Young British Art on the Global Stage

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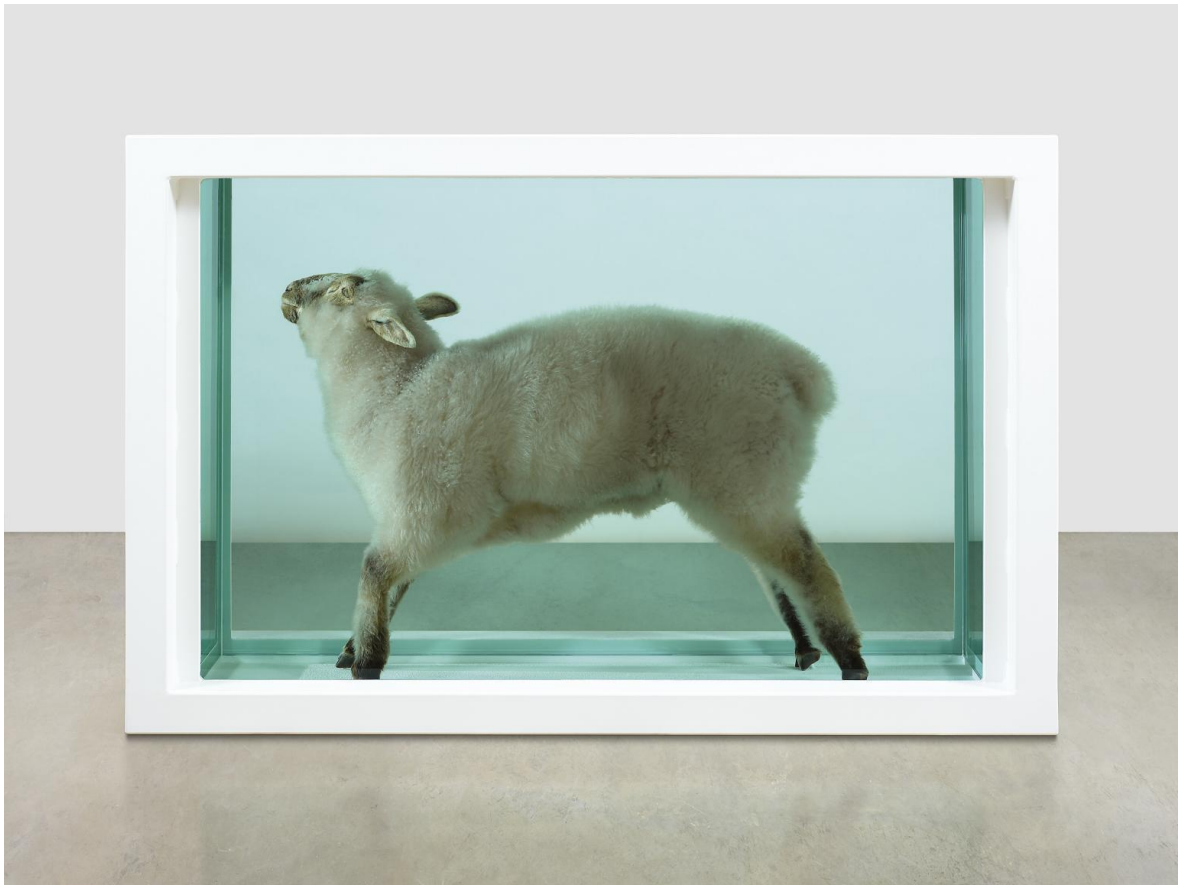

Fifteen years ago, at the time of the *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy, which showed off Charles Saatchi's collection of 'young British art' (often known as 'yBa'), it was the most notorious tendency in the art world. Its works—especially those by Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin, Chris Ofili, Sarah Lucas, Marcus Harvey and Jake and Dinos Chapman—caused huge public controversy and attracted regular headlines in the press. They received the signal honour of being attacked: in two separate attacks, Marcus Harvey's *Myra*, a portrait of the child-killer Myra Hindley, was smeared with ink and pelted with eggs at the *Sensation* exhibition; an artist poured ink into Hirst's *Away from the Flock* (1994), a dead lamb held in a leaping position within the usual vitrine; and Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), was attacked by a religious adherent on the showing of *Sensation* in New York. The artists became known as celebrities in the press and on TV: Hirst as a hard-drinking party-goer known for exposing himself; Emin as a colourful and similarly drunken adolescent primitive; the Chapmans as punkish, leather-jacketed delvers into the depths of human depravity.

