



ART

REBEL WITH A CAUSE

"Simone de Beauvoir said that one is not born a woman, but becomes one. No wonder then that we all suffer from performance anxiety a lot of the time."

LINDER STERLING, ARTIST

BY ALICE PFEIFFER

—Linder Sterling aka Linder has spent a lifetime denouncing the artificiality of groomed and tame femininity. From meat dresses worn whilst performing for her band Ludus to collages, performance and prints, the Liverpool-born artist reveals the performativity of gendered and social differences. To this day, she never ceases to hijack all stages – the street, the gallery – and make her riotous, indelible mark.

Alice Pfeiffer: You recently held a major retrospective of your work in Paris' Musée d'Art Moderne. What were your main aims for this exhibition? What were you trying to express to those who know you and those who have never heard of you?

Linder Sterling: A retrospective offers many ways to show a life lived. My path was never straightforward in life, it looped back on itself and I sometimes stepped sideways, my career has not had a straightforward trajectory. Thankfully, the gallery at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris was itself one large loop, beginning with small dark interior spaces and ending with a large curved space of natural light. We decided to use the architecture to ventriloquise my creative journey, beginning with small black-and-white photographs from claustrophobic transvestite clubs in Manchester in 1976, to the huge curve of the Musée painted in the colour of coral lipstick, drenched in natural light, and showing two decades of work. I looked up the etymology of "museum" – it means "seat of the Muses" – I loved that idea after having been described as the muse of others for so long.

Alice: You have said you still feel marginal in Britain – why is that, in your opinion? What do you believe the French saw in your work?

Linder: It's not so much that I feel marginal, it's more a feeling that I'm only digestible in the UK in very small pieces, that I still have to be spoon-fed to the Brits. Meanwhile, the French made a banquet of me, with Punk as their hors d'œuvre and collages of transsexual horse lovers for their dessert. They can see that my practice is all one, it's holistic, whether it's gluing a picture of an iron onto a pin-up, or making a dress out of throw-away meat for the Hacienda, or collaborating with Richard Nicoll on a series of sartorial collages, the French understood all. The British are still suspicious if you don't just do one thing very well, a retrospective would still be illegible here.

Alice: Your exhibition features curtains made in Manchester to protest against the dying textile industry there. What is the

connection to the rest of your work? Does this suggest that ultimately, all your work and fights also discuss social class?

Linder: In the retrospectives in both Paris and Hanover, I use swathes of white transparent curtaining. The wealth of the north west of England came in part from the "dark satanic Mills" there, to quote Blake. Manchester was nicknamed Cottonopolis in the 19th century but by the time I started to make work there in the late 1970s, that industry was already on its knees. Within the retrospective, I wanted to contextualise the geographic and economic origins of my early work in an elegant metaphorical way, rather than showing a photograph of two punks against barbed wire. Growing up in Wigan with Orwell's ghost meant that social class has always fascinated me. Class is like pornography, trying to ignore its existence doesn't mean that it will go away. I'd rather roll my sleeves up and work under the bonnet of it than pretend that we live in a utopian society with parity of choice for all.

Alice: In the age of the internet, why are handmade collages – which are a recurring aspect of your work – still relevant?

Linder: There's a kind of eccentricity to anything handmade now, isn't there? To someone sitting in a room with a pile of old magazines, a pair of scissors and a glue stick? It's almost remedial, the kind of activity prescribed for someone too delicate to navigate the outside world, one who has now been gently locked away for their own good. For me, the physicality of the cut is as important as any other mark-making activity such as drawing or painting with pencils and brushes. I select imagery with my scalp and I make my mark. Using paper and glue lacks all the ease of working with a mouse and a pixel, but the struggle often yields something far more articulate.

I occasionally work digitally when I can find photographic negatives that interest me. There are all sorts of negatives floating around now, as most photographers abandon their darkrooms and exchange silver halide crystals for pixels and RAW files. I sometimes buy the estates of deceased photographers, never knowing quite what I'll find. I can work at a far larger scale with negatives, so that the collages become almost forensic in their detail, you can suddenly see the exact details of an eyebrow or a bra strap. I've made a series of two-metre high collages using negatives from a "glamour session" from the 1960s and collaging them with photographs of orchids from another

photographer's estate. From the lens of two dead men 50 years ago, something new is formed.

