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Liz Ellis 'Do You Want to Be in My Gang?' An account of Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Art
Practice an analysis of the Britpack phenomenon
Tomur Atagök A View of Contemporary Women Artists in Turkey
Hilary Robinson Nine Snapshots from living and working in Belfast
Katy Deepwell Questioning stereotypes of feminist art practice as 'Feminist Aesthetics in an
International Frame'
Shelley Hornstein 'Of Identities and Nationalism seen from Far and Near: Narelle Jubelin and the
Politics of Space'

List of Contents

Liz Ellis 'Do You Want to Be in My Gang?'	
An account of Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Practice, an analysis of the Britpack phenomenon	4
Tomur Atagök A View of Contemporary Women Artists in Turkey	20
Paradoxes and Orthodoxes : An Invitation to Dialogue from the Editor	26
N.Paradoxa: An Interview with Marina Abramovic	29
N.Paradoxa: Dialogue with Australian artist, Jill Scott	39
<i>Feminist Art Criticism in an International Perspective: Three Papers from the joint American and Canadian Association of Aesthetics Conference from Montreal , October 1996:</i>	
Hilary Robinson Nine Snapshots from living and working in Belfast	48
Katy Deepwell Questioning stereotypes of feminist art practice	55
Shelley Hornstein Of Identities and Nationalism seen from Far and Near: Narelle Jubelin and the Politics of Space	63

Do You Want to Be in My Gang: An Account of Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Practice

Liz Ellis

A critique of the Britpack phenomenon and particularly the critical reception of Bank, Sarah Lucas and Sam Taylor-Wood.

Introduction

This work is a consideration of the role of ethics in contemporary arts practice from Britain. It has its origins in the investigation of art work that I respond to passionately, and attempts to unpick the basis for this response. As the critical thinking on my own work develops, it has become essential to see debates around art and aesthetics in a political and ethical context.

This work began with my feeling of alienation from some of the currently fashionable work including many of the group described as *young British artists* (*yBa*). Many claims have been made for this work and I want to look at some of these claims as they appear in the accompanying interviews and articles, catalogues and critical writings. Many of these artists seem to me to employ a ruthless assimilation of the commercial and the kitsch in a way that is empty of imaginative space or invitation to the viewer. Recent shows in London like *Minky Manky* (1995), *Some Went Mad And Some Ran Away*, *Take Me I'm Yours* include many artists working in this way. This piece focuses on the work of two women artists, Sarah Lucas and Sam Taylor Wood, whose careers are booming within the framework of *yBa* and whose work has received attention but limited analysis. There are, of course many male artists using similar languages of irony and detachment, the work of "Bank" artists group is briefly discussed within this piece, a group of 3 men and one woman.

Minky Manky, a show at the South London Art Gallery in April/May 1995 curated by Carl Freedman, included Gilbert and George and Sarah Lucas amongst many others. Freedman wrote that of one of the themes of the exhibition was :

"the artist as a subject, and (to) explore the relationship between the art on the wall and its creator, to make the whole thing more humanistic. And in there somewhere there is the beginnings of a thesis on the relationship and similarities between madness and modernism, for example, defiance of authority, nihilism, examples of extreme relativism, strange transformations of the self, irrationality, and things like that."

Given this agenda, it is then surprising to find the work of Gilbert and George represented with their repeated belief that :

"We don't believe that everyone is an artist because we do believe that the artist has to be a total outsider, totally extreme, if not it doesn't work and you are a boring normal person like everyone else. Artists have to be outside to feel the world in a different way."

Later in the same interview with the curator Carl Freedman they talk about their "horrible, horrible shock" on seeing a young male friend who "could hardly walk, his hands were like skeletons. The boy's had it...your friends completely dying in front of you, becoming like skeletons." What comes through is Gilbert and George's complete inadequacy to deal with the issues of pain, mortality, suffering and grief that AIDS has introduced to their lives with anything approaching emotional comprehension. Humanism is not the philosophical framework that springs immediately to mind in considering their work or writings.