Hirst was only the most celebrated member of that new wave in British art which succeeded in gaining international attention and widening the audience for contemporary art. They were formed as the once confident and affluent private art market was hit severely by the recession from 1989 onwards. Galleries closed or scaled down their activities, while some began to turn away from the work of highly expensive international stars to young, home-grown—and much cheaper—talent. Many artists found themselves with large stocks of unsaleable objects and nowhere to show them: some ceased making permanent fine-art objects—there was a revival of performance work and of transient installations—and others made less conventional ones. Artists also became their own curators, making shows for themselves and their acquaintances in the many industrial spaces emptied out by the recession. Hirst, from the first an entrepreneur, put on one of the first of those do-it-yourself shows. Most of all, there was a turning away from the inward-looking concerns of the art world to new subjects, especially to those which might appeal to the mass media. Those media were British-based and mass marketed so it is not surprising that the character of the work became more specifically British and—in a very qualified sense, as we shall see—less oriented towards conventional middle-class taste. If it was to appeal to journalists busy dumbing down, and to advertisers and proprietors, it had to abandon (at least on the surface of things) the arcane concerns of autonomy and postmodern theorising.

This tendency was no avant garde for it had no coherent programme, and no mission except success. It was a rapidly changing scene where works and reputations were driven by fashion and publicity from venue to venue, courting the growing museum- and gallery-going audience. If Hirst's shark became a symbol of the phenomenon, it is because the creature can never be still—it must keep the water flowing over its gills—or die: as Hirst himself put it, 'not moving forwards ... just moving'.

The most positive features of new British art were always negative. It reacted against a pompous and snobbish art world, against an art that was caught up mostly in itself, against art critics' nonsense used to puff up artists and intimidate the general public, and against high theory which erected barriers to keep out the vast majority uneducated in its jargon, and which promised something radical but rarely delivered.

Seeing yBa's uncouth art for the first time in unmanicured rooms was often an unusual experience—quite different from the managed displays of most art galleries, or the culture industry as a whole for that matter. The transport of those works into the highly decorated rooms of the Royal Academy, and more recently into polished white cube spaces, drains them of some of their original negatory power. Of the works in *Sensation*, Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years* was the setpiece of that negative impetus. Even the Academy cannot tame it—the stink of the rotting head induces nausea, and its flies escape to settle on other works. The core of Hirst's work is not to be found in banging on about life and death, as he and his supporters are wont to do, but instead in their mass-media representations, particularly horror flicks, from *Jaws* to old Hammer movies about vampires and other monsters. *A Thousand Years* plainly refers to Dracula films, the glass enclosure and the life cycle of the flies raising the shade of the Count's incarcerated servant, Renfield, who feeds on the blood of small creatures. The great majority of the work on show at *Sensation* also fed off mass culture. Many at the time said that that this art proved that the barriers between high art and mass culture had collapsed for good. Yet the power of the work was precisely (and very

often *only*) to do with breaching those boundaries, with the flow of blood from one body to another.

Sensation, showing the work of Marc Quinn and Cerith Wyn Evans

Before yBa, Britain had been a fabulously hostile environment for contemporary art. It was generally considered (at best) worthy and boring, and (at worst) a huge con, in which over-educated folk were duped into finding significance in works of no conceptual or technical merit. The tendency issued into a rapidly changing social situation, in which as deindustrialisation stalked the land, the organised working class shrank and was politically defeated, while the middle class grew and blurred its boundaries. Artists, and the middle class as a whole, began to discover the joys of white boys' pop, of football, of watching self-consciously trashy TV while quaffing large quantities of lager. At any rate, they were more prepared to celebrate these activities openly. What brought about this open embrace of 'low' culture and manners, and allowed the surrender of the vestiges of bourgeois deportment and morals? How did the middle class to come to regard lager-drinking as 'culture' at all?

The first cause was the collapse of Eastern European communism alongside the political and economic defeat of the working class in Britain. With the power of that class apparently shattered forever, and with the restraining force of communism over capitalism gone, it was

safe for the middle classes to let blur those distinctions that held them apart from their lessers. Art often feeds on that which is passing away, and, in doing so, assists its passage. In Britain with its rapid deindustrialisation, much of traditional working-class culture acquired a nostalgic patina, celebrated in the clichés of a film like *The Full Monty*, in which social collapse is recast as what is supposed to be bitter-sweet comedy. Similarly in *Sensation* there were crude jokes, kebabs, tabloid spreads, fragments of pornography, confessional and lurid pieces—all from artists trying hard to behave badly. The mere form, the shadow of working-class culture is celebrated but only in its grossest and most clichéd outlines. The solidarity that those forms produced and were produced by is forgotten, and the result has only the appearance of life.

