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London, according to the international media, is now 'the coolest city on the planet', and its art scene is swinging like nowhere else. The 'new British art' (nBa) has become something of a popular spectacle, and right across the media its 'success', alongside that of its counterparts in fashion, design, music and even gastronomy, is being celebrated to the point of tedium. What has not yet been much discussed, however, is what the 'popularity' of art might actually amount to: what are its broader meanings and functions; what kind of investment does the media have in art and, vice-versa, what is the nature of art's commerce with the popular media? Does art's high profile necessarily mean that its audience has expanded, and has any significant reconfiguration of the interface between high and low taken place within the new British art?

To address these questions adequately, however, it is necessary to go beyond some of the recent responses to the nBa phenomenon. One of these criticises what it takes to be its populist and 'careerist' bent, accusing it of a wilful and knowing elision of 'difficulty', theoretical, ideological or otherwise, and of simply being 'out for a good time'. Although this accurately describes much of the nBa, this view is confounded by a significant amount of work that has self-consciously resituated itself both in relation to 'theory', and to pleasure and 'the practice of the everyday'. Another theoretical response has been to incorporate a demotic, 'populist' element within theory itself, foregrounding the 'everydayness' of art, its articulation of the 'voice of the philistine' and its enactment of a return of the repressed dimensions of the 'low', the 'base' and the 'popular profane'. The problem of this approach, however, is that it over-privileges the 'everyday' and over-invests in the potential of the low to such an extent that it ceases to occupy a position from which to be disaffected with or critical of the everyday. These two theoretical views form opposite sides of the same equation and tend, consequently, to be too one-dimensional to distinguish adequately aspects of what is a heterogeneous and contradictory phenomenon. For there are two distinct tendencies within the new British art: the first, and by far the least numerous, within which the 'everyday' is appropriated without serving to fetishise the 'low' and affirm the popular; the second, and by far the most numerous, in which a 'scene art' of cynical and attention-seeking populist gestures predominates.

This distinction can be further elaborated via a discussion of how the new scene, of which both tendencies are in different ways a product, developed. Its 'point of origin' is commonly considered to be the series of 'DIY' shows mounted by young, at the time unknown, artists in disused warehouse spaces in London's Docklands. Shows such as *Freeze*, *Modem Medicine* and *Gambler* were mounted at a time when the London art scene was still as buoyant as anywhere else. The commercial sector was still in a fairly healthy state, British art history and theory were on the international cutting edge,

making for a productive conjunction between theory and practice that existed within art education at such places as Goldsmiths, and within the pages of what was the liveliest and most informative art magazine of the 1980s, *Artscribe International*. Also, the Saatchi Gallery had mounted what were the two most important and influential exhibitions of contemporary art to be held in Britain since the Tate's shows of American Abstract Expressionism in the late 1950s: the *New York, New Art* shows of 1987-88. The scene was well informed, and the level of debate was at an unprecedented highpoint; the success of the *Freeze* generation was an index of these conditions.

These 'DIY' shows were not an attempt at a 'Young Unknowns Gallery' agenda, however, but were a successful attempt on the part of well-connected, scene-sharp young artists to circumvent the conventional process of becoming a professional, exhibiting artist. But there was nothing really new about the work that emerged out of these shows, although many of the artists marketed at the time under the 'Goldsmiths' tag are still referred to as nBa's. For the most part, it consisted of cool and competent-looking derivatives of a generic, late post-modern period style that had its origins elsewhere. One variant consisted of re-rehearsals of the, by then, textbook strategies of 'Endgame' painting (Fiona Rae, Perry Roberts, Ian Davenport, Gary Hume's work at the time), another of Neo-Arte Povera poetics, or the 'arty' subjectivisation of once 'radical', problematic processes (Anya Gallacio, Cornelia Parker, Rachel Whiteread and many others), or the illustration of theory (Langlands & Bell and a few others). The work of its biggest star, Damien Hirst, consisted of a diluted variant of 1980s appropriation art. Anglicised and ontologised into aura-laden tableaux that dealt, not with the seriality or sign-value of the commodity, but with the timeless universals of the 'human condition'. The regressive, conservative nature of his art was masked, however, by the coolness and slickness of its presentation, and by his own self-promotion. In the latter, he was aided by his ambitious young dealer, and by an art scene eager to establish the profile of a new generation by providing it with a figurehead. Hirst, however, quite rapidly ceased to be a point of reference for nBa's, and at the moment, it is questionable whether he any longer operates within the remit of contemporary art; he is rather a media phenomenon, and his single contribution to the new British art is to have been responsible for the revival of the knowing 'shock' tactic, and a now widespread infantile narcissism and a craving for attention of any variety.

