

Barcelona INK

An interview with Lydia Lunch

Musician, performance artist, writer or photographer – whatever the discipline, Lydia Lunch could never be accused of shying away from controversy as she shines a light into the murkier corners of human existence. Now a Barcelona resident, she talks to the INK...

Why did you come to Barcelona?

To escape Bush. I knew he was going to steal the second election so I got the fuck out; and anyway I had been coming to BCN since 1984 on and off and I couldn't support myself in the States...

But why specifically Barcelona?

Well, it was thirty years out of facism as America was going into it. I think it is one of the sanest countries in the world right now. When I'm dealing with heavy subjects I don't need to live in the cancer zone, when I'm speaking about the enemy it doesn't mean I have to be living in their backyard to know what they are doing. Right now, because of its time in history it feels sane.

I'm not sure the locals would agree with you...

Yeah, but that's their issue. I'm an outsider. I don't party every weekend and I live in Grannyville [she lives in an apartment near La Sagrada Familia]... my building is mostly 90-year-olds and one floor of students and I like it that way. They don't hear me...

But it seems a little sedate...

Where the fuck am I supposed to live? In the Born? Are you nuts? Look, I lived in ghettos my whole life, I was born in a ghetto. I lived in New York, Pittsburg, outside of San Fransisco, LA...LA is a ghetto. I did my time. I didn't need to live in the ghetto anymore.

Is it a city you work from or a city you work in?

It's easy for me to create here because I'm not distracted by anything. I can get a lot of work done here. I can do a lot of performances here. I can play anywhere from Heliogabal to the CCCB and it's interesting for me to be in Spain because they have more respect for me as a multi-faceted artist. They are not afraid of me here... The other day I was doing my solo show 'Sick with Desire' and I'd do this piece called 'Ghosts of Spain', which is about the ghosts of the civil war and Spanish amnesia but also brings in Faluja, Islamabad, Dafur and so forth, but it starts with the ghosts here and I just love antagonizing the audience. I'm showing pictures of Belchite behind me and I'm saying "It's in your constitution, amnesia, and I won't forget your fucking dead". I mean I've accused America long enough so now I'm accusing the country I live in and don't even belong in for 'Crimes of Amnesia' and I love it. I mean I called my book *Amnesia* because it is a constitutional right that they decided to forget the Spanish civil war. To me it's astonishing...but anyway, I still feel that wherever I live I'm an outsider: that's one reason I love living here. I refuse to learn the language – it's arrogant to some degree but I don't do it out of arrogance – I do it so I don't have to hear the mundanity of normal conversation. Especially grannies in the butcher's shop. I feel outside of every community I've ever worked in. I live in an onanistic universe which doesn't exclude other people, I just don't need them. I will do what I do, with you or without you and I think that's ultimately where my strength lies. Ultimately I see myself as a lone figure on the railroad tracks with a polka dot handkerchief tied to a stick, maybe a cat on a leash. That's how I feel no matter where I am.

You say you 'don't want to be understood'...

I don't have a philosophy or a dogma I'm trying to preach. I'm ever a 'mutable'. The problem with most people is that, first, they are pigeon-holed by gender, then they are pigeon-holed by socioeconomics. Then as an artist they pigeon-hole you even more. I mean, fuck you. I'm at the tip of the volcano and it is not necessary for every word to be understood. It's like poetry – I hate that word - some lyrics don't always make sense, it's not sense that is the important thing, it's emotion and passion that's the important thing.

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So have you got a message?

There's no fucking message. What's the message? Me against them? If there's a message it's 'I am the voice for whatever dilemma I hope I can voice in you that you can't find a voice for'. That's it. I am the eternal scream into the endless void: trauma, torture and night.

You work in many disciplines. Are you more of a musician, a poet, a visual artist?

I am a confrontationalist in whatever form I choose.

So how would you describe yourself?

I am a faggot truck driver, mainly. I'm a serial killer who decided to knit. My work is like crochet, knitting, architecture. Whatever format it takes it all goes back to the word and the word is basically AGHHHHHHH. To make poetry out of the battle cry. That's what I do, because for me, it's like the title of my recent exhibition [a show of photographs in Valladolid], 'The War is Never Over' and I've been speaking about wars since under Ronald Reagan and it's not going away. It's perpetual industrial military complex and you'd better get used to it. It ain't going away. And in some ways I take great delight in this fact because it's man at his worst, which is what I've been complaining about since I was born...man at his worst. Fucking assholes... and the bitches who allow it to go on...Jesus Christ.

