

Lydia Lunch

Interview by Theresa Stern (October 1997)

If you're looking for some nice, sedate, calming music or poetry, then you don't want to go near Lydia Lunch. Her avowed purpose since the late '70s has been to agitate and aggravate. Her frank sexuality and hatred of passivity hasn't made her exactly the darling of mainstream media but the hell with them. For anyone who wants some harsh reality shoved in their face, Lydia's the right place to go. In film, in writing, in CD's/LP's, and any other medium she gets near, Lydia is a memorable presence. During this interview, I wanted to interrupt her several times to say 'hell yeh!' but it was probably better to let her explain herself. Anyone with weak stomachs and constitutions, people with heart conditions, the very old and the very young might want to use caution before proceeding further (if you dare...).

PSF: I've heard you referred to as a confrontationalist- what does that mean to you?

That means that my job is to confront apathy and confront all the forces that tend to batter each of us down with all kind of oppression, even self-oppression. I consider that the main job of the art that I do- to rattle the cage, wake people up, wake myself up, confront all that would conspire to keep us down.

PSF: You find that it's hard to do that today since people are bombarded with a huge amount of information?

I think people are mobbed with a huge bombardment of distractions, like the entertainment that's forced down our faces so many times in so many formats. It's the amount of CD's, the amount of movies, the amount of TV, the amount of internet. We're surrounded by a number of things that steal our time so that we don't have to think or focus in only one direction. 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. Because we have so much eye candy and mind candy, spending so much time trying to pay the rent, all of this conspires to keep us from thinking too hard or taking action from that. Our time is stolen. So much of our daily life is stolen. People have to really be conscious of that.

PSF: If people did become conscious, what do you think they would realize? What would be their goal?

I think the goal would be more real information or real knowledge. More

compassion, less data, less information, less distraction. I think if we had a greater focus on the bigger picture, instead of being locked in our cubicles, in front of our computer screen, in front of television or movie screen or the rave or the band, that we might consider the larger picture of what's happening personally in our lives and globally. That's why I tend to still, fourteen years after I began spoken word specifically, occasionally slam down these political tirades which attempt to articulate and outline some of the greater issues that we all know exist. We're all aware of these things and frustrated by them and they surround us in this bombast. Because it's so normal and we live under such stress and preoccupation, we feel we can't do anything about it. That's a large statement.

I'm not saying the individual can take on the entire world though sometimes it seems like the entire world is pounding down on us. I just think that people need to reorganize, especially at this time. I don't know what this time means this close to the millennium, whatever the fucking millennium means, whatever the apocalypse is. WE ARE IN IT NOW. It's not a big bang. It slows the mind. It's global destruction. I'm not speaking as a global environmentalist. I'm speaking as an awake person that sees the destruction we're reeking everywhere, especially from the Western and American point of infiltration.

No wonder I get headaches! I'm conspiring here in my little cubicle, trying to right all the ills that are all completely beyond my fucking control.

PSF: So what do you do if you feel that way?

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 obsess me, hoping that others will either find release in my voice or will acknowledge that there's some truth in this. They can see that this IS as horrible as I make it out to be, that I'm not fucking exaggerating. How can you exaggerate reality? We can't even condense reality. We can't understand what's truly happening because it's too immense. I think that overwhelmingness is what helps turn us back into our cubicles and sit in front of the TV. Ultimately, if one thinks too much, one gets a massive fucking headache and realizes 'where do you begin and what can you ultimately fucking do?' There's a lot of small things that can be done. People are (and this is really the American curse, not the American dream) born and bred to be capitalist consumers. We always want the latest toys and we have to work to pay for all of these modern conveniences that trap our time and waste our energy.

Spinning off into a diatribe, what can the individual do? The individual can refuse to buy Nike which supports slave labor wages (as if everyone in this country isn't somehow effected by slave labor wages). We can be a little bit more frugal in the sense of knowing what we are supporting, knowing that our money is going to these Hollywood companies putting out these 50 million

dollar sci-fi pieces of complete shit. It's realizing that if you go to fucking McDonald's what you're doing to the environment and your body. The individual has many small ways to revolt whether it's forced frugality against capitalism or consumerism or small acts of volunteerism or donating things to the VA. There's a million things that the individual can do that might seem small but in the face of it, it all helps.

Where do we begin signing up for this? I'm not ready for fucking politics because I realize what a lie the whole arena is. That's what is ultimately frustrating but that's what ultimately forces me to continue to create, especially because in this age of placation, who are the protesters? What do we have? Me and Jello Biafra? Who's the voice of reason? How did we get so far afield from the ideology of the '60s? In the '70s, I saw activism turn into apathy. Then the greed of the '80s and I don't even know what we should call this fucking decade. The decade of struggle. There is so much to struggle against. There is so much to make you stressed out.