The other factor in this middle-class yearning for the authentic image of working-class culture is just as important: the failure of communism has been accompanied by a prolonged and increasingly serious malady of capitalism. This is a crisis going back decades, although in the West it is only recently that it has been felt with such harshness that people no longer expect things to improve, and have begun to believe that life will be worse for their children than for themselves. So the middle class has been freed from the spectres of both socialist and capitalist improvement—what else is there to do but party? So the establishment countenanced the surrender of its lofty principles for a more plausible and marketable alternative.

It is curious to revisit the subject so long since its heyday. There are ways in which the contemporary art world seems to have changed beyond recognition in the intervening years, particularly in the increased pace of its globalisation and in its involvement with the politics of documentary. The sideshow that was yBa has become little more than a well-worn joke, as the most feverish speculative investment moved to shores that presented opportunities for the marketing of richer exotica, before crashing in the financial crisis of 2008. yBa's death as

a tendency was completed, and its irrelevance was sealed by the rise of a strong current of documentary and political art that came to dominate the biennial scene, and which responded first to the anti-capitalist movements and then to the 'war on terror'. That war against nations and ideologies saw the British state become active and complicit in illegal invasion, imperial occupation and in kidnapping, torture and murder. Of the artists who made up the yBa generation, only Mark Wallinger has made work that fully grasped the gravity of those crimes, with his intervention in the long galleries of Tate Britain, meticulously reconstructing a protest installation originally set up outside Parliament and torn down by the police, which included many photographs of the horrors inflicted on the people of Iraq.

While the tendency vanished, a few of its members have a public reputation that still trades on its notorious memory. Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst (and to a lesser extent, Sam Taylor Wood) are less artists in the usual sense than celebrities who happen to make art. If they were to stop, their lives as lived in the media would be sufficient to ensure them of continued income and fame, on the Paris Hilton model. Neither Emin nor Hirst occupies the oppositional position that yBa once held against a conservative culture. Rather, they are comfortingly eccentric establishment figures, a raunchy dame and a golden duke, firm fixtures of the British media scene. The current Hirst retrospective at Tate Modern is an odd attempt to make Hirst look like a conventional artist, by arraying his work in a typically stately and serious Tate display in its staid white galleries. Viewers can swiftly tell they are not in a conventional show, firstly because looking at more than one dot painting or pharmaceutical cabinet brings very swiftly diminishing returns, and secondly because in the later rooms Tate deportment gives way to some Hirstian silliness—vulgar wallpapers, revolving spin paintings, a lot of gilding and absurd religious references. You exit into the shop, where the true Hirst can be found.

Nevertheless, even the position of those celebrities is insecure. Recently, both have tellingly faltered in their handling of the media, and both with an excess of conservatism. For Emin, this was in response to the 50% top rate of tax announced in 2009 by the Labour government as a response to the financial crisis: she proclaimed that she would leave the country to avoid paying it, a stance that did not quite fit with her carefully honed image of wounded, expressive and above all uncalculating adolescent primitive. The general reaction was to say that she was welcome to take her services elsewhere. Tax evasion would, of course, be fully expected of the Hirst persona, but his attempt (also in 2009) to reinvent himself as Francis Bacon with the extraordinary step of taking up painting (it had previously been left to more or less competent assistants) received a very hostile critical response. Many dwelt on the weakness of the execution and composition, particularly when matched against the Poussins and Rembrandts of the Wallace Collection, where Hirst had arranged that the works would first be shown. Most newspaper criticism was utterly dismissive. For example, Tom Lubbock wrote in the *Independent*:

> Many kinds of paintings get reviewed on these pages, and some of them (in my judicious way) I say are good, and some bad. But in a way they're all quite good, or they wouldn't be getting reviewed here in the first place.
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> These Hirst paintings are way outside that range. They're thoroughly derivative. Their handling is weak. They're extremely boring. I'm not saying that he's absolutely

> hopeless. But I'm not saying he's any good either. There are many degrees of painting. There are many painters in evening classes much worse than Hirst. On the other hand, you'd find quite a few who were better, too. To try to be accurate: Hirst, as a painter, is at about the level of a not-very-promising, first-year art student. He is in his mid-forties.[1]

By attempting to escape the image of himself as a chancer and speculator whose works (of which the paradigm is the diamond-encrusted skull, *For the Love of God*, 2007, now far by far the smallest work to occupy Tate Modern's gigantic Turbine Hall) embody the allure of money, in favour of an authenticity of touch and expression, the connection between the brand name (Hirst) and the automatic creation of positive publicity and wealth was broken.