You once said you were 'busy being mad at everything'. Are you still mad or are you mellowing with age?

Whoever isn't mad is an idiot...and if you don't want to be slapped awake, don't come here. It's OK...go turn on your MTV...go listen to The Ting Tings...that's cool. I don't care.

Lydia Lunch's latest written work includes *Will Work For Drugs*, Akashic Books and *Amnesia*, (poetry, photography and music. Bilingual), published by Contemporanea

This is my murder

Lydia Lunch

Consider the thought of re-incarnation as the ability to dissect the secret history inherent in our genetic coding and the multiple atrocities, which have polluted our bloodlines.

Contemplate suffering as an acute oversensitivity to geography and the army of ghosts which litter the landscape who have given their lives leeches of blood to the whimsy of brutarians who denigrate life by celebrating death.

Imagine that every stone, stairwell and street has absorbed the life, death and fear of everyone and everything that has come before you and your job is to give voice to this nightmare.

This is my murder.

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Two poems by Claire Basarich

Rebirth

The first day we met, you chirped like a frog
and your eyes never left me

The first time I visited her in the hospital
she no longer spoke, only nodded her eyelids
her eyes saw past me

The first time I held you, hiccups rocked your frame
and I held tight
balancing your rolling melon head

Her limbs now twitched and trembled with their own life
and her head seemed to have shrunk
to the size of a dried plum

Your tiny hand groped my index
like a blind person discovering
the direction I pointed towards

On the last visit, her hands no longer looked like hands
but claws, flippers incapable of holding
anything at all

all you do is sleep and eat and waste
all she does is sleep and eat and waste

You have grown in length and width
since the last photo I saw of you
while she has retracted in all dimensions
all mass and energy compacted, slack, collapsed

And where you will soon identify
people by face and your favorite soft things
she forgets
her eldest daughter's name
the language they speak in Spain
and this piece of furniture
the ground beneath her

You are two poles attached by this short length of time
pulled taut like a rope
parallel and inverse reflections of alternate universes
slowly circling in orbit
anticipating

The moment when your first step
will release her last breath.

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Burnt

In my fever I hear every song
played at high volume
all at once

You give me fever
in the morning
but at night, the bed is made of damp soil
and my fever
under the bedclothes
creates a greenhouse effect

In my dream you burnt to death
and my skin turned dark from the ash

In my fever, dreams are outlined red
with burning coals
which should make them brighter

but lately I only dream of fever
of swallowing a lit match

I watch my own outline expand and deform
redden rippling like the expanse of air above lava

Once cooled
the cover un-tucked
you'll find only a black scar
still smoking
a burnt silhouette

Imprint of a dream on the bed sheet.

Claire Basarich is French-American and was born in Atlanta, Georgia. She has lived in Barcelona since 2008 and reads her poetry at local events such as El Prostíbulo Poético, Trilengua and Collage's 'Tea and Poetry'. She has been published in *El Libro Rojo del Prostíbulo Poético* (2010) and the upcoming *Five/5* (2011).

The American Traveler

Leah Ganse

‘I can’t believe you can smoke in this hotel,’ Josephine’s granddaughter commented, wrinkling her nose and batting away the air in front of her face.

‘You can only smoke in the hotel restaurant. And don’t scrunch your face like that – you’ll age yourself. You’re too pretty to look like an old woman before you turn thirty.’

‘Cigarette smoke will age my skin faster, Gran.’

Josephine slowly sipped the small glass of hot coffee, matching her lips to the print her deep red lipstick had made on the rim.

‘Did you ever come to this place when you lived here?’

Josephine watched her granddaughter take an unladylike bite out of her napolitano and then lick the other end out of which the cream had escaped.

‘No,’ Jo answered, and stirred her coffee with a delicate silver spoon, agitating the grains that had settled at the bottom of the glass. ‘This is new. All of this seems so new,’ Jo said, sweeping her hand from left to right indicating the whole of the Passeig de Gràcia laid out before them on the other side of the window.

‘Normal after almost thirty years,’ her granddaughter said as she fit the last bite of pastry into her mouth and closed her eyes. ‘That was one of the best things I’ve put in my mouth in months. I’m officially off my diet on this vacation.’

Jo looked at her granddaughter, at Eva, the girl who reminded her so much of her dead husband. She said whatever was on her mind at a given moment, just as Len used to announce that he thought he might be suffering from indigestion, or that it might be a good idea to change the type for the magazine. Jo admired their openness and was generally thankful that those she had been closest to never seemed to mind her relative silence, or mistake it for what it was not. All of those, of course, except her daughter, who looked at Jo like a mirror and reflected back the same profound silence that pooled inside herself.

