

**Paula Smithard,  
'How Rude Can You Get?'  
Make Magazine, February-March 1997.**

*Dog-u-mental* functioned as an allegory of institutionalised art practices. It consisted of eight exhibitions contained within the structure of make-shift polythene partitions, splattered with Pollock-style drips and a coloured, chequer-board floor that created an acid-induced hallucinatory feel. *Bonkers Bird* and *shut up you stupid cunt* which deployed allegories of gender politics were the most interesting of these.

The exhibition continued BANK's *epater le bourgeois* stance but in the publicity material there seemed to be a disturbing turn to the gestures of sexism and the use of misogynistic language. Evidently. I was not the only person to have reservations as to whether BANK hadn't taken a step too far, Susan Hiller pulled out of the exhibition after seeing the press releases.

BANK threw down the gauntlet with their press release for *Bonkers Bird* describing it as '... a show dealing with the shrill outpourings of irrational, spoilt, highly strung creatures...'. This figure of 'woman as other' was referenced by Rebecca Howard's narrative which used a drawing and a video of a wolf with photographs of herself interspersed to suggest her moonlight transformation into the wild-eyed woman who peers on her hands and knees at the viewer. The last image in this work showed barred teeth smeared with blood-red ink. These images, youth/style magazine pastiches, suggest that the hysterical woman is one which still haunts the imagination of a patriarchal culture.

Carina Diepens explored female fantasy in *Portrait of a Perfect Wife: a series of wedding photographs* in which her own face was collaged over the heads of eleven brides. At the opening Diepens lay face down on a table wrapped in clothing. So successful was she that many people didn't notice her. She became part of the furniture, an object.

Humour carried the work of Rebecca Warren and Milly Thompson. Warren's flashing neon sign *This Way* an arrow mounted vertically on a wall, reminiscent of the neon of Soho strip bars, was a joke phallic signifier that made a spectacle of male desire. Thompson's *Ba Ba the Elephant* consisted of polaroids of her backside transformed into a face, with the aid of a strategically placed carrot and sausage. This complemented her purple *Sexy Potato* that gently turned on a string and winked at the viewer. Joke automatic writing had been painted onto part of the wall in an unfortunately childish parody of Hiller. One of Hiller's criticisms had been that the artists didn't have the opportunity to write their own 'funny' press releases, but this wasn't a problem, it made the male members of BANK appear shrill and irrational. Indeed *Bonkers Bird* looked surprisingly cool for a BANK installation, all the work was hung on or close to the wall in its own space without interference from the others.

By contrast *Shut up you stupid cunt* looked hot and irrational and it was here that the hysterical subject figured most prominently, but it was male not female. A range of works jostled for space in an installation announced as "...a new challenge, for a thinking-Left-

New-Laddism", but what actually confronted the viewer was a litany of grotesque male subjects as mad, bad and dangerous to know. There was a drawing of Henry VIII (the original Lad?), Holbein style, denuded of the vestments of power by David Burrows and a mural by Dave Beech recounting Elvis's fetish for dark pubic hair against light underwear. Beech also drew himself poised to shoot by making the shape of a gun with his hands below a text beginning "this is not the story of an ordinary bloke who became obsessed with the glamour of the gun...". 'Fat cop' photos and videos by John Beagles emasculated the authority of male power through their ridiculousness; Graham Ramsay's bedsit-land alter ego John Saxon encased in a snorkel parker filmed making brevilles; Mark Hutchinson's cartoon-like cut-out, an alien on acid, danced in the midst of this chaos, disrupting any neat reading of the installation. This was the masculine subject as ridiculous, monstrous and in crisis. The only female figures here were Burrow's bubblegum heads of the Spice Girls on spikes and photographed, pilloried for the female laddism. Pilloried by and for whom?

The investment in testosterone excess here risked a celebration of unwelcome transgression whilst recent feminist criticism has produced invaluable insights into patriarchy and gendered art practices by theorising these phenomena. The title of Beech's show *shut up you stupid cunt* (an appropriation of Kathy Burke's insulting response to Helena Bonham-Carter quoted in Time Out) 'upped the ante', coming as it did from a male artist. In the context of the installation, it read less as a slur on women's art and more an expression of the crass sexism epitomised by Beech's Elvis. Rather than being a misogynist backlash, as Hiller feared, the works were curated in such a way as to expose the darker recesses of masculine subjectivity. The tensions raised between an investigation of gendered subjectivity and sexism made *Dog-u-mental VIII* an engaging and provocative-show to be reckoned with.