The new British art proper emerged from a different context, and it is largely, and paradoxically, a product of the early 1990s recession and the hiatus that followed. Commercial galleries scaled down, relocated or closed altogether, *Artscribe* folded, and, gradually, it became apparent that an era was at a close. The career and financial expectations of artists were no longer the same as they had been in the 1980s, and artists began to adapt to a new set of circumstances. Created by the boom-and-bust climate of the 1980s were semi-redeveloped areas of London, full of unlet office, retail and warehouse space, and, initially in an attempt to replicate the success of the *Freeze* generation, artists began to mount similar DIY shows in these spaces. Around this, a new scene started to emerge, populated by the graduates of an art school system that overproduces more well-educated artists than any other city in Europe. This, and the fact that the recession hit the London art world harder and earlier than anywhere else,

meant that this new scene was unique. This new context also forced into existence a new attitude to the art of the recent past. The lack of career opportunities, together with the kind of places and spaces within which art was being made and displayed, meant that 1980s-style professionalism and production values no longer seemed to apply. Gradually, 'museum art' seemed less relevant. The reason for this stems partly from the fact that the instrumental claims made for the art of the 1980s did not seem to stand up in this context either. Claiming to be undermining 'the scopic regimes of modernity' from within the confines of the pristine spaces of transnational postmodernism was one thing; reading the same claims on a press release of an exhibition by unknown artists in a disused shop-front in Shoreditch seemed slightly embarrassing. Considering such claims in the seminar room was a different matter to considering them while signing on in Brixton.

Furthermore, it became increasingly apparent that the critical strategies of postmodernism were in themselves less problematic than they once were. A particular kind of theory had become institutionalised in the 1980s, and, by the 1990s, it had become too easy to read first-order 'critical content' off the surfaces of art. In other words, the relations between theory and practice had become too close, and it had become too easy to 'illustrate' theory; instrumentalism seemed self-certifying and formulaic. What was seen to be a 'crisis of representation' in the 1980s had now, perhaps, ceased to be a crisis, and there no longer seemed much point in continuing a formalistic critique of the sign. Work made 'on' representation was now, for most educated young artists, already 'in' art; certain theoretical issues had ceased to be issues, were taken as read and had become part of a fairly conventional way of making art. The refusal by many younger artists to brandish theory, to wear it on their sleeves, can, therefore, all too easily be misperceived as an anti theoreticism. What all this meant for a younger generation of British artists was that they had to look beyond abstract theoreticism, and an alternative route was opened by another way in which this new context forced itself between theory and practice. This might be described as the experience, shared by many young artists, of a palpable sense of contradiction between the kinds of experiences, practices and pleasures that, if one were a critical, deconstructing postmodernist artist, one was supposed to keep an ironic, or otherwise, distance from, and those spaces and sensations that were constitutive of one's sense of identity. This was a contradiction that had become far more difficult to repress in this new situation.

Some of the best of the new British art comes out of this contradiction, and as such is not motivated by a counter-chauvinistic desire to revel in the 'profane' and the 'base', as many accounts would have it. What takes place in Sarah Lucas' work, for example, is a conscious and problematic return of the repressed dimensions of the local and the low. Hers is not a one-dimensional enunciation of invective as a counter to 'Art', but a quoting of other voices in a dialogic manner. There is thus a distance from the 'everyday' in her practice; she works, as she has stated, in the space between 'the ideal' and 'the actual'. She takes previous practices concerned with identity politics (that, unlike most of her peers, she has clearly engaged with) and 'tests' their claims against other contexts, while those other spaces, practices and experiences are brought within

the orbit of art, along with all their attendant contradictions. It is not an 'oppositional' practice; she does not fall into the trap of privileging one voice over another, and the 'everyday' is not therefore taken as a given and thus affirmed. Her work, like that of Tracey Emin, while concerned with the intensities of base pleasures, voice, retaining an edge, an awkwardness lacking in much of the nBa.

