

High Art Lite at the Royal Academy

Julian Stallabrass

'High Art Lite at the Royal Academy', *Third Text*, no. 42, Spring 1998, pp. 79-84.

The Saatchi Gallery holds two overweight files of press clippings, collecting the media reaction to *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*.¹ One can only feel reluctant to add to it. So this will not be a conventional review of the show but rather will look at the significance of the establishment's adoption of 'new British art' (or 'young British art', or the 'New Boomers' or whatever you want to call it or them, the terms and acronyms continue to multiply).² From the start, it should be said that there was a variety of work on show at the Royal Academy—there is a world of difference between Marcus Harvey and Gillian Wearing. But, in the Royal Academy's halls, with the tendency's induction into the high art establishment, it all began to seem the same. In this homogenising mainstream view, the art becomes best known for being (somewhat) notorious; the feature articles about Chris Ofili or the Chapmans in the *Evening Standard* purvey the same standard hype. This is the perspective that will be taken seriously here, despite its flattening of the scene. And it must be taken seriously because it is now the dominant view.

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 its own concerns, against art critics' bullshit used to puff up artists and intimidate the general public, against high theory which erected high barriers to keep out the vast majority uneducated in its jargon, and which promised something radical but rarely delivered. One of its early catalogues, *Modern Medicine*, read:

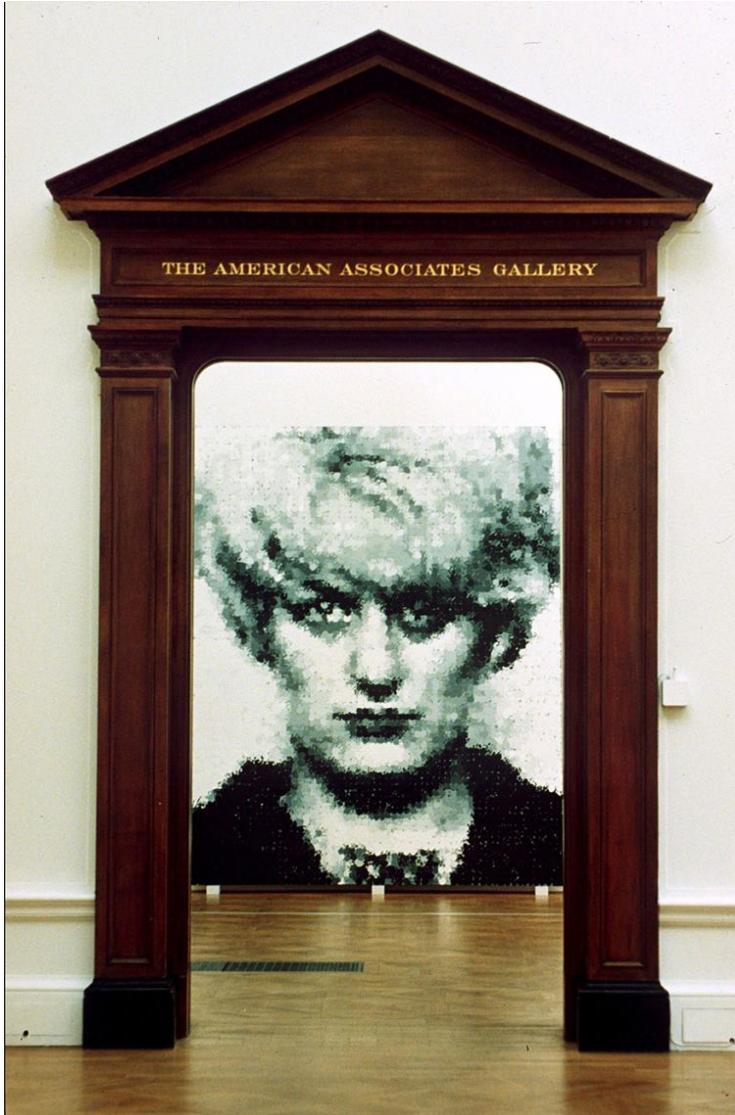
There is a gamble that takes place every day in your contact with other people, that your own logic (the way in which you think or do things) will not contrast too greatly with theirs, otherwise you might not have too smooth a ride.³

¹ *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* was held at the Royal Academy of Arts, 18th September-28th December 1997.

