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'Chill Out. On and off the politics of "young British art"'
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everything is political

Dicks, cunts and arses (no bollocks though¹) are all over Dinos & Jake Chapman's mannequins. If they're trying to shock us, they're not doing it as part of some ambitious Brechtian cultural politics. The difference is not primarily a question of social content, but of artistic technique. The Chapman brothers don't work with the technical repertoire of immanent critique. What's more, this repertoire, for the first time, is suffering neglect - even abuse - from a generation of artists who don't so much oppose "critical practice" as find its claims comically baffling.

Consider, for instance, what has happened to montage.² At its politicized height, with Heartfield's photomontage, Brecht's theatrical defamiliarization, and Benjamin's redemptive allegory, montage was considered to be a technical equivalent of dialectical critique. And the association of the form of montage and the work of critique (both auto-critique and social critique) remained vivid enough for a full-blown revival in the 70s and 80s. Today, however, montage has become almost a joke in the hands of Keith Tyson's ArtMachine (a generator of random combinations) and Bank's curatorial diabolism (incoherent groupings in attitudinizing settings). Montage holds no special promise - neither as interruptive address nor as self-reflexive practice - but seems instead to be as capable of triviality as dialectic, as likely to produce absurdity as construct knowledge.

There is a dearth of politics in contemporary art. And yet, even with this fact it is annoying to find so much writing on what has come to be called "young British art" addressing itself to this lack. Symptomatically, the writing on "young British art" has an agenda and style which the art and artists don't share. The writing is, therefore, derogatory, deluded or seeks to influence.³ Responding to these writers is bound to be tricky: to ask about the politics of this art is already to approach it from outside. Which is not the same as confirming the absence of political responsibility in this art, but suggests an absence within "cultural politics" itself. The same goes for accusations of anti-intellectualism. The accusation is a trap. Responding to it means promoting the values which prompted it, either by arguing that this apparent anti-intellectualism is actually intellectual, or by presenting an intellectual defence of anti-intellectualism. The authentic anti-intellectual response would be something like "shut up and dance!", but this too would leave the accuser satisfied. No, the accusation of anti-intellectualism has to be accused itself of anti-intellectualism: it closes itself off from unfamiliar modes of intelligent behaviour.

Imagine after storming the Winter Palace Lenin had addressed the Congress of Soviets with the words, "You made the world. And it is wide/ and like a word that ripens still in quiet/ And once you vouch to understand their sense/ They'll gently let your eyes go free..." It's a long shot, admittedly, but it is even harder to imagine Rilke opening a poem with the line: "We shall now proceed to construct the Socialist order". Brecht is more likely, not because he fooled himself that political content was transferable,⁴ but because his politics of representation didn't rule out the representation of politics.⁵ Nevertheless, the absence of politics in younger art does not mean that it sides with art's autonomy: the opposition of autonomy and political utility has lost its explanatory power.⁶ Consider how, rather than quoting Lenin, Jeremy Deller makes posters out of lyrics by The Smiths, Stone Roses and Happy Mondays. Georgina Starr plays out her love of "Grease" (the movie), affectionately taking another look at her childhood's contact with the youth of her parents' generation. This means that these artist simultaneously withdraw from the priorities of critical practice and at the same time immerse themselves in the swooning intensities of consumer culture. Art of

this sort thus does without the two key measures of artistic integrity of the twentieth century: political engagement and artistic autonomy.