The recent *Brilliant* show (1996) at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, U.S.A., is another example of an exhibition of young British artists, perceived in even critical publicity and press coverage, as promoting an idea of the dangerous avant-garde while actually remaining unchallenging of the establishment. Neville Wakefield, writing in the tabloid- newspaper style catalogue for *Brilliant* claims an art history heritage for this work that includes Pop art and punk and says

"For these young artists , parodic indifference and irony - the creative tools that once returned every gesture to an empty place on the deconstructive stage- have become less a question of practice than the underwriting of a sensibility ... Cultural pessimism has been transformed into conceptual energy, boredom into the impetus for action and provocation. The current generation is dismissive of the ideologically rigorous but aesthetically anaemic art leavened throughout the 1980's on the imported yeast of post-structuralism and the essentially foreign theory enlisted for its legitimisation." (my emphasis)

The supposedly anti-intellectual and in fact, positively political position that this occupies will be discussed later in this piece. Central to this discussion is my investigation of the sensibility and as an extension of this, the ethical position that is assumed in this work. Implicit in my understanding of an ethical practice is the

idea that engaging with the work extends the viewers imagination and ability to imagine change, rather than a self-reflexive nihilism . While some of the artists in *Brilliant* use materials and methods that embrace sensuality and lived experience (Anya Gallaccio , Tracey Emin) in a way that I see as being central to our experience as viewers and our involvement in the work, the choices made by other artists, including Sarah Lucas and Sam Taylor Wood, leave us as passive observers . In the accompanying interview in *Brilliant* Sarah Lucas makes it clear that she is not making work of social or political or critical meaning, she says:

‘Just look at the picture and think what you like. I knew that everybody would have a response to these pictures , whether they thought I was being gratuitous or whether they thought I was making a feminist point or whether they thought I was actually just carrying on the exploitation.’

So we seem to have returned to the old, tired familiar notion of artist as moral relativist, removed from the rest of the world, at liberty to make and say and do without the necessity for explanation or intellectual framework. This role does have social-political implications, and however weary these graduates of Goldsmiths may be, many others are passionately involved in these post structuralist debates. To choose not to join the messy debates over the language of experience, the themes of difference and otherness is to adopt a political and intellectual position. The narcissistic self-referential, free-enterprise nature of the work to the exclusion of any other outside factors ultimately locates the work as politically right wing. It is worth pointing out here that the peers to these artists in theatre, writers like Ayub Khan-Din (*East is East* Royal Court Theatre,London 1996) Shelagh Stephenson (*Memory of Water Gate* Theatre,London 1996) show no such reluctance to engage with the mess of social and political positioning. Michael Billington writes:

‘The rising generation, who in Britain have all grown up under Conservative rule, see through the hypocrisy of appeals to family values and reject the notion that self matters more than society....their themes have included the Holocaust, Irish Republicanism , East End Fascism , unionism and miscegenation. .. the corruption and exhaustion of the times has bred a countervailing moral revulsion.’

It seems that it is not an inevitable result of 18 years of Tory rule that artists become individualistic and self-referentially ironic.

It is worth noticing here that the phrase *young British artists* or the label *Britpack* has been used as a commercial marketing strategy to unite artists who are different in formal style but largely share, I shall argue, a common theoretical position. The full extent of the incorporation of these *bad girls/ bad boys* into the establishment is evident in that radical letter from the edge, *Harpers and Queen* where Martin Gayford promotes their work in the London artfair Art97;

‘The yBa's are ironic, super-cool, disengaged and disenchanting...there are some labels one might try to apply: Nihilism with attitude, grungism, dysfunctional’ (Jan 1997 issue) as he urges the acquisition of art as ‘the perfect status symbol, expensive,

exclusive" It is good to have the commercial context of this work laid bare, unvarnished by ideas of quality or value. At the same time a similar phenomenon is current in packaging young white British pop bands.