² There have been some excellent reviews of the exhibition: see, for instance, Patricia Bickers on the background to the show in *Art Monthly*, no. 211, November 1997, pp. 1-6; Naomi Siderfin's analysis of the congruence of new British art and the Royal Academy in her review in *Make*, no. 78, December 1997-February 1998, p. 25; and Neil Mulholland's detailed critique of this work's engagement with mass culture in the *Burlington Magazine*, vol. cxxxix, no. 1137, December 1997, pp. 886-8.

³ *Modern Medicine*, exhibition catalogue, anonymous text, London n.d., n.p.

Seeing its 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—and one which might well bump your logic off its usual track.



Marcus Harvey, *Myra*, 1995, as seen at the Royal Academy

Of the works in *Sensation*, Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years* is 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 or hide in Tracey Emin's tent. Elsewhere I have argued that the actual concerns of Hirst's work are 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.⁴ *A Thousand Years*

⁴ Julian Stallabrass, 'In and Out of Love with Damien Hirst', *New Left Review*, no. 216, March-April 1996, pp. 153-60.

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 likewise feeds off mass culture. There are those who say that this art proves that the barriers between high art and mass culture have come down for good. Yet the power of the work is precisely (and very often only) to do with breaching those boundaries, with the flow of blood from one body to another. Let's look a little at this vampirism.

The Sleep of Dracula

There, in one of the great boxes ... lay the Count! He was either dead or asleep, I could not say which—for the eyes were open and stony, but without the glassiness of death—and the cheeks had the warmth of life through all their pallor, and the lips were as red as ever. But there was no sign of movement, no pulse, no breath, no beating of the heart.⁵

As is well known, new British art was in large part a response to the recession which hit the art market from 1990 onwards, retrospectively endorsing such 'alternative' tactics as do-it-yourself exhibitions. Many of its characteristics can be explained by the turn to different sources of funding and publicity that the economic downturn forced upon artists. An art which set out to appeal, no longer solely to the cosmopolitan art world, but to the mass media had to transform itself. 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, to advertisers and proprietors, it had to abandon (at least on the surface of things) the arcane concerns of autonomy and postmodern theorising. But who exactly was the new audience for such art?

The Classless Class

Apparently, everyone who cares to look. We are a classless nation now, says Tracey Emin, echoing John Major. In economic terms, this is sheer nonsense—the long years of Conservative government may have seen a marked decline in traditional manufacturing industry and conventional patterns of work, but also saw a great rise in inequality, as business took back from its workers the gains of previous decades, and as many people ceased to work at all. But culturally, perhaps, the claim is more plausible.

Artists, and the middle class as a whole, have for a few years now been discovering the joys of white boys' pop, of football, of watching self-consciously trashy TV while quaffing large quantities of lager, or so we are led to believe. Perhaps, at any rate, they

⁵ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* [1897], London, Penguin Books 1994, p. 63.

are more prepared to celebrate these activities openly. What has brought about this open embrace of 'low' culture and manners? What has allowed the surrender of the vestiges of bourgeois deportment and morals? What indeed has led certain sectors of the middle class to come to regard lager-drinking as 'culture' at all? There are two interlinked causes, and neither of them have much to do with lessening class distinctions.

The first is the collapse of Eastern European communism alongside the political and economic defeat of the working class in this country. With the power of that class apparently shattered forever, and with the restraining force of communism over capitalism gone, it is safe for the middle classes to let blur those distinctions that held them apart from their lessers. As Herbert Marcuse put it, many years ago, in fact during the 1960s, a period with which this art is meant to have some connection: "The greatness of a free literature and art, the ideals of humanism, the sorrows and joys of the individual, the fulfilment of the personality are important items in the competitive struggle between East and West."⁶ With that struggle over, these matters (always something of an embarrassment because both systems flagrantly failed to live up to them, and besides they were an impediment to money-making) become subject to down-sizing.