Postmodernist sophisticates - often bright artists who became dull intellectuals by marrying themselves to "theory" - and their earnest opponents alike, are now faced with a youthful suspicion of intellectualism, political posturing, and self-regarding art chit-chat insularity. No-one is organizing a conference on pressing issues of studio practice these days. It has become smart to appear ill-informed, or at least it's no longer clever to fake knowledge. Art chatter is not what it used to be. Conversations are peppered with unashamed admissions: "I've never read that ..."; "I don't understand ..."; "You've lost me ...". I lose it myself every now and then. I don't mind confessing even being distracted from art altogether when I was being paid to talk about it. There was that time when... I'm getting carried away again... But I'm nowhere near as bad as an artist I've heard of who keeps his books in a box, pretending to his friends that he never reads. It's this sort of behaviour which has led to a situation where the next unpredictable, wacky move might be to "go intellectual". But like "going native" this would be somewhat disingenuous and fail to reinstate intellectualism. Theory and politicized self-reflexivity have been dislodged because they have turned from being the pillars of modern art's hard-won liberty to the badges of its authority. From those still loyal and committed to critical practice, therefore, younger artists are themselves under suspicion, cast as dullards, opportunists, charmers, Thatcherites.

politics isn't everything

Picture Jeremy Deller malingering in a car park, then moving at speed. Affixing his bumper sticker: "I "heart" joyriding". Onto a police car. Photographing it then running for his life. And did you see Robbie on kids TV just before leaving Take That wearing Deller's T-shirt printed with the slogan "My Booze Hell"? Affirmations of intoxication, brutality, loutishness, and getting carried away are not, in art of this sort, cheerful, dull and empty. Deller ridicules the cliches of shameful confession by presenting them camped-up as displays of pride for those who don't give a shit. These are in-jokes for debauchers who have not renounced debauchery. These T-shirts might well have been designed for that Elvis who Colonel Tom Parker kept respectably hidden with images of home-grown beauty. But Deller isn't trying to critique the culture industry or the likes of fat Elvis - his work isn't ironic⁸ - nor is this a high-brow "appropriation" of mass culture. In fact, these pranks may or may not belong in a gallery - their significance is certainly not confined to the modes of attention which operate there. The fact is, these artists no longer regard intellectual display and critical rigour as intelligent or responsible,⁹ but rather see the parading of critical resistance to these ubiquitous seductions as equally hypocritical as Colonel Parker's identity management. In fact, the culture of art has become managerial.¹⁰ This is why Bank produces red-herring publicity and puts together shows such as "*Charge of the Light Brigade*" and "*Fuck Off*" which are spectacularly comical before they are even remotely aesthetic.

For the intelligentsia of critical practice I guess these artists appear disengaged, unburdened agents of cultural barbarism. Just as Deller and Starr aren't pursuing the "critique of cultural division", Bank is not exploring the "discourse of the museum", and Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin, Jake & Dinos Chapman, and Siobhan Hapaska are not participating in the "discourse of the body". It is not that the body is being represented less, but that the body is not being treated as a cipher of discourse even though it is figured as culturally and socially inflected. The difference is that younger artists don't see the body (or culture, or institutions, or whatever) as a battleground, or any other architectural system, but as a layered, open field. Sex is back, as is fantasy, transgression, anarchism, and violence,¹¹ because these themes offer up the individual as a subject of intensities which are irreducible to the formulations of earnest wisdom. Not the result of extensive research, such attitudes are a provisionally arrived at effect of the suspicion that the critique and

discourse, which this generation were introduced to under the sign of emancipation, has turned out to be, or has turned into, an arm of order and paranoia.

More specifically, the values and categories of critical practice set the horizons of artistic responsibility, which channel attention to some areas of activity only. In other words, the universe which critical practice inhabits and cultivates is lop-sided. Critical practices address materials, processes, sites, canons, and techniques as socially charged - which they are - but neglects other frameworks, other levels and other forms of cultural responsibility. By stressing the immanent politics of form as a category of production, critical practice talked itself out of caring for the spectator - except insofar as s/he might be or become co-opted to production. This is why the refusal of pleasure was often taken as a concomitant of a persevering critical art. Always willing to sacrifice the ethics of reception for an ethics of production, as if the former was either irrelevant or somehow followed from the latter, critical practice had a distorted view of the ethical conditions of culture.¹² There is perhaps in this something of the Romantic conviction of the authenticity of primary processes and their contempt for everything secondary. At any rate, younger artists aren't satisfied with this legacy, and while they haven't turned their backs on the ethics of production, they combine this with a whole array of responsibilities, needs, desires, pleasures, and challenges. This is why younger art is funky, entertaining, disgusting, sexy, ordinary, crude, facile, puerile. Consequently, unlike those shamefaced modernists who skulked off from their miserable studios to have extra-marital affairs with fun, celebrity, glamour and fantasy, younger artists are openly polyamorous.