I don't know. I can only continue to fret. (laughs) Write my little speeches and sell them to a handful of people and hope that someone will not buy Levi's or Nike or anything. Start somewhere.

PSF: Right. Actually, that's what I try to do with our site, getting recognition for people and ideas that usually get ignored.

Yeah, send that out in the void and some open minded individuals will stumble on that. To me, I've always taken pride in reporting for the minority. I take pride in the fact that the passion of my message, no matter what format my passion is manipulated into under a project, speaks for a real small minority that's not scared by the truth, scared by themselves into the perpetration of any number of cycles. That's not the majority of people. People don't want to be blamed for what they're guilty of. They don't want to take responsibility and think for themselves. If that's the masses, fine.

PSF: You're from the Midwest originally?

No, I'm from upstate New York, Rochester. People always think I'm from Detroit or Cleveland. No one knows about Rochester. Kim Gordon, Wendy O. Williams and I were all born there. It's a bizarre thing.

PSF: So when did you come to New York City?

Around 1976.

PSF: What did you think of New York City when you first came there?

It was glorious. It was a mass insane asylum. It was a massive candy store. It was a pigsty. It was easy to get by in 1977. Nothing was expensive as now and people were very generous. Obviously, I went there for a creative outlet and for the stuff that was coming out of there. I didn't go there to embrace what existed. My whole theory was to stick a thorn in every side that had come

before me. It was almost as if my job was to dispute the 'alternative' that had already been established.

PSF: What do you mean in particular?

The groups that had originally made me want to go to New York and which originally had made me run away at fourteen to go and investigate. Patti Smith, Richard Hell, Television. Although they attracted me there and they were a welcome relief from a place like upstate New York, I wanted to create something that would completely divorce myself from that, break away and shoot forward. I still found that a lot of things that I was drawn to didn't go far enough or were still too based in a tradition.

PSF: So you didn't think much of the punk bands from that time?

I was never interested in punk per se. It depends on what you mean by 'punk.' Punk can be an attitude or a fashion statement or a lousy, three chord music. Take your pick. I always thought I was anti-punk. I got lumped in with punk because I wore black and I dyed my hair. I thought punk was lousy Chuck Berry music amped up to play triple fast. I didn't like the chord structure or that they used chords. I thought it was really too much orientated towards fashion. A lot of the groups that were in New York were diversifying more and trying to find a new genre- groups like Mars or DNA or the Contortions.

PSF: You got to be a part of that scene with Teenage Jesus.

I think that was very anti-punk. When I think of punk, I think of the Sex Pistols and the Clash but I really do think that those are rock bands.

PSF: So what made the 'no-wave' bands different?

I think they were dealing more with personal insanity while English punk rock was dealing with social insanity. That's what helped diversify the New York from any other scene that was happening at the time. No one was socially conscious in New York at the time. We were all trying to fucking survive and not be committed to Bellevue.

PSF: A lot of the no-wave bands didn't last very long.

I think that's a blessing. To me, that's the problem with anyone that has a band. All my projects are based on this: you have a concept, you develop it, you execute it, you do the next thing. I never wanted to do anything longer than one album. I didn't want to document any longer or try to 'perfect' it because to me that's repetition. It never interested me. It also helped to keep my popularity under control because you have to play the same songs for ten years over and over and tour over and over in all these cities so people can catch up and catch on to what you're doing (this is pre-MTV). That has held NO interest for me and never shall. One of the problems or maybe the biggest benefits of my career is that I constantly did something else. I had to.

PSF: What were you doing after Teenage Jesus?

At the same time of Teenage Jesus, I had another band called Beirut Slump. We recorded an LP's worth of stuff that came out on Hysterie. We did three shows, we lasted a year, we did our thing and we broke up. 8-Eyed Spy was next and at the same time as that, I was recording Queen Of Siam.

PSF: How were each of these bands and projects different?

They were each coming from a different musical perspective although I have always dealt with obsession, fascination, danger, death and sex. I always try to present a different musical format or soundscape. Musically, none of the above have anything in common.

PSF: In the '80s, you did a lot of collaborations but you were doing much more work as a poet. Did you find you were getting frustrated with music?

I've enjoyed all of my musical collaborations and I continue to do them today. I'm always doing some kind of musical project. I have a double CD coming out this October called MatriKamantra, which is 'illustrated word' as I call it. It really means 'the mother of all sounds.' I consider it spoken word set to music, which I've done since 1982 in various incarnations live. I released a CD two years ago called Universal Infiltrators which is also in this illustrated word format.