That is a negative condition for the emergence of such a culture, but what of its positive attractions? There are some who would have you believe that these activities are simply enjoyable. But we can do better than this.

Art often feeds on that which is passing away, and, in doing so, assists its passage. In Britain with its precipitate deindustrialisation, much of traditional working-class culture has 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.⁷ Similarly in *Sensation* there are crude jokes, kebabs, tabloid spreads, fragments of pornography, confessional and lurid pieces—in short, 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 (of course, it is silly for anyone to object, because this art is *so* knowing, *so* ironic). The solidarity that those forms produced and were produced by is forgotten, and the result has only the appearance of life. So this vampiristic art draws life from its already anaemic subject.

Now it is true that for those raised on polite painting, this work is an eye-opener—for anyone who visited the Royal Academy, people's reactions showed that. But again the positive charge of this development is mostly negative—is about what it is not. The nationalist and apparently popular aspect of the art is a reaction against the

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* [1964], London, Routledge 1991, p. 57.

⁷ For an analysis of heritage film which is related to arguments about British economic and political exceptionalism, see Paul Dave, 'The Bourgeois Paradigm and Heritage Cinema', *New Left Review*, no. 224, July-August 1997, pp. 111-26.

cosmopolitan, bourgeois taste of the international art world and its association with neoliberal capital. It is part of a much wider process in which people are looking around for alternatives to the technocratic, globalised, economically orthodox world which is being prepared for them. Lacking any concrete political and cultural alternative, however, we are left with dubious nationalism and ineffectual misbehaviour. Further, in the case of this art, its adoption by the very people and institutions it seemed once to be pitched against removes most of its sting.

A few obtuse critics who pretend to radical credentials, have (perhaps inadvertently) placed themselves at the service of the establishment by trying to create the theoretical justification that this art will surely need if it is to sustain itself. They have claimed that this pale and shoddy reflection of a culture has some authentic connection to the real thing.⁸ Such ideas are founded on collapsing the dialectical opposition between mass-marketed culture and grass-roots popular culture, so that a false synthesis emerges. Again, Marcuse put the matter clearly: the objection to reinventing art as something popular, lacking alienation and acting like advertisements, is that it is historically premature, 'it establishes cultural equality while preserving domination.'⁹ Reminders of actual domination, of what it really means for people's lives when business rules, are very few in *Sensation*.

The second factor in this bourgeois yearning for the authentic image of working-class culture is equally 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? In such circumstances, the ideals of bourgeois society—and with them, those of conventional high art, previously so resilient in this country—are as much in crisis as those of socialism. Only now can the establishment countenance the surrender of its lofty principles for a more plausible and marketable alternative, that (to coin my own term, which at least has the advantage of descriptive power) we might call High Art Lite.

⁸ For an example of these views, see John Roberts, 'Mad for It! Philistinism, the Everyday and the New British Art', *Third Text*, no. 35, Summer 1996, pp. 29-42. It should be noted that the risible scenes at the 'Healthy Alienation' conference at the Tate Gallery, far from being an intentional exercise in futility, as suggested by Malcolm Quinn in these pages, clearly revealed the intellectual poverty of such views. See Quinn, 'Re-thinking the Unthinkable: Ventriloquy, the Quotidian and Intellectual Work', *Third Text*, no. 40, Autumn 1997, p. 13

⁹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 64. He is following Adorno's analysis here of course. If Adorno is the bugbear of many of these would-be radical supporters of new British art, it is not without reason. He provides a remarkably complete refutation of their claims, fifty years before they were made. He reveals their errors and, worse, reminds us that these errors are rather old. See Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein, Routledge, London 1991.