last word

I suppose we should welcome the recent writing on what has come to be known as "young British art". If nothing else it finally puts *Technique Anglaise* off reading lists. What has prompted this essay, though, is the gaping divide between contemporary art and the writing about it - whether in its defence or not. One of the commonest symptoms of the misperception I'm talking about is the sheer lack of differentiation applied to the scene, especially in the use of the phrase "young British art" to cover an aggregate of works, ranging from Damien Hirst's bombastic aestheticism to Penny Day's short film of two toy cars having a shag. Differentiation is not only required to distinguish between various phases (say, 88 to 91, 92 to 95, or whatever), but also in other ways. For instance, a couple of years ago Starr was documenting everyday life (sometimes her own, sometimes other people's, sometimes doing it straight, sometimes mediated through cultural forms such as astrology), using the document to burst through the ruling ethics of self-reflexivity. The document allowed the world to enter art and art to enter the world. But more recently Starr has turned to fantasy, fun and role playing in what amounts to a dissatisfaction with the everyday, and escape from it even.¹³ The term is not only under strain, though, it is also inaccurate. With as much as ten years between them, the younger members of the scene already regard some of the "young British artist" as old. I even heard the story of some foundation students visiting Starr's installation at the Tate asking, tragically, "Why is this old woman dressing up as a young girl?" More seriously, there are artists such as Jaki Irvine who have a right to be pissed off with the label "young British art" - she's Irish. So, if coming up with the term "Conceptualism" was a fucked up piece of managerial journalese,¹⁴ coming up with the name "young British art" was all that plus jingoism, market-led opportunism, and plain laziness. The term has had its day. But as with "Conceptualism", if the differentiation of the category takes risks with commercial and institutional success, then long after it even seems to be descriptive, it will hang around for the purposes of blockbuster exhibitions, books, and bad history. But the other thing is, in the interests of differentiation, I was hoping to get through an essay on "young British art" without mentioning Damien Hirst. Shit!

1 This was pointed out to me by Paul Khera.

2 Elizabeth Aarup helped me to think more clearly about the history of montage, critical practice, etc. and its fate, especially in the work of Keith Tyson. My pre-Aarup formulation is expressed in my review "Strange Company: Keith Tyson and the Brady Bunch Movie", *Artifice*, issue 3.

3 Stewart Home's "*The Art of Chauvinism in Britain and France*", [everything19] is clearly derogatory even though he tries to dampen this by aiming more specifically for the writers than the artists. Nevertheless, his agenda is unsympathetic to what I take to be going on at the moment. Simon Ford's article for *Art Monthly* is forthrightly derogatory, but again there is some confusion about who he despises most, the artists or those who write about them. Robert Garnett can write insightfully about the current scene (as when he observes that many of the internationally successful artists are still on the dole), but he can also be deluded (as when he attempts to discover some politics under the surface of youthful puerility), though, to be fair it is difficult to tell whether such delusions are authentic or contrived for the purposes of influencing what artist might think of doing next (a clearer case is when he calls for a bit more self-reflexivity - a request I want to knock on the head if I can). John Roberts' writing is a clear case of trying to interpret recent art in a way that might contribute to the artists' self-understanding, and to get them to think about their work more historically and critically.

