

Interview



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Linder

By **Morrissey**

Photographed by **Sölve Sundsbø**

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VIEW FULL IMAGES

One of Linder's most recognizable works of art first appeared on the sleeve of the 1977 Buzzcocks single "Orgasm Addict." On the cover, Linder utilized what would become her signature mass-media collage strategy to adorn or violate—or, really, both—a classical nude female torso with mouths at the nipples and a household iron in place of the head. By the time the single was released, Linder Sterling, born in 1954 in Liverpool, had already become a fixture in the Manchester punk and post-punk scene out of which bands like The Fall, Joy Division, the Buzzcocks, Magazine, and The Smiths emerged. In many ways, her collage works from the period have much in common with the subversive practices of punk: Ripping things apart and reassembling them was a way of showing the counterfeit quality and construction of any social image. But Linder's art went even beyond the rebellion of her underground musical counterparts. Much like Hannah Höch in the Weimar era, Linder fused capitalism, sexuality, violence, feminism, desire, morbidity, and hope in her collages. Those fantastic and yet quotidian works have gained perhaps even more biting currency in today's culture. Lipsticks, television sets, mouths, household appliances, nude bodies—nothing and everything are sacred in her realm.

Linder has transformed herself many times as an artist since those first collages. She performed as the lead singer in the art-punk band Ludus. She's applied those assemblage tactics to photography and her own portraiture (most recently in a series with flowers). She's even combined her radical aesthetic with her love of spectacle in a number of performance pieces, including one last October that involved black veils, antlers, a gold metallic dress, and a white horse on the beach for the Tate St. Ives's *Dark Monarch* exhibition.

Next month, Linder is set to show new works at the Sorcha Dallas gallery in Glasgow and stage a special performance at the Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art. One constant in her life has been her relationship with the musician Morrissey. The two met in Manchester in the mid-1970s and quickly became friends. While Linder and Morrissey have continued to work around and alongside each other—in 1992, Linder published an intimate collection of photographs, *Morrissey Shot*, from her travels with him on a world tour—this interview marks the first time they have spoken publicly since 1979, when Morrissey interviewed Linder for a U.K. fanzine. Their questions and answers, written back and forth between each other over a span of weeks, are as much inventories of two poetic masterminds as lyrics all their own. When Morrissey wrote his first questions for this interview, he closed his letter with the following message to Linder:

"I shall love you till that final stretch of sand that the sea never quite reaches is finally swathed by crashing waves. Or, perhaps longer . . . if there's time."

Most artists, by rights, should be unemployable and living in Hackney. Many are. But the artist is in many ways the village idiot, recast as a superhero. Linder

MORRISSEY: You and I first met at a Sex Pistols sound check in Manchester in 1976. You've been steadfast and constant in my life ever since. My main admiration of you, quite apart from your physical beauty, is the fact that you move at all times within your own laws. If I'm aware of this, then you must be. How do you define it to yourself as you gaze into your shaving mirror at 9 A.M.?

LINDER: We move in a world of too many myths. I have no desire to be Nico, who was as much a creature of mythology as the Minotaur is. My interest in mirrors belongs more to the world of Cocteau and Fellini—as gateways to an afterlife or as reminders that all reflection is a form of religion. If I move within my own laws, then I do so through the looking glass, where, as Alice discovered, all is the same yet reversed and that which is pretty becomes ugly. Hello, Nico.

MORRISSEY: Even though as an artist you regularly abandon your work to the appraisers, do you value what is said by those who are not artists?

LINDER: Artists make the worst critics. I lead a remarkably insular life. I've made a series of conscious decisions about how I want to live at 55 years of age, which probably doesn't differ that radically from the decisions I made at 20. I like the disappearing act, and I like not knowing what people think about me.

MORRISSEY: At every stage, your work—recordings, photography, montages, etc.—reads as screams. For what reason would the screaming ever stop?

LINDER: Sometimes I glimpse Linder at 80 years old, still screaming. It's the way that I was born and the way, no doubt, that I will die. I now meditate each day at dawn in order to find silence. Sometimes I'm successful. The screaming would only stop if the universe would see fit to remove the layers of overstuffed eiderdowns that I feel have been crushing me since childhood.