‘What kinds of places did you used to go to when you were here?’ Eva

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asked.

‘In the beginning,’ Jo said, ‘the places that were dark. There are so many small streets in Barcelona that never see sunlight, you can’t imagine.’

‘That’s so depressing.’

‘I was depressing.’

‘That’s what Mom said.’

Jo finished her coffee and gently cleared her throat. ‘Did she?’

She watched Eva shift and tuck one leg under her on the plush armchair that looked like it belonged in someone’s living room. When Jo had lived in Barcelona, the chairs all tottered from one side to another on uneven legs and scraped across the floor when you got up to pay for another round. None of the cozy aesthetic that surrounded them now.

‘But how could you be depressed here?’ Eva started back up. ‘I mean, look at it, it’s gorgeous!’

‘I’m happy nothing has stopped you from seeing the beauty in things.’

‘What, you don’t think I’ve had my heart broken yet?’

‘Have you?’

Eva smiled. ‘You try to be so modern but you’re so old-fashioned. I’m twenty-two years old, and yes, I’ve had my heart broken several times.’

‘And broken some yourself?’

‘Doesn’t that go without saying? But if I were as pretty as you used to be, I probably could’ve broken a few more by now.’

‘As pretty as I used to be...’

‘Don’t take it the wrong way, you know what I mean. You looked like Audrey Hepburn in your pictures, and not everyone can pull off the whole short hair thing,’ Eva said, and Jo allowed her to stroke the silver hair at the nape of her neck.

‘So when are we picking up those boxes of yours?’

‘I’ve arranged for them to be picked up and brought directly to the hotel.’

‘Wait, I thought you wanted to visit your friend? Didn’t you use to live there with him for a while? Isn’t that one of the reasons you wanted to come back in the first place? To visit him?’

‘It was.’

‘And so?’

‘He died. His son still lives there.’

‘Oh, Gran. And you only found out since we got here?’

'His son informed me when I telephoned earlier this morning.'

'Well...how are you?'

Jo looked at her granddaughter's face and found her concern simple and charming. Another genetic memento from her husband. She finished her coffee and daubed her lips with a thin paper napkin.

'I was relieved to hear he had died.'

'Gran!' Eva sputtered and then began to laugh. 'I can't believe you would say that about the young, hot, Spanish rebound guy you found after Grandpa died.'

Jo always found it strange to hear Eva refer to Len as 'Grandpa', a title he only acquired after he had died.

'This way he'll never see the havoc thirty years of time wreaks on a woman,' she said.

'Cigarette smoke, I'm telling you. And I'm sorry about your friend.'

Jo patted Eva's smooth, unlined hand. 'Thank you dear. But it was all a long, long time ago.'

'What about the son? Was he alive when you were here?'

'He was eight when I met his father.' She lifted her finger and touched it to her empty glass of coffee, making eye contact with the waiter. 'We didn't quite see eye-to-eye.'

Eva laughed again and used Jo's discarded silver spoon to scoop up a pat of cream from her plate. 'How can you not get along with an eight-year-old?'

'Age alone doesn't compensate for rudeness.'

'Okay, so you didn't like the kid.'

The waiter deposited a fresh cortado in front of Jo and cleared her old glass away.

'So your stuff is getting picked up this morning?'

'Yes, I had the hotel concierge arrange everything.' She carefully drank from her steaming coffee.

'You know,' Eva said, 'since it's still early I think I'm going to head off and do some shopping before it gets really crowded. If you don't mind?'

Jo dismissed her granddaughter's request with a flick of her wrist. 'That's fine. I'll go for a swim in the pool.'

'Thanks, Gran. See you in a few hours!'

Jo watched her granddaughter trot out of the dining room without pushing her chair in and wondered how she became so different from herself

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and her daughter. It was one of the reasons she liked her so much though. Her own daughter had never really stopped resenting Jo for leaving in 1976, after her husband died. Even though Len had been the editor of one of the most successful travel publications in the country, *The American Traveler*, news of his death was barely mentioned by the media because Franco had died on the same day in 1975.

Jo had started working as Len's secretary in 1950. Two years later, they were married and little by little her role had shifted from transcribing notes to researching and writing stories. She had never been happier, and somehow she had even managed to make it work when their daughter was born. Len's death had upset everything though, and from that moment on she began to walk unbalanced through her life.