In Madame Tussauds there is a newish ride, called 'The Spirit of London' and opened by John Major, which takes visitors on a nightmarish animatronic tour of British history and identity. The last historical cliché, among the Beefeaters and the Blitz, is an ensemble showing Carnaby Street in the 1960s. It is no ideological accident that the 1960s should now be so much revisited. The usefulness of the image of Britain as a unified, classless nation—a bit eccentric, a bit raunchy but basically safe—which can be marketed to the British obviously, but also to others, particularly tourists, is obvious to those professional boosters of the economy and the culture. The nation's industry being weak, art stands out as the paradigm non-manufacturing industry, creating value apparently from nothing. Yet the often-made parallels between the current scene and Pop art—or for that matter with Situationism—bear little examination. Both Pop and Situationism were products of glut, born of a time when it seemed as though capitalism would go on delivering increased goods to everyone forever. That an art can be made in our currently straightened circumstances which has certain formal similarities with Pop is a matter partly of wilful blindness, partly of the hope that success will materialise if its mere image is aped. Again, in this farce, only the ghostly forms survive.

The Modern Medici

An art often gets the literature it deserves, and this boosters' art, as it is drawn into the mainstream, is in this respect exemplary. Louisa Buck's recent book, *Moving Targets*, which is meant as a user's guide to the current scene, actually does tell you everything you need to know, though not in quite the way that she intends. With its relentlessly upbeat tone, the book is a digest of the current hype, never missing the opportunity to deploy some journalistic chestnut, and as one reads more and more of it, the suspicion grows that the hype is all there is. Here is the opening to the piece on Charles Saatchi: 'What Cosimo de Medici was to quattrocento Florence, Charles Saatchi is to late twentieth-century London.'¹⁰

Likewise, the *Sensation* catalogue, while it looks like other Academy productions that have sometimes contained serious scholarship, is little more than an inflated PR exercise.¹¹ Richard Shone gives a detailed account of the rise of new British art with much useful information about art schools, galleries, exhibitions and networks between artists.¹² But tellingly the detail runs out when it comes to the few passages on those who have criticised this work. Rent-a-don, Lisa Jardine, writes an extraordinary piece, entitled 'Modern Medicis', on the history of British private collecting this century, seeking to glorify Saatchi by bathing him in the reflected light of such figures as Samuel Courtauld.¹³ This has the advantage of praising Saatchi while saying absolutely nothing

¹⁰ Louisa Buck, *Moving Targets: A User's Guide to British Art Now*, Tate Gallery Publishing, London 1997, pp. 126-7.

¹¹ *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, Royal Academy of Arts/ Thames and Hudson, London 1997.

¹² Richard Shone, 'From "Freeze" to *House*: 1988-94', in *Sensation*, pp. 12-24.

¹³ Lisa Jardine, 'Modern Medicis: Art Patronage in the Twentieth Century in Britain', in *Sensation*, pp. 40-8.

about his activities. The methodology is on occasion breathtaking. Might collectors sometimes collect for financial gain, asks Jardine, not unreasonably, and if they are important enough, might not the very fact that they collect certain types of work assure its value? But the motives of the collectors she has talked to are above suspicion, for they have assured her that they collect only for love.

Despite the claims of the boosters among artists, curators and critics, what is most remarkable about this noisy tendency is how static it is. It is an undead scene, without pulse, without breath. Although it bears all the marks of fragility and is subject to endless speculation about its demise, it is in fact enduring, appearing immortal by inducing a forgetfulness among its viewers and participants. If these artists are ‘playing for time’ in the endgame of high culture, they have been doing so now for nearly a decade.¹⁴ The major players are still in place six or seven years down the line, without much developing their work. This stillness is a reflection of the British interregnum, for it is an art which developed under Major and has achieved its greatest success under Blair. The Major years seemed to be a time of waiting for something better, and with the Blair government that waiting continues. The art scene, too, has been in a state of suspended animation, awaiting the twitch of the next thing, unable to see beyond the body of the present. With its adoption by the establishment, this art has reached a terminus—less sensation than cessation.



Martin Maloney, *Sony Levi*, 1997

The early promise of not-so-new, not-so-young British art has not been kept—instead, it has become thoroughly complicit with the mass media it started out regarding askance.