MORRISSEY: There have always been vibrations of menace in everything you produce. Yet your general demeanor is very correct and polite, and you are extremely witty. Is art a part of the naughtiness game, in that it excuses us from all adult obligations and we can run riot with the slapdash emulsion? Is it your own private graffiti? Or is your art your droppings?

LINDER: [Musician] Patti Palladin once said that I sounded like Julie Andrews, which, of course, I took as the greatest compliment. Call me Maria. If there are "vibrations of menace" in the work I make, then they resonate of their own accord. When artists set out to disturb—unless they happen to be Goya or Gina Pane—they tend to fail. The Australian critic Robert Hughes once wrote that American art schools began to fail in the '60s because they taught "self-expression." "At this," he wrote, with bone-dry sarcasm, "no one could fail." For me, art is the conversion of a personal experience into a universal truth—or making a trip to the chip shop sound cosmic. At this, you have never failed. "Loafing oafs in all-night chemists. . . ." [lyrics from Morrissey's song "Now My Heart Is Full."]

MORRISSEY: I think art is a miracle, and I'm so relieved at those rare moments when someone gets it right. But how do you avoid being a copyist? After all, we all work with the same set of words and the same set of materials.

LINDER: I have always worked with found material—a photograph, a magazine, a film still, myself. I commence the creative act and I'm quite happily guilty of theft. The trick that follows is to find the gesture that returns newness to the familiar; my familiars are the inanimate objects I work with. I restore the implicit to the explicit. All of which brings me to the business of wordplay, which is vital to the way I work. I pore over my etymological dictionary with the same rapt excitement and saucer-sized eyes that a schoolboy from Eccles would have while poring over *Razzle* magazine.

MORRISSEY: Art is also the gluttony of the self-engrossed, isn't it? Well, it needs to be. But are there not moments, mid-stroke, when you think to yourself, well, perhaps I'm a bit of a nutter? I hope not, of course.

LINDER: Being a bit of a nutter is included in the job description of any artist worth the price of admission. Most of the artists whose work I really love were completely bonkers—or, rather, had to appear to be completely bonkers and enter the realms of the truly mad in order to make an iota of impact on a generally obese and indifferent world. Think of Sun Ra. Even the ambulance crew who picked him up believed he was from Saturn. Gilbert & George paint their faces orange and stand outside the local mosque for a few hours, not even blinking. People come up to them and ask them hugely intimate questions about how they should run their lives. And Joseph Beuys lined a gallery with thick gray felt, which seemed to suck the air out of the world. . . . Most artists, by rights, should be unemployable and living in Hackney. Many are. But the artist is in many ways the village idiot, recast as a superhero. If you're looking for me, you'll find me by the pump. I'm trading stray wisps of straw with the idiot from the next village. . . .

MORRISSEY: I dislike the "use" of animals in art, such as in the work of Damien Hirst. But in your latest performance piece, "Your Actions Are My Dreams," you have a woman serenely sitting atop a calmly satisfied horse, which is, of course, alive and healthy. Do you agree that Hirst's head should be kept in a bag for the way he's utilized—and sold—dead animals?

LINDER: Dead butterflies, cows, horses, humans, sheep, and sharks—it reads like the inventory of a funerary Noah. How many halved calves suspended in formaldehyde does the world need? To my way of thinking, none.

MORRISSEY: Do you place yourself inside your own art because, well, because you are art? Leigh-Bowery famously sat for hours behind glass—as “the object”—and the public queued up and scribbled lavish notes. Are you a step away from this, or does it all become too much of a diet of oneself?

LINDER: I have always treated myself as a found object.

MORRISSEY: So, you walk out of the Tate St. Ives [the Tate museum recently acquired several pieces of Linder's work for its collection] having displayed your wares to the art hounds, and suddenly you see fat Christine Cowshed on the seafront tucking heartily into ood 'n' chips. How do you relate it to your work at the Tate? How can both worlds possibly meet?