Not so long ago, there seemed grounds for optimism regarding the apparently 'carnavalesque' openness of the new scene in London. What predominates now, though, is a carnival of fetishised and mostly facile populist gestures, within which the repressed has returned in a quite different way. The vacuum created by the above hiatus has been filled by an anything-goes free-for-all, lacking any coherence or agenda other than careerist attention seeking. What looked like potentially significant gestures a few years ago, have become tediously ubiquitous ways of making modish 'wannabe' art. It is no longer big news to be told that you can be an artist and like Techno music; it is no longer a novelty to dance to it in shopping centres or play it in galleries and call it art. For established artists to say that memories of the film *Grease* are as important to them as those of the Falklands War might still be stunningly arrogant, but making work about one's investment in 'trivia' now amounts to little more than a one-dimensional gesture. That such work is still ubiquitous is largely the result of a paradigm shift, or rather, the disappearance of any coherent paradigms created by the contemporary crisis of criticism. Artists are no longer answerable to criticism; there is no longer a critical economy in London to speak of, and artists are above all part of a scene economy. Hence, a 'scene art' proliferates as a counterpart to a 'scene punditry' that passes for criticism.

This crisis in criticism could be anticipated when *Frieze* magazine began to assume the market-leading position of the defunct *Artscribe* in 1992. A change of agenda was apparent from the outset; flash production values seemed to take precedence over content, and there was a notable diminution in the level of debate. This escalated as the fashion cycle turned over and it became cool to say that theory was 'out'. For many, though, it had never really been 'in', and at the same time as the crisis in critical postmodernism manifested itself, there occurred an opportunistic marginalisation of 'Theory' or anything 'difficult' that might threaten to spoil what was turning into a very good party.

An upshot of this was a shift in power relations within the art world. When criticism had some power in the 1980s, perhaps more validatory power than it had had for over a quarter century, this meant that there was a displacement of power away from those who normally controlled the distribution of art. The hiatus of the 1980s has, however, been rapidly exploited by a constituency who had no stake in the 'failed project' of critical postmodernism, and validatory power is now squarely back in the hands of those who hold the purse strings, and whose main interest is market liquidity. Business as usual has resumed. Validatory and promotional power is now also shared with that mutant phenomenon of the 1990s: the curator. These part would-be writers, part would-be artists, and total art-careerists have stepped in to fill the space vacated by the critical constituency of the 1980s, who have largely fled the art world and gone back to

academe. Curators have also exploited the space created by a generation of artists who have largely disavowed their claims to authorship, who create a deliberately 'dumb' art that refuses to answer back, that can, therefore, be neatly slotted in to any 'theme' or group exhibition 'authored' by a 'big name' curator. Without any attendant critical discourse, however, the scene cannot really be much more than the curated spectacle that it is at the moment.

This spectacle is, nevertheless, enthusiastically devoured by the media across the board. The most significant factor behind this is clearly the fact that that art is a lot more streetwise, sexy and media-sharp than it has been before in Britain. A perhaps less obvious reason why the media, particularly the newer lifestyle and pop culture magazines, are interested in featuring 'Art' is that it makes them appear less trivial and superficial than they actually are. One of the effects of the media profile of the nBa phenomenon is that it can be packaged in such a way as to function as a convenient counterpart to the Britpop wave in music. In the current context of the touting of London as 'the coolest city on the planet' the popular spectacle of the nBa can then be made to provide the 'Swinging London of the Nineties' phenomenon with a form of high-cultural validation. The problematic implications this has for any claims regarding the 'cultural politics' of the nBa scene are obvious. Furthermore, another function of the hyped spectacle of 'success' is to completely elide the economic conditions within which art is currently produced in London. Many nBa's, including quite a few of its prominent figures, are still forced to live off state benefits. While London might be 'swinging' for a few people, it certainly is not for the majority of people involved in the art world.

