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## Reba Maybury and Lucy McKenzie's *Pervert or Detective?*

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That a work of art “inverts” or “subverts” power structures is one of the great platitudes of contemporary exhibition literature. When used to camouflage a deeper conservatism, which is so often the function of cliché, the phrasing reassures readers that their engagement with the work of art in question affirms their opposition to the injustice they might recently have observed in the world, might even be feeling guilty about. Aesthetic experience is reconciled with ethical principle, pleasure equated with virtue, the beautiful made consistent with the good.

In the conversation at the heart of this book, published alongside a joint exhibition at Ca' Bucciari in Venice, artists Reba Maybury and Lucy McKenzie dismantle this comforting delusion. Their theme is power, figured not so much as an external infrastructure as the authority to dictate what is right and wrong: a privilege that art can perform, dissolve, or refuse. That “perversion” is their means to these ends is instructive: unlike its more orderly etymological cousins, the word carries the implication of a desire that cannot be subordinated to any ethical framework. This is both more troubling and more transformative. “Discomfort,” says Maybury, “can become an arena for change.”

The work of both Maybury and McKenzie—respectively a “political dominatrix” and perhaps the most subtly transgressive British artist of her generation—draws much of its affective charge from this discomfort. This is more obviously apparent in the case of Maybury, who commissions (more accurately, orders) her submissives to produce works of art to her instructions. This is “an act of humiliation and control,” as she puts it, and the book accordingly reproduces her clients’ pathetic pencil sketches without compensation or attribution. In the exhibition, a rote paint-by-numbers copy of Berthe Morisot’s pointedly chosen image of outsourced labor, *The Wet Nurse Angele Feeding Julie Manet* (1880), hangs beside McKenzie’s own portrait of Maybury’s young daughter.

There are conventional ways to justify Maybury’s exploitation of her clients. The most obvious is that the sexual pleasure her subs derive from this demeaning relationship legitimizes it. An argument by precedent might cite Jeff Koons’s industrial modes of production, while Maybury’s own analogy between sex work and painting to instruction (the former provides “a façade of intimacy without any commitment” as the latter “gives the experience of art without being an artist”) suggests a retributive form of justice, according to which equality consists in being equally alienated from one’s labor. But the most insidious argument, put forward by the book’s editors in their introduction, is that Maybury should be understood as the “instigator of a creative process by which the submissives are unleashed and liberated.”

Insidious because to recuperate it into a comforting narrative—“don’t worry, this nice woman is really leading these men towards self-actualization!”—is to strip Maybury’s work of its power to unsettle. That none of the above arguments stand up to scrutiny, that the work cannot so easily be reclaimed into a soothing moral parable, seems to be the point. This is what justifies the work’s exhibition as art, which is the only justification it needs. It is provoking of thought and feeling precisely because it doesn’t let its audience so easily off the hook. Maybury puts it more pithily: “isn’t sanctimony the biggest turn-off of all?”

McKenzie’s celebrated trompe l’oeil paintings, murals, installations, and fashionwear are not so directly confrontational. Indeed, for all the defiantly retrograde techniques and preoccupations, her work is often framed in terms of an uncomplicatedly progressive politics (on the maddening assumption, it can seem, that an articulate woman with avowedly leftist politics from outside the art world’s corrupted centers must naturally make virtuous art). Yet it also evinces a profound attraction to aesthetics—whether associated with individuals (as in her 2013 installation *Loos House*, which appropriates a design by Adolf Loos), historical movements (the historical avant-garde), or ideological superstructures (fascist architectures and Stalinist fashions)—in which a deeply reactionary violence is encoded. As with Maybury’s practice, this attraction cannot simply be wished away.

Indeed, McKenzie uses this conversation to contest that whitewashing tendency. When its moderator, Marie Canet, proposes that working as a soft pornographic model “opened up a space for vulnerability” in her practice, the artist rejects the implied justification of the experience by its contribution to her emotional or professional development. She was looking for “activation,” she says, and she found it. The choice of words is instructive: the artist as a seeker for—and producer of—experiences that “turn on” their subject.

If sanctimony “turns off” by reinforcing a set of normative behavioral codes, then we are “turned on” by that which violates them. Art might in turn alert us to the “violence in which we live,” as McKenzie puts it, and lead us to establish creative spaces—subcultures—outside of those strictures. Maybury similarly figures the erotic as an “unsentimental life force that makes me feel entirely alive” and sexual fantasy as “a world of play” in which radical redistributions of power can be imagined. By decoupling art from received morality, they reclaim it as an arena in which hierarchies and social norms can be brought into question without repercussion.

That they are brought into question does not necessarily mean that they are overthrown. On this point, McKenzie has elsewhere cited Laura Frost’s argument that the “use of Nazi imagery by ‘bohemians’—think Siouxsie Sioux in an armband—is “a sign of a fit democracy and of an elastic and free exchange of symbols.” In which case, the prevailing pressure on artists to restrict themselves to a set of symbols deemed appropriate to their subject position and politics is not a sign of the art world’s ideological health but its sickness. Art in McKenzie and Maybury’s alternative model is a space in which to examine desires that might not align with our principles, however sincerely they are held, and in the process to test their security. What exactly are we

scared of? Our era's conflation of appearance with reality—and symbolic orthodoxy with ethical behavior—is the problem, not the solution.

The “libidinal drive” that motivates her work, says McKenzie, is complemented by a “detection imperative” that requires her to understand *why* she is compelled in these directions. In her afterword to the book, the writer Susan Finlay responds to the question posed by the book’s title and concludes that—at least in “late-capitalist society”—a free individual must be “both” pervert and detective. Only by expressing our unconscious desires and then measuring them against abstract ideals of the good can we approach self-knowledge and establish a workable politics. It is not hypocritical to experience unruly impulses; it is hypocritical to deny them.

*Reba Maybury and Lucy McKenzie’s Pervert or Detective?, edited by Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen with an afterword by Susan Finlay, was published by no place press in May 2025. The exhibition is on view at Ca’Buccari, Venice through June 29.*

## Notes

Of Loos, McKenzie is secure enough in herself to recognize that “had I been a young person in fin-de-siècle Vienna, I would have been seduced by his extremism and that mix of intellectual cruelty and insecurity.”

Christopher Page & Lucy McKenzie, “Interiority: Christopher Page & Lucy McKenzie,” *Effects Journal*, <https://effects-journal.com/archive/interiority-an-interview-with-lucy-mckenzie>.

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