Nowadays, boys with enormous . . . record collections describe me as the “muse” to this circle in manchester. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. . . But you were my muses too. Linder

LINDER: I grew up on a council estate surrounded by fat Christine Cowsheds. Every town in the world has at least one Christine, with her head in a bag of chips. In some ways she's my ultimate nemesis. The everyday and the commonplace put the fear of God in me. My whole childhood was spent waiting for a bus. Yes, it was raining. In Greek mythology, - Nemesis gave birth to Helen of Troy. But this Christine will probably give birth to a boy named Kai, meaning keeper of the keys, which is the chosen name of [soccer player] Wayne Rooney's first child and forecasted to be the number one boy's name in Britain by the end of the year. Imagine, Kai Cowshed may one day be your bank manager. The latchkey kids of Lancashire shall return renamed, but never to Tate St. Ives. You have to have good skin and at least one novel under your belt before they'll let you in.

MORRISSEY: All of your more physical art captures the body at unguarded moments. Did you spend your childhood peering through keyholes by any chance?

LINDER: No, it was the other way 'round. Someone peered through my keyhole at an indecently young age and I've been on guard ever since. But I've always been fascinated by those who can reveal all at the drop of a hat. Enigma is my burlesque.

MORRISSEY: In your self-portraits, you always cover your own mouth, either with floral displays or the cut-out mouths of others, or even kitchen utensils. Since the mouth is a powerful center, why do you hide yours? Is your mouth in the wrong part of your body, do you think?

LINDER: The mouth can betray in two ways—by what goes in and what comes out. I am not one of nature's chatterboxes—but neither do I mumble. As time goes by, I have less and less desire to speak. And the number of people to whom I might address my select and diminishing group of words is likewise dwindling. My internal monologue keeps me busy enough. You once said that you felt as though you had read everything; I sometimes feel as though I have said and heard enough. I cheer the blank page. And central to my own work has always been the fact that women have more than one pair of lips.

MORRISSEY: If you inhabited a male body, how would your work differ?

LINDER: Call me Ishmael.

MORRISSEY: Be honest. If you could inhabit a male body for 24 hours, how would you spend the day?

LINDER: Screaming for someone to kill me—like Sigourney Weaver in *Alien Resurrection* [1997].

MORRISSEY: People's feelings are always stronger than their expressions. Longings always outdistance satisfaction. Why can't we all just let it out?

LINDER: For the very reason that we must, at all costs, keep it all in. No good art has ever resulted from simply running naked through the hall and letting everything swing. The artist must always try to reconcile the experience of a shot at happiness, long fallen wide. As you know so well—being the High Priest of the Contrary—there is a form of ecstatic dissatisfaction that comes close to inspiration. Control of one's material is all. Once people believe too comfortably in their own artistic leanings, they may as well stick shells on teapots. Which is not without its charm, but to my mind comes closer to day care than art.

MORRISSEY: Sexually, the human mind is very limited. Anything sexual in modern art is usually seen as inventive filth. Within pop music, sexuality is always, always, always artificially aroused. Why do you think sexuality is such a heavy burden for humans? Horses, for example, never need to refer to *The Joy of Sex* or the *Kama Sutra*. Isn't it a fact that, sexually, human beings are just a mesmerizing mess?

LINDER: I come from a colder age, when any man with lead in his pencil would have to fight his way through five layers of corporation underwear to even glimpse the stubborn flesh that he would, of course, be tartly denied. The dichotomous sexual world of the 1960s—before tans, gyms, and irony—shaped those who, like myself, grew to adolescence through its murk. The ultimate mystery would end up being as mundane as a Kenwood Chefette [a food mixer once popular in the U.K.] but less useful. But as you once sang, so truthfully, “Amid concrete and clay and general decay, nature must still find a way. . .” [lyrics from The Smiths' song, “Stretch Out and Wait.”]

MORRISSEY: If you feed a daffodil whiskey, it will get up and dance. Since all art is static, why can't artists create something with motion?

LINDER: But some of the best of them do. There's many a rumba in a Bridget Riley.

MORRISSEY: A chef does not give away his or her recipes, so how can you, Linder, ever explain the construction of your art, whether by lecture or otherwise, in a way that avoids the stripping of mystery?