For me, it's always that the lyrics are what drove the music. What always came first were the lyrics. I thought that I had to get to the meat of the matter and strip away the music. When I was in 8-Eyed Spy, it started to annoy me as we got more popular because I thought it must be too catchy and too accessible. People think they know what it's about but they don't. It's a very negative attitude towards the audience. Hence, I quit the band. With spoken word, I was driven to that out of the need to get to the root of the problems and deal with the real issues.

PSF: Did you find that there were some authors that were a big influence on you?

My biggest influences from the beginning were literary anyway. My influences had nothing to do with music. Hence my first musical project, Teenage Jesus, doesn't sound like anything else. My influences were always Henry Miller, Hubert Selby Jr., Jean Genet. They were always these male authors that really told the truth about their lives and had no fear of revealing themselves. Although they claimed it was fictionalized accounts, it was really their own lives. Those were really the most inspiring to me as a young teenager. I knew I would write. I knew that writing was the priority over any other format. I used music to illustrate the words. There was then a time when the music was no longer necessary. I made certain points about certain things but I've never ceased to do music.

PSF: Did the Beats influence your thinking or your writing?

The only way that the Beat generation influenced me was by their lifestyle. I just didn't think that they wrote good enough. I didn't think it was poetic enough. It didn't grab me in the way of the aforementioned authors did. But their lifestyle interested me- that they would just claim to be a writer or an artist and just live their life this way. Mobility is always very important to writers, which is why I've lived in many different cities. New York, L.A., San Francisco, London, New Orleans. Now I'm in Pennsylvania. Mobility is very important for an artist. I think that if you're a solo performer, it makes it a lot easier than dragging around four babies with you that are considered your band.

So the Beats' lifestyle was what was so attractive to me, that they went to all these places. They had mobility so that their property didn't stop them from creating. They documented this work and somehow got this published. That was very wonderful.

PSF: You were talking before about how sex and sexuality are important parts of your work. Could you talk about your views on this?

The book I have coming out in October is called PARADOXIA- A PREDATOR'S DIARY. It's like all of my work, non-fiction. It's not memoirs. It's not a novel. It's not fiction. It's written in a unique style. It's about sexual horror and the psychic repercussions. It's about understanding my obsessions that I first started to outline in films like RIGHT SIDE OF MY BRAIN and various spoken word things. I think that this book ends that period, dealing with habits and obsessions and the predatory nature, which I don't think has been documented from a female viewpoint. Although in this book, a lot of my (it's not guilt since I feel none) blame goes to my male side, my masculine tendencies. Although I enjoy the most horrible elements of my nature, my male tendencies always drove men insane. This book tries to bookend what I tried to explore in my own psychosexuality in the early '80s. It's an update, an outline and a psychological dissection of what really drove me now at the mature age of 38 in understanding more of what I was doing, how I was doing it and why I was doing it. All in a nutshell, in 200 pages or less.

When I deal with sexuality, speaking for a sexual minority, I'm speaking to and for people who have no choice but to deal with the darker side of their personality, their darker desires. We really need voices that speak to us about this in an intelligent and a poetic way. We need it from a female voice because I can't think of any in recent or past history that have dealt really deeply in this. I think that's another thing that really drives and also the fact I feel no taboo. Nothing embarrasses me. I realize that my pain, torture and sexual deviousness is a universal trait. Universal by minority standards indeed but we need a voice that addresses these issues that are not adequately addressed.

PSF: What would you consider a healthy sexual attitude?

'A Healthy Sexual Attitude' by Dr. Lunch. I think it's knowing what you want, knowing why you want that. In other words, there really is no taboo. I'll look at the negatives and I'll take my own case example. If something transgresses or is seemingly degrading and really attracts you and you embrace that, just

understand why you embrace that and then there's no harm to anyone. And of course, having someone that also understands. The most difficult part of sexual honesty is finding someone that you can tell the truth to and accept it and understand it and deal with it and satisfy it. That's very difficult in the games that we play between men and women and in relationships in general. It's really difficult to find an honest sexual relationship where you can express what you want and desire and have them understand why that drives you. It's a life-long study. What is beautiful is the more that you know what you want, one does become a connoisseur of their own desire, which you should be. We shouldn't accept what turned us on five years ago. We should be constantly progressing in our desires and understanding them better so we can openly be satisfied. It might be one of the few areas where we could actually control our satisfaction over a situation. Again, another life-long search. (laughs)

PSF: You talk a lot about things that piss you off. What about some things that give you pleasure and joy?