There has been a quantitative transformation in terms of the content of the commerce between art and popular culture, but there has been no substantive change in the form of the interface between high and low, and the 'Great Divide' is no closer to being bridged. Low culture profits from its commerce with art, while profits are at stake in the popularisation of art. Art institutions are keen to promote this exchange because it creates the impression that there is a wider audience for art than there actually is. What this broader audience is probably consuming, however, is the spectacle itself, and the populist element in the art that provides the kinds of pleasures and sensations available elsewhere in culture. How many more informed spectators the nBa has created is also questionable, considering the paucity of rigorous analyses of the phenomenon, and the general lowering of the level of debate around the scene.

Nevertheless, there is a substantial body of work being made in London that does attempt to sustain the momentum of post-conceptual practices by incorporating within itself a critique of criticism. Gavin Turk, in a work such as *Pop*, for instance, quite presciently anticipates a number of aspects of the popular reception of the nBa phenomenon. He anticipates the ways it would be caricatured as punkish, 'in-yer-face', 'Bad Boy' attitudinising, and implies that neo-Situationist shock tactics generate no more gravity than the title of the work. Others, such as Jake and Dinos Chapman, also parody detournement and the recent cults of 'abjection' and 'bodyism' in art, while Chris Offili parodies and refuses both the stereotypes of blackness and the cultural authority of the post-colonial critic. The group practice, BANK, have launched a relentless assault upon

every aspect of the nBa scene. Their self-curated 'theme' shows have embraced all the predominant tropes of the 'Slacker' generation-'baseness', 'dumbness', 'banality' and 'profanity' - in such a way, however, that they are 'quoted' and thus sent-up rather than enacted. No reputation or pretension has been spared within the hilarious, faux-tabloidese pages of their art-zine *The BANK*, which tells a few home truths about the London art scene that you certainly won't read in the art press. This sharpness to the ways in which their activities are circumscribed means that such artists' work constitutes a practice, rather than simply amounting to a gesture. It is a practice conducted on the terrain of the popular, but one that retains a degree of reflexivity, an agenda of its own, and it does not, therefore, end up affirming what at any given moment passes for the popular.

It was inevitable that British art would align itself with British popular culture, once shifts in the class-profile of culture generally were eventually reflected in the art world, and once the demise of critical postmodernism meant that there was nowhere else left to go. The popular is now the backdrop against which art conducts its own self-definition. There is nothing wrong with art being popular, or of artists being opportunists, careerists or rampant hedonists, except for the fact that none of this can add up to a significant practice. However, the populist momentum within the nBa scene seems recently to have reached its nadir with the recent ICA exhibition *Assuming Positions*. Universally panned by critics, this exhibition purported to 'evoke a new romancing of pop and the promotional- so different from the critical knowingness of postmodernism [sic.]'. It consisted of an assortment of bits of designer furniture, a TV advertisement, a pop video and some art, assembled to demonstrate the 'increasing elasticity' of the boundaries between art and non-art; and it was certainly an exhibition that, a decade ago, anyone with any 'critical knowingness' would have thought twice about curating. However, this was an exhibition that was not intended to stand up to any critical scrutiny; it was not a serious attempt to look at the distinctions between high and low, but another disingenuous example of art aligning itself with the popular - one of the oldest and easiest moves in the book. It was clearly an instance of curators, like their many artist counterparts, trying to be hip, a promotional gesture, primarily directed at the media. But, people don't have to go to art galleries to see Jarvis Cocker or TV ads, and when art ceases to be popular, when Britpopism's novelty value inevitably wears off, its new audience will go back to consuming popular pleasures in the spaces in which they were intended to be consumed. Such populist gestures have a limited shelf life and this exhibition's reception indicates that a timely backlash is underway.