Alice: The pornography industry is more part of pop culture than ever today, pornish jokes are commonplace – how do you feel about that? How can women of all ages protest against that?

Linder: I'd argue that we only see the fluffy aerosolic aspect of pornography within popular culture, a little haute bondage here or perfectly manicured "paid to be gay" there. One trip to Pigalle in Paris and seeing shelves labelled "Dog", "Fig", "Donkey", "Horse" and "Snake" reveals just one of the many pornographic niche markets catered for that we thankfully will never see represented in a fashion shoot. Just because most of us don't enjoy looking at photographs of a woman enticing a pig, it doesn't make it all go away. The vast scale of the unregulated pornography industry is hugely problematic. Like Lot's wife in the Bible, I continuously turn around to look at that which I'm not supposed to see. I thankfully don't turn to stone but I do concretise that act of looking by creating collages that tell a tale.

Alice: You have been in a band and worked with musicians. Is music still a big part of your life? What do you listen to these days?

Linder: When I'm searching through my piles of magazines for that one page that cries out to be cut up and reconfigured, then music keeps me sane. I'm listening to a lot of Northern Soul at the moment, after having found myself in Wigan for the past 12 months, looking after my elderly mother. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell wrote that traditions are not killed by facts and yes, the fact is that we now have most music available at most times to download, but the tradition of vinyl within Northern Soul will never die. I've adopted Nolan Porter's *Keep On Keeping On* as my new mantra.

Alice: The feminist cause has evolved a lot since you started working, why is it still relevant today? And can it be expressed in the same way as it was 20 years ago or do we need new tools?

Linder: Thankfully feminism is still very robust despite both men and women still feeling very uneasy with the word. For a lot of people, they hear the word "feminist" and immediately default to an inner depiction of a screaming, unkempt intellectual minus her bra, circa 1974. Feminism is alive and well, it has to be, there's still some way to go before there's true equality between those born without a penis or with one. There's a long tradition of graphic

agitation beautifully documented in Liz McQuiston's *Suffragettes to She Devils*, it's proof that feminism will always move with the times and stay ahead of its time.

Alice: This issue is about performance and I feel you are a performer in your own rights – your work seems to suggest women are all performers, that femininity is a role that one slips on like a dress and a pair of oven gloves. Could you please tell me what role the stage has played in your work and your "mission"?

Linder: In Paris and now in the retrospective in Hanover, writ large in neon, is Freud's dictum "Anatomy is destiny" except that I've collaged an extra word in neon so that it reads "Anatomy is not destiny". I've had t-shirts made with the slogan on the front and depending on whether you're a man in a wheelchair when you wear one or a woman six months pregnant, the meaning stays the same, you don't have to bow down to the cultural expectations of the body that you're born with. Life can be a cabaret, old chum, if you use the contents of your wardrobe – or better still the contents of someone else's wardrobe – to create your version of your daily self. Writers far more eloquent than I have argued the same, Simone de Beauvoir said that one is not born a woman, but becomes one. No wonder then that we all suffer from performance anxiety a lot of the time.

Alice: How do you feel about Lady Gaga wearing a meat dress like you once did? Powerful or on the contrary trivialising something vital?

Linder: ...and talking of performance anxiety – Lady Gaga's wearing of a sirloin steak meat dress was all so safe and manicured. The dress grabbed the headlines for a while, so job done. Gaga's meat dress spoke volumes about the desperation of celebrity and nothing about the animal whose flesh she wore. At the Hacienda club in Manchester in 1982, I accessorised my meat dress (made from meat discarded from a Chinese restaurant) with a large dildo. I was vegetarian and angry that the Hacienda sold hamburgers and also looped pornography films when the club was half empty – which it was on most nights then. So much attention to detail had gone into the architecture and graphic design of the club and there in the blind spot, meat was murder and women were all sexpots lusting for the window cleaner. Gaga doesn't know the half of it.

Alice: What message do you have for young women today?

Linder: Make your mark.