LINDER: I have always been fascinated by the ways in which great artists create and maintain their own mythology. One foolproof way is to always give contradictory answers to your interviewers. To claim one day that you adore the color blue, and the next to say that you vomit at the sight of it. Is such game playing the privilege of the truly immortal? Or can anyone have a go? In my own case, I try to tell people very slowly and precisely exactly what I think and feel about my work, and they look at me as though I've got flies crawling over my eyelids.

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MORRISSEY: Your life has been a full commitment to your work and your drive, and since I believe that we have no choice where art is concerned—we don't decide to be a singer but rather, we find that we are one—do you ever think it would all have been so much easier if you'd been fat old Christine Cowshed sitting outside Boots with her cod 'n' chips?

LINDER: Well, Keats and Yeats are on my side. It was the latter, I believe, who remarked that one was forced to “choose perfection of the life or of the work.” As for the heavily pregnant Christine Cowshed, I have a suspicion that little stirs in her bovine world, save for the infant Kai, gurgling in his amniotic sac. I have never yearned for a lawn sprinkler. And Christine has never wanted to pick up a brush in her life. We are probably equally unhappy. Christine, *c'est moi*.

MORRISSEY: Rest is the most important part of the day. Do you ever get the urge to spring out of bed and start working on a new piece? What's the most absurd urge that's ever grabbed you?

LINDER: I woke up this morning, flung open the bedroom windows, and climbed in.

MORRISSEY: You were born in working-class Liverpool. Would having been born in Henley with a frightfully Celia Johnson-type mother have sent you on a different course?

LINDER: I would have become the celebrated Violette Nozière of the Royal Regatta.

MORRISSEY: In a recent issue of *i-D* magazine, you are photographed as a voluptuous 1950s housewife—or homemaker, since housewife implies that the woman is married to the house . . . which, perhaps, she is—and “she”—that is, you—is busy vacuuming the garden. It's the endless task of scrubbing away, which, again, has been a constant theme in your work since 1975. Would it be too personal to ask you if there's something within yourself that you're anxious to “scrub away”?

LINDER: The word “dirt” can also mean “matter out of place.” And so dirt and being dirty have, in many ways, shaped my life. My mother was a cleaner in a hospital for nearly all of her working life. She used to have nightmares that she couldn't get her windows clean, and so she couldn't see through them. I grew up in that psychic force field. I can relate to the chill in Alan Bennett's comment about a certain kind of Lancashire widow, who “tidied her husband into the grave.” But how might cleanliness look? Genteel? Pretty? Like art? As a child I begged for piano lessons, but pianos were dismissed as “dust harborers.” I wanted ballet lessons, too, but there weren't any teachers in our part of -Liverpool. Culture called—and Billy Fury answered via the radio. I grew up with pop, and pop will die as you and I die—if not before. When I was young, everything was neat and tidy, except for me. I have never felt clean inside, and I never felt beautiful.

MORRISSEY: Is it an added thrill if Mr. and Mrs. -Sidcup buy a piece of your art? Or does crossover mean wrong turn? The media obsession with Hirst's millions, I think, reduces him to mere factory outlet.

LINDER: Someone's got to keep him in Pond's Cold Cream and Homer Simpson slippers.

MORRISSEY: You live quietly in the niggly north, yet your art pieces are explosive loft-land Berlin. You are forever “open and entering,” and digging in. Is this a northerner's way of doing things in full view with the curtains open?

LINDER: As you remember, to be a child in the northwest of England, in the 1960s, was to inherit a burden of intense but nameless fear. It came in part from the memory of war, and in part from the hardships of the region. So I grew up in a house that was ruled by superstition—that laughing would end in crying; that mirrors must be turned to the wall during thunderstorms; that if you dropped a knife, a stranger would call. And there is a poetry in these lines, which holds my attention still. In this spirit, my mother always said it was better to be noticed than to be passed by. She didn't mean it, of course, but coupled with her nightmares of windows that would not clean, it seemed that, for my sanity and hers, I had to throw back the curtains and scrub away. I think that punk was important in this too—particularly in Manchester, away from the catwalk of the King's Road, where being a punk was somewhat easier. The currency of ideas in the houses I shared—as you well know, given you were there—was, in retrospect, the most memorable education in intellectual imagination. Not that anyone would use those terms, but you and Howard Devoto and Pete Shelley and others were so very, very smart. All finding different ways of saying, “Yes, but. . .” It had less to do with talent than with genius—musicians and singers, but with the minds and eyes of novelists. Nowadays, boys with enormous . . . record collections describe me as the “muse” to this circle in Manchester. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. . . But you were my muses too.