Quiet. Peace. Getting up at 5 AM, which is my usual daily ritual. Solitude. Reading. Those are top priorities. I'm living now in a place where I know two people. I removed myself, having moved repeatedly. When I moved to New Orleans, it's because I knew no one there. It's not that I don't want to have friends. I have plenty of friends. I think it's very healthy to live in different cities. Peoples' lives tend to complicate your own life. Ideally, I consider myself the hermit on the hill. That's peace to me. Maybe it's just because of the velocity of what I've created, the velocity of the interactions in public that I've had in past 20 years. My pleasures are really much more personal and onanistic.

If people could understand how much pleasure they could have by themselves, I think everyone would be a lot saner. I think that people really need a dose of quality time with one's self, because the things people fear (which is why they long for all these distractions) is to be by them-fucking-selves quietly, alone. Reading. People in general really have an aversion to that. Maybe it's because they have to face themselves.

PSF: I usually wish that I had more time for myself.

Right. It's not just saying 'I can have this weekend.' The beauty in the way that I create is that I will go through months and months and sometimes years of a really intensive workload and then I will say 'that's it.' You have to force yourself. And of course, you have to have the financial stability even if it's only for a week or month for one to greedily consume time by themselves. That is a luxury. It's a luxury that I strive and work very hard for.

JUST TO BE LEFT ALONE. It's so joyful. (laughs)

PSF: You once said 'I used to think feminism was a liberating force - now I see many of those people are just censors under a different name.'

Absolutely. But 'feminism' is like saying 'mustard.' Which feminism or which branch of feminism? To me, I always like the term 'humanist,' which I think I am. I'm pro-sex, pro-pornography, pro-NRA. That divides me from a lot of so-called

feminist who I've readily debated as well as other forms of censors. We need more equality across the board. I think feminism certainly is not an outdated idea. I consider myself a 'femi-nazi' (a term which I use to my advantage) because in a lot of 'conspiracy of women' speeches, I'm making a sarcastic proposal. It's not completely eliminating half the population but finding a planet where women could be by themselves just to see if it would make any fucking difference. Not of course painting all men with the same fucking broad stroke. Realizing that my target is men in positions of power which the average man sadly completely lacks. My target is always the politicians, the fathers, the forefathers, the fuckers, the corporate soldiers.

PSF: How about this quote: 'I would be humiliated if I found out that anything I did actually became a commercial success.'

It would be horrifying!

PSF: Why?

Because I don't think it would be for the right reasons. I don't think I'm in the right era or the right century to be embraced the way I should. The people who meant the most to me, no matter what form of art it was (like the Marquis De Sade or Henry Miller or any thinker), were always denounced during their time. They were never embraced until their death. If for some reason, I did get famous, I just don't think people would get the total picture. They would be embracing an aspect or a movement or one side of me. That's why they can embrace Courtney Love, because she's one dimensional. That's why they cannot embrace me. That's why they will never embrace me as a population.

PSF: You think it's kind of a paradox to be an artist and at the same time try to shun a large audience?

I don't purposely shun them. I just think the passion in which I deliver in any format is going to alienate a lot of people. I think because I'm not dealing with fiction and because I'm dealing with hyper-reality. People want something that soothes them or makes them forget and takes them further from themselves. They don't want something that makes them question, wonder or take responsibility. I don't think that it will ever be a popular core intellect that will become suddenly fashionable to embrace. I don't have any fear of popularity in my lifetime. (laughs) I'm just happy that I'm at the plateau that I've been at since the inception of my career.

There are hundreds, thousands of people that we don't know about. They get no coverage. They get no press. They can't get their records produced. They can't get their paintings seen. They can't get their writing published. I'm very lucky to be in the position that I'm in and I recognize that. It's really out of sheer stubbornness to make sure that my stuff gets out there whether it's distributed, whether or not people want it, whether or not people can find it. That's just blood, sweat and tears. It's just 'I will not take no for an answer.' A lot of people don't have the gumption, energy or time that it takes. It is really time consuming and it really can be frustrating. It is something that I'm really driven

to do. But there's any number of really talented phenomenal artists that we'll never fucking know about unless someone like you goes and seeks them out.

Therefore I'm lucky. OK, Rolling Stone and Spin ignore me. I ignore them. I don't fucking read them! I don't watch MTV. If the enemy ignores me they're lucky because otherwise I might have to attack. I can't afford the kind of ads that run in those magazines to get the coverage that only the corporate backing will allow. Therefore, I look at the positive. It doesn't matter if my message is not universally heard. It only matters that those that need the so-called kind of public psychotherapy that I deliver can seek it out. If they look hard enough, they can find. It's out there.

PSF: Thanks very much for your time.

Sure! Good luck in infiltrating the void!