lydia Lunch and Large Picture Philosophy

***What do you do if you're one fucking person? Just a small individual whose message has never and will never be popular? We should try to speak some universal truth whether it's personal/obsession/frustration/experience or from the larger picture. What can one do? Why don't I just give up and shut up and go smell the fucking flowers before they're all dead? All I can do is try to find various formats to express the things, the ills that obsess me, hoping that others will either find release in my voice or will acknowledge that there's some truth in this.***

"We Talked to Lydia Lunch and She Didn't Seem to Like Us Very Much," Interview with Brad Cohan, *Vice* (2013)

***I personally would like to tear down the INS or the IRS or the Sony Corporation, brick by fucking brick, to erase them hard drive by hard drive. But I'm not able to, you see? The systems that we have created or that have been created at us are far too huge, powerful, and unresponsive to be resisted by direct attack. And these systems are getting bigger and more centralized all the time; note the unification of the European currencies, for example, or the way the United Nations seeks to act as a world government, to the reach of the Nike Corporation around the world and its ever-growing implication in economic exploitation, or the vicious monopoly of bad software achieved by Bill Gates.***

Crispin Sartwell, *How to Escape* (2014)

In the chapter "Philosophy of Punk" in a collection of essays titled *How to Escape*, the philosopher Crispin Sartwell laments his inability to take on the relentless grip of the INS, the IRS and Sony. His jeremiad was written in 2014. Lunch has been addressing Sartwell's question all of her adult life. Recently in an interview for *Vice*, she unflinchingly states that "We should try to speak some universal truth" when rhetorically asking herself, "What do you do if you're one fucking person? Just a small individual whose message has never and will never be popular?"<sup>1</sup>

Yes, Lydia Lunch is a brilliant "polymath autodidactic." She came to the cultural fore figuring prominently and powerfully in New York City in the mid- to late seventies when "everyone was exchanging fluids."<sup>2</sup> She believed, and still believes, in big ideas. This is why to this day she is culturally risky; in the face of the tentative, the uncertain and the unguaranteed, she perennially articulates a baseline and compels us to see a "larger picture."

Lunch has always manifested extreme emotions in her work. Unmistakably, there are clear antiauthoritarian threads that connect her to the American individualist tradition: Emerson, Thoreau, Abbie Hoffman, Noam Chomsky. "I remain stubbornly independent, and have no restrictions on what I do placed upon me anyone or anything," she says.<sup>3</sup>

Lunch's embrace of truth, including the formal abstraction of rhythm, is a way through relativism's ever-prevalent nihilism. Lunch shaped and was shaped in an era of thought when it seemed ridiculous to even attempt to delineate truths. This was a time when Richard Rorty would tell his philosophical protégés in the academy that "It was ridiculous or impossible to try to describe reality outside of our linguistic practices, to describe it as it would be if it were not being described."<sup>4</sup>

"Again, it's like my political speeches: using the language or the statistics of the enemy. Using aggressive, macho stance to complain against aggressive, macho stance as part of my contrarian spin around."<sup>5</sup> This speaks to the heart of Lunch's philosophic activity. She is facile in deploying the syntax necessary for change. Ideally, philosophy "mustn't ignore the problems posed by life as we live it."<sup>6</sup> Yet that is often not the case with the disciple. It sometimes takes an artist to illuminate difficult questions, and in the case of Lunch, someone to illuminate the truths as well.

As an artist, Lunch has made many bold confessions in her life, but one of her most affecting statements is: "It's always been important (for me, at least) to shit in the face of history. Because history has shat all over us, so I figure it's fair game to give it back."<sup>7</sup> Here again, she underscores her belief in large pictures and big ideas. After all, history is one of the grand cultural schemes constructed by humanity. Lunch is demanding that artists be responsible and responsive to context. Of her spoken-word work, she says that it is her duty to "express the dilemmas that many of us live under."<sup>8</sup> "That's why I tend to still, thirty years after I began spoken word, slam down these political tirades which attempt to articulate and outline some of the greater

**Michelle Grabner**  
**Lydia Lunch and Large Picture Philosophy**  
**(Continued)**

issues that we all know exist. We're all aware of these things and frustrated by them, and they surround us in this bombast."<sup>9</sup> Lunch has generated a seemingly endless array of sage insights and acute observations over the years. I am thankful that her fan base has felt a need to return to the oracle on a regular basis, providing the public with a trove of practical and philosophical acumen. Her practice is reflexive, and her ability to navigate systems of belief for the greatest political effect is as impacting as the art she has produced. It should be no surprise then that Lunch is currently attuned to articulating the perils of our attention economy.

"I think people are mobbed with a huge bombardment of distractions,"<sup>10</sup> she says. "I think that's a real threat. I think it's a danger. It's a tool to keep people away from real protest or taking action because of the way they feel. Our time is stolen. So much of our daily life is stolen. People have to really be conscious of that."<sup>11</sup> Attention, as she suggests, is most insidious when meaning gives way to information and erodes our ability to determine value. In other words, "our distractability seems to indicate that we are agnostic on the question of what is worth paying attention to."<sup>12</sup> Another big, unwieldy cultural thesis noticed and shrewdly addressed by Lunch.

Lunch continues to be a lot of things. Some of us need her to be the "bitch" of no wave, or a radical feminist, or a political poet. As a public figure, she understands this. I, however, need her to continue to weigh in on big, even clichéd ideas, and to continue to articulate and model a moral relationship to the world, to art and to history. Lunch has earned the freedom, the privilege and the responsibility to activate universal truths: right and wrong, left and right, ugly and beautiful. They are her baseline, and she reminds all of us that they should be ours, too.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>"We Talked to Lydia Lunch and She Didn't Seem to Like Us Very Much," Interview with Brad Cohan, *Vice*, May 29, 2013. <sup>2</sup>Lydia Lunch interviews by V. Vale (San Francisco: *RE/Search* 2013), p. 50. <sup>3</sup>Crispin Sartwell, "Philosophy Returns to the Real World," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2015. <sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>5</sup>*RE/Search*, p.76 <sup>6</sup>Jürgen Habermas, "Philosopher, Poet and Friend," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 11, 2007 <sup>7</sup>*RE/Search*, p. 54. <sup>8</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>9</sup>Interview with Jason Gross, *Perfect Sound Forever*, October 1997 <sup>10</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>11</sup>Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p.5.