4 This is one of the great issues of twentieth-century cultural politics, and I'm not about to make any quips about it. But, surprisingly, the other day I found myself half-remembering some of J.L. Austin's observations about language use (especially about the conditions under which statements are effective - such as the difference between the Queen and a hooligan smashing a bottle of champagne against a ship and announcing "I name this ship the Jarvis Cocker"). It seems worth trying to see how much Austin might help dispel some myths not only about the specificity of literary language (de Man does some of this) but also about the transformations that occur when politics are 'imported' into art.

5 This is my little dig at Victor Burgin and all those who followed his line on switching from the representation of politics to the politics of representation. I'm not so much bothered about their political withdrawal as with the sophistry they pumped out to support it. This distinction of theirs is merely a rehearsal of the old distinction between content and form, and shares the Romantic and modernist asymmetry in the supposition that content cannot be its own form, but that form can - and should - be its own content.

6 Paul Wood has recently published essays in defence of art's autonomy and I have recently made attempts to rattle his defence. Wood seems to have shifted across the established modern axis which separates (and joins) art and politics, moving from a politicized defence of critical practices to a politically inflected defence of autonomy itself. I began my response to this by arguing for a definition of autonomy that doesn't derive from modern art's image of itself, but from the philosophical conception of self - determination (see my unpublished paper delivered at a conference at Nene College, expanded in the forthcoming article, co-authored by John Roberts, "*Spectres of the Aesthetic*", (*New Left Review*)). I stand by this, but I think the very axis itself needs to be challenged, so that we no longer feel that to move away from one means to move towards the other. In fact, the absence of politics in art does not necessarily mean a greater degree of autonomy, just as the loss of autonomy doesn't mean the gaining of politics. Simply there are other factors involved. The trouble is that these other factors (I'm not very sure about them, but at the moment I'm presuming them to incorporate something like entertainment, fantasy, storytelling, the everyday, the document) have been marginalized and derogated for so long that they have not figured - except as distractions and errors - within the practices and debates of art for most of the twentieth century.

7 I think somebody else pointed out this generational aspect to me - a student probably - and I can only apologize for not giving credit to whoever deserves it. You know who you are. If you read this please let me know.

8 I first came across the quasi-militant assertion that "the work isn't ironic" from members of Bank when they were putting together "*Zombie Golf*". I think they were declaring a suspicion of the high-brow suspicion of so-called mass culture. Irony implies a distance, or the pretence of a distance, and that distance implies a power or privilege which is neither attractive nor credible.

9 The idea that intellectual display isn't intelligent was forced out of me during an excellent discussion after John Roberts' lecture at Byam Shaw School of Art this winter.

10 this is one of Mel Ramsden's favourite lines, which I have ended up repeating, just as you find yourself using the phrases of your parents. However, having worked with Bank and Fat I don't find the managerial to be as clear cut as Mel seems to. I don't agree with David Goldenberg that the legacy of "Conceptualism" means that artists must become managers, but certainly when artists

manage their own shows and set up their own opportunities the results can be more than mere functions of managerial aspirations.

11 For more of my thoughts on this take a look at my article dedicated to the Chapman brothers, "*The Artist's Body*", *Artifice*, issue 4.

12 In saying that the refusal of pleasure was either a failure to respond to an ethics of reception, or otherwise was inadequate as an ethical response to reception, I am not arguing that the ethics of reception must lead to the provision of pleasure, only that the refusal of pleasure as a cultural politics issued from an ethics of production. At least, what makes the refusal of pleasure attractive, I think, is that it appears to be an ethics of reception but that its logic is governed by concerns about production. As such, the relatively autonomous critical artist can remain indifferent to the spectator whilst claiming to be responsible towards her/him/them. One of the main differences between such practices and the attitudes of younger artists is that the latter don't think of the audience as her, him or them, but as us.

13 This is an interpretation of an aspect of young art that I've gleaned from David Burrows who's been saying this to me for months and I've finally come round to it.

14 This is easy for me to say because Terry Atkinson has devoted a lot of time and energy to putting together the arguments and the evidence it requires.