MORRISSEY: You've gone through periods of willing flat-chestedness, but lately you are thankfully releasing your very ample headlamps in all of your self-portraits. Are tits a pain in the neck?

LINDER: I'll probably be 70 before my full cleavage is revealed to the world. Do you remember I always used to wear V-necks back to front? As a young woman in the '70s, I longed for a flat chest—to be braless, liberated, and secure in just a vest. Inevitably, I used to attend feminist meetings in south Manchester wearing a 36C cup and too much lipstick. A woman's right to choose.

MORRISSEY: It could be said—by an ungenerous mind—that a hanging piece of art is just something sticky plopped onto coarse canvas. Do you ever feel trapped by the immovable piece?

LINDER: Like the daffodil, I dance—with the curtains wide open and the lights full on.

MORRISSEY: A song has more reality for people than an art piece or even a film because we can all instantly have a go at singing the song for ourselves but we can't ever become that art piece. People accidentally reveal themselves in song, whereas artists intentionally reveal themselves in art. Do you think this is because artists relish the fact that a great many people will be unable to grab the essence? And is it snobby to revel in that distance?

LINDER: The aim of the artist—as our Oscar [Wilde] once remarked—is “to reveal art and conceal the artist.” This is true in the gallery and, occasionally, true for singers—Johnnie Ray, for example, was a poor but perpetual wearer of masks. The women singers I venerate have more confidence—Ursula Dudziak, Yma Sumac, Norma Winstone, Annette Peacock. The real difference is that most artists, unlike most singers, never get to hear the applause. . . .

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MORRISSEY: Isn't it a fact that eccentricity is something we consider to be a great strength in people we admire, yet a revolting weakness in those we do not like?

LINDER: I have never been much of one for “colorful characters.” I think that all too often “eccentric” is just another word for “veteran bore.” Kingsley Amis once called Stevie Smith “doty” on television. It was hard not to agree, but she was doty, in a brilliant kind of way. Perhaps the answer to this lies in the fact that a great deal of talent is required to turn eccentricity into charm. But how quickly that charm can curdle and turn back into a kind of sour milk of the personality. . . . It's the razor-blade high wire that genius walks.

MORRISSEY: Is sexuality self-awareness? Could anything else be considered self-awareness? Science, or cookery, for example?

LINDER: “It took a tattooed boy from Birkenhead to really really open her eyes. . .” [lyrics from The Smiths' “What She Said.”] *Non?*

MORRISSEY: If live music is the strongest art because it combines so much—sound, words, physicality, movement, amplification, style, sex, dance, instant audience response—do you accept the limitations of the art exhibition in cold Cologne corridors?

LINDER: Can Seurat ever catch up with Sinatra, or Monet with Morrissey? It's hard to be sure, but I believe that they all soar supreme in their different ways. We look to all art to show ourselves and the world re-explained in a way that makes it and our sense of ourselves somehow richer and more alive. Art is always, as you know, about life. When it starts to simply be about itself—like a pub quiz for ravers—then it withers and dies at record speed.

MORRISSEY: Finally, if you measure your life by what you, Linder, have acquired from within against what you've acquired from without, which is the main source?

LINDER: On the day that I was born, the angels got together and lowered me in a bucket, deep, deep into the interior of the planet. On the way down I saw rubies and diamonds and beautiful monsters. I have never forgotten the experience, and today some of those monsters I count amongst my best friends. The rubies and diamonds? We sold them, split the money, and lived happily ever after.

Morrissey is a Manchester-born singer and songwriter. His most recent Album, Swords, a collection of B sides, was released in October.