¹⁴ ‘Playing for time’ was Karsten Schubert’s description. See Andrew Renton and Liam Gillick, eds, *Technique Anglaise: Current Trends in British Art*, Thames and Hudson/ One-Off Press, London 1991, p. 40.

The text in *Modern Medicine* continued, ironically offering comfort to those engaged in the gamble over conventional logic:

Fortunately the stakes are usually kept low by the services of such as tv, magazines and other advertisements which set guidelines and patterns, so that you can align your logic in preparation for the outside world in the privacy of your own head. Personal experience has become a realistic extension of tv documentary or an improvisation of mingled feature films, to make the job of connecting far less involved, smoothing the awkward movements of your thoughts.¹⁵

And the artists of the Saatchi Collection, and their many hangers-on, advertisers and PR people, have finally made a very smooth ride for themselves. Martin Maloney's painting, *Sony Levi*, with its assured cack-handedness and considered vacuity is an emblem of the movement. It looks critical but the teeth of its critical gears have no purchase and spin in the air.

Forever Young

There lay the Count but looking as if his youth had been half-renewed, for the white hair and moustache were changed to dark iron-grey; the cheeks were fuller, and the white skin seemed ruby-red underneath; the mouth was redder than ever, for on the lips were goutts of fresh blood, which trickled from the corners of the mouth and ran over the chin and neck. Even the deep, burning eyes seemed set amongst swollen flesh, for the lids and pouches underneath were bloated. It seemed as if the whole awful creature were simply gorged with blood; he lay there like a filthy leech, exhausted with his repletion ... I stopped and looked at the Count. There was a mocking smile on the bloated face which seemed to drive me mad. This was the being I was helping to transport to London, where, perhaps for centuries to come, he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless.¹⁶

The success of this tendency is not, we should be clear, the normal process of assimilation since a good deal of this work wanted to be assimilated from the start, and built into itself the process of getting there. Now the Count lies sated, installed in London. Falsely youthful, infused with the (itself tainted) blood of mass culture, this art is dependent for continued life on the material and interest of the media. Is it fanciful to see in High Art Lite, the aesthetic face of Blairocracy—of a grimly youthful, strenuously

¹⁵ *Modern Medicine*, n.p.

¹⁶ Stoker, *Dracula*, p. 67.

egalitarian, British bulldog regime, obsessed with the media, yet committed to the terrible orthodoxy of its predecessors?

That face is not all there is. Founded as it is upon the taste of an advertiser, *Sensation* is a very partial show. It passes by much of what is of interest in recent British art, both in terms of new media and unorthodox ways of working: collaboration, performative work, site specificity, for the most part photography, digital art, are all missed, and video was granted a place only at the last moment.¹⁷

In one Hammer horror film, there is a scene where Van Helsing, in a desperate fight with Dracula, tears down the curtains from a tall window in the castle. The sunlight strikes the Count who expires and promptly crumbles to dust. Similarly with new British art, so self-regarding has it become, that an ingress of daylight will surely kill it. Immured in success, it has acquired a paradoxical autonomy, in which its supposed engagement with the outside world is transformed—by that ancient establishment alchemy—into a renewed formalism. Its provincial inwardness, though different, is no less complete than that of the art world of old.

That ingress of sunlight may not be slow in coming. The crisis of capitalism is deepening, as the recent economic and environmental crises in South East Asia show. This has been accompanied by some as yet provisional and uncertain signs of a revival of working-class militancy, particularly in the United States, but also here in Britain.¹⁸ Where democracy has been defeated or is ineffectual, guerrilla armies once again stalk dictatorships, and, as in the Congo, have overthrown them. Any further such revival will no doubt remind the bourgeois bohemians of their true loyalties. Those artists with truly radical instincts, by contrast, will want to abandon the wine bars of Shoreditch. Then perhaps *Sensation* will serve as the headstone of High Art Lite.

¹⁷ For analyses of various alternatives, as well as critical views of new British art, see Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass, eds., *Occupational Hazard: Critical Perspectives on Recent British Art*, Black Dog Publishing, London 1998.

¹⁸ See Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*, Verso, London 1997.