The Role of the Imagination in Arts Practice

Before discussing the work of two artists in some detail, I want to look at the role of the imagination in arts practice, which I see as being central to the discussion of aesthetics. Imagination is both a site for activity and the invitation for response from the viewer. It creates a space, or the possibility of engagement. What I understand by 'the space of the imagination' is the ability to produce a place in one's work for the possibility of change. The space of the imagination is both about an openness in the way that the work is made and, crucially, the intention in which it is to be read. If the work has imagination or the possibility for imaginative engagement within it this creates an "open" response that can allow for critical engagement. It has to be distinguished from work without that sense of possibility that appears "closed". The "closed" work may still allow for many interpretations, but there is no direction or space for the imagination to open into or develop. The place of the imagination is central in connection with my concerns for the development of an ethically aware arts practice.

One assumes that all aesthetic work involves use of the imagination. While some art practices create and promote an imaginative journey in the viewer, exploring and extending possibilities, other work, currently in fashion, appears to promote a banality of thought and an ironic detachment from feeling and commitment. These works are not characterised by any single artist or formal methods, rather the lack of an ethical dimension is the common factor. The crucial emotion informing these works seems to be connected to a distanced position combined with a refusal to locate honestly an artistic intention. Instead of an ethical use of 'the space of the imagination', there is often a cynical and self-conscious use of the mechanisms of consumerism. I believe this goes beyond individual practice and reflects a broader political and philosophical framework of ideas linked to late capitalism and post-modernism. I intend to discuss distinctions that underlie these divergent practises in relation to their ethical implications.

It is a commonplace that art has to be seen in a social and political context. The clear implication is for the art work as a 'pure' aesthetic entity as against the artist and art product in a broader context of social change. Clearly, the discussion of context for the art work is important. Walter Benjamin's lecture of 1934 'The Author As Producer' is invaluable here;

"Social relations, as we know, are determined by production relations. And when materialist criticism approached a work, it used to ask what was the position of that work vis-a-vis the social production relations of its time. ..instead of asking what is the position of a work vis-a-vis the the productive relations of its time, does it

underwrite these relations, is it reactionary, or does it aspire to overthrow them , is it revolutionary... I should like to ask: what is its position within them .. This question concerns the function of a work within the ... production relations of its time. In other words, it is directly concerned with ...technique.'

I take Benjamin's notion of *within* productive relations to be the crux of relations, networks, affinities, sympathies, contacts which defines the common interests of a particular artist, with those that show, sell, admire, promote, buy , deal or write about him or her and like minded fellow artists. In short, within amounts to belonging to *the gang*. What is important here is to note that this is not an analysis of class structure, but Benjamin advising of the necessity to examine the infrastructure that surrounds arts production. For the contemporary arts world, this is pluralistic, with a mesh of commercial and publically funded arts spaces, the arts press ranging from *Frieze* magazine to *Modern Painters*, and private collectors to institutional buyers. Currently, the work of Sarah Lucas, Sam Taylor Wood and the artists group Bank, based in Old Street, North London receive attention as avant-garde and on the edge, while operating successfully within the commercial marketplace, the arts and cultural establishment (e.g. Banks premises are funded by the Arts Council of England). While being promoted as the cutting edge of an alternative tradition, they are actively engaged in a celebration of these product relations. The mix of public and private sponsorship which now distinguishes London's ICA, the role of collectors like Saatchi and their links to other key collectors and media celebrities (e.g. Damian Hirst's well publicised associations with Dave Stewart and David Bowie) creates an atmosphere of commercial and consumer incorporation while lending to all sides the frisson of being both contemporary and risk-taking.