There is a tendency for the memory of yBa to become increasingly reduced to the cipher of a media-savvy, celebrity manufactured persona, of cynical manipulation of the market, and the resulting generation of extreme wealth of which Hirst is the prime example. Plenty of art students would still willingly follow his track towards fame, vast fortune and country estate. The very power of the model also produces reactions against Hirst himself and all that he stands for. Eugenio Merino recently displayed a vitrine containing a caricature Hirst effigy with a vastly inflated head which has just blown out its brains with a pistol. Its title, *4 the Love of Go(l)d*, made the pun on the skull piece explicit. Of course, such a work, in re-enacting the techniques of yBa, also becomes an example of them, and it was certainly designed to manufacture media controversy. Yet its aggression, and its apparent demand to have a

[1] 'Are Hirst's paintings any good? No, they're not worth looking at', *The Independent*, 14 October 2009.

definitive end to hype, egotism and cartoonish literalism feeds on a common reaction against the excesses and stupidities of yBa and its patron saint.

Yet while yBa perished, many of its characteristics have taken on a suitably zombie-ish afterlife in work produced across the globe and sold to a new breed of collector and

speculative investor: like yBa, that work is attention-seeking, simple, spectacular, tongue-in-cheek and feeds of readily recognisable mass-media cliché. In its global reanimation, there is no longer anything 'young' or 'British' about this art. It is just that work with similar features is a commonplace in the art-world decoration of the lives of the super-rich. While a lot of work is made globally that looks a bit like yBa, it is hard to gauge the precise influence of the tendency. This is partly because it is difficult to separate it from the influence of the US art from which it drew many of its characteristics—particularly from Warhol, Koons, Steinbach, Prince and others. Nevertheless, the model of yBa was an attractive one for artists who lived outside the global cultural hegemon, not least because a swiftly successful, popular and irreverent art with wide international recognition had been made, not in the United States, but from the edge of Europe.

A paradox of the emerging global art world was that it relied for much of its marketing on the promotion of national and regional art. Here British artists had a particular contribution to make: while the origins of the art lay in its appeal to a national audience, in its global reach, it took British images and issues that had some wider resonance to manufacture a clichéd image of the nation fit for the international scene. In this sense, the preview party for the Walker Arts Center's show of young British art, *Brilliant*, was symptomatic: guests were greeted by British 'bobbies' (uniformed police) and Buckingham Palace guards, and could be made over as punks or mods. In such a setting, the art was set up to be viewed as an allegorical expression of its nation of origin, and only that.

US artists, then representing the universal culture of consumer capital, were unable to provide such an education in national niche marketing. The more American they seemed, the less tied to any one place. When, among others, Scandinavian, Cuban, Chinese and Indian artists followed the success of yBa, it provided a lesson in presenting a national art for the global scene by playing to national cliché in a media-friendly fashion, which may, depending on circumstances, be taken as truthful description or tongue-in-cheek simulation. It was seen in the prevalence of depictions of Mao in Chinese art or the frequent appearance of machetes in Cuban art. The national labels were flags of convenience for marketers, useful in neatly and simply identifying under-exploited tracts of art for new speculators unschooled in the history of avant-garde and contemporary art. Since those labels were so much insisted upon, they had a deep effect upon the way that art was made, seen and written about.

Internationally, if yBa was the first example of a revamped national art made for a global stage that had been transformed by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Eastern European communism, then the very thing that assured its notoriety also eventually killed it. Nations with more dramatic stories and extreme political conditions—and far more dynamic economically and important politically—started to produce art that fitted the global model, driving Britain to the sidelines. For how could the depredations even of the British working class, and the oppressive character of a regime that remained nominally democratic compare to the sweeping transformations of, say, China with its precipitate economic growth and urbanisation, and its crucial role in sustaining the economy of the US and the West as a whole; or of Russia with the misery of its vast masses, contrasted with the flaunted wealth of a tiny few, and the ruthlessness, corruption and ambition of its dictatorship?