She saw it as a sign that the next issue of the magazine was set to be focused on the Iberian peninsula. She found it miraculous that the monumental implications of Franco's death meant a rebirth for Spain, and reinvention there became more attractive to her than survival at home. She hadn't planned to stay for seven years, and when she went back for her daughter's wedding, she hadn't planned to stay home. But then Eva was born, a tiny anchor that forced her to shake her head clear and rooted her back to the place she had escaped from.

She left the hotel cafe and changed into her swimming clothes, amazed at the feelings and memories that had come flooding back as soon as she had returned to Barcelona. In the seventies and early eighties when she had been there, she would never have been caught dead in such an extravagant and overpriced hotel. On the rooftop terrace, she was one of three guests taking advantage of the hotel pool in the mid-September heat. She lay on a lounge chair under a layer of SPF70 feeling the sun's rays take her breath away. Though in her eighties, she was pleased with her appearance and the patches of skin that were still taut, thanks to genetics and a few procedures that the success of the magazine had afforded her. She dozed in and out of consciousness, the heat sucking liquid from her skin and making her head feel supremely heavy. In her semi-consciousness she drifted into a memory of a week in the Costa Brava with Rafel. They had laid on the beach the very same way, only moving when he would brush imaginary sand from her breasts or she would prop herself up on her elbows to sip from her water bottle or wet her hair. It had been so easy to feel nothing else but heat and pleasure and occasional hunger – nothing else fit.

Someone jumped into the pool with a loud splash and a few drops of water turned the memory back into vapor. She blinked her eyes until the black spots went away and then got up and slid into the pool. The cold shook her free of the heat of memory.

Jo was sitting in her robe at the desk in their suite reading a newspaper when Eva returned.

'I'm back! And I found a dress!' she called before she emerged in the sitting room brandishing a brightly colored shopping bag. She kissed Jo on the cheek and then spun around in the opposite direction.

'I'll try it on for you, okay?' Eva said. 'It's from Custo. I love that place.'

In a flash she disappeared into the bathroom, leaving Jo to marvel at the girl's exuberance. A moment later she appeared in a calf-length black dress covered in a layer of iridescent gauzy material. The straps were thin and gold and crisscrossed down her back.

'That's fairly hideous,' Jo said after Eva gave a twirl. 'But at your age it doesn't matter.'

'It's avant-garde,' she said, spinning around a second time. As Jo watched her admire herself in the mirror, there was a knock at the door.

'I'll get it!' Eva said, twirling down the hall. A moment later, she was setting down a ghost in the shape of a box in front of Jo. 'Look, Gran, your things are here. Can we open it now?'

Jo smoothed her hair and willed her emotions to a halt. 'Some of these things will need to be hung up and pressed,' she said.

'Okay, hand them to me,' Eva said eagerly.

Jo peeled back the cardboard flaps, softened with age and humidity, and the smell of her life from thirty years ago surged up and out of the box. She braced herself again as she touched her hand to fabric that once had leaned against lamp posts bathed in cigarette smoke and absorbed the dry salty sea air in November. All the memories were there, woven into the thread. She held up an ivory sweater, creating a curtain between herself and Eva, and shook it out lightly.

'This one's first,' she said.

After all the clothing had been hung and all of the makeup and perfume bottles laid out on the table or thrown away, Jo had closed up the box, insisting to her granddaughter that there was nothing else inside.

'I'm surprised you remembered that box after all this time because there

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wasn't much in it,' Eva had said before going to read a magazine by the pool. Jo asked her to hang the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door on her way out.

She looked once around the room before opening the box back up, carefully lifted out a stack of pages at the bottom of the box, and set them on the desk before her. She read the first paragraph and caught her breath. She had been loath to admit it, but over the years, her memories had taken to fading and been reduced to cloud-like images she sometimes went to when first waking up in the morning or before falling asleep at night. Here in these pages were entire moments, feelings, people, as if encapsulated in amber and preserved as perfectly as when she first experienced them. It was too much and at the same time not enough. It was a relief in her hands.

She turned next to the last page and her fingers sought out the thin black pen with gold lettering on top of the pad of hotel stationery. She wondered how her voice had changed in thirty years, but as her pen touched the paper and lines began to emerge, she felt transported. She was building a bridge backwards through time, and she hoped that among the people who might be waiting for her on the other side, her daughter would be one of the first.

Leah Ganse is a freelance writer from Winchester, Virginia and a graduate of the Washington College creative writing program. She has previously published work for a travel website and *Barcelona INK*.