Historically, the avant-garde has had a more ambivalent attitude towards consumerism, since the embrace of commercial values contradicted the oppositional stance of many artists. As an example, Ad Reinhardt, a committed Communist for some of his career at least and active socialist at other times, avowed a doctrine of 'art as art' where 'art is art and everything else is everything else', including politics. This radical split between political action and art work generated a formalist approach to art practice that still has a strong following amongst artists today, for example Callum Innes. On the other side, and much in opposition to this position is the work of artists such as Nancy Spero, who have combined a life of political and collective action with an arts practice that includes specific political references and a particular open-ended approach to formal issues with a greater range of stylistic concerns. Whereas the ICA in London mounted a major exhibition of her work in 1987, shifts in the cultural and political climate, including exhibition policy make it impossible to imagine the same institution showing her work today. It is this type of cultural policy change in the last decade in Britain and the implications in terms of wider ethical and political debate and action that need further consideration...

The Role of the Ethical Dimension in Arts Practice

I do not propose that ethics need be at the forefront of every artist's practice necessarily. However, I do argue that a complete abrogation of an ethical awareness, or the establishment of an ethical vacuum, is characteristic of the imaginatively "closed" approach, evident in some of the 'yBa's work, and that this has political implications. What is revealed through attention to ethics is the subtle sense in which an ethical dimension can be placed at the heart of effective aesthetic activity; conversely the lack of it renders work dull and self regarding. This notion goes back at least to Kant, who gave it systematic treatment in the Critique of Judgement, concluding that "the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good". It should be added that Kant understands the symbolic as a mode of the intuitive and for my purposes, aesthetic judgement therefore requires imaginative faculties. It is as if the categories of the ethical and the aesthetic operate in a way that enrich each other and highlight the effect of the other's function. Herbert Marcuse takes up this argument, especially in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, but I believe that some of his views on the role of aesthetic activity are important in understanding how the ethical informs the imagination (see below).

It is important to consider the conditions in which "closed" work can operate so successfully. The crucial factor, other than the commercial art world and power structures and product relations previously referred to, is the impress of modernity. Baudelaire clarifies the difference between the modern and modernity in the following way "modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent, it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable." It is important to note that modernity for Baudelaire is not only a relationship to the present, it is a deeper integration of the current with historical and philosophical understanding, that problematises our relationship with both art and the world around us.

It is here that I see the some of the work represented in exhibitions like *Minky Manky* or *Some Went Mad* and recent Bank shows like *Cocaine Orgasm*, as lacking the second important characteristic of modernity, which is that there should be some interrogation of the languages of popular culture which characterise their practice. Foucault, in his essay 'What is Enlightenment?' amplifies this aspect of Baudelaire's thought, "for the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping in it what it is".

This "eagerness to imagine" is clearly an aspect of "the space of the imagination" which I touched on earlier. The importance of transforming the "value of the present" is at the centre of my criticism of the irony and detachment that characterises the work without an ethical dimension. Clearly much of the current work is very concerned with the languages of popular culture and the need to be of the current (modern), but without a wider political or philosophical awareness this becomes self-conscious and redundant. In much of the response to the work of "the young

British artists there is a clear determination to define the modern and current in an anti-intellectual position. This operates in many ways, but generally amounts to a disdain for forms of critical practice, often sidelining it as old fashioned or earnest or marginalising it.

An example of this is found in John Robert's lecture and article *Mad For It* (*everything* magazine, Spring 1996) which clearly expresses these attitudes in his hostile comments on the Whitney Programme, a visual arts programme in New York, which has a history of issue-based arts practice. In a further article 'Notes on 90's Art' in *Art Monthly* (October, 1996), he continues this theme by claiming 'punk, travellers, ecological critique and the new dance-based musics' as part of a new popular oppositional culture. As the *yBa* culture becomes more incorporated into mainstream gallery programmes and private collections, it is hard to recognise the work as part of any oppositional practice, particularly when the artists themselves are so resolute about claiming their political neutrality and their studied detachment from any socially located meaning, always preferring a position of ironic individualism.

The implications of the categories 'critical' and 'ironic'.

There is a well known comment of Sartre's that irony is the last refuge of the bourgeoisie. The notion that an artist could be engaged, that is both politically committed (to social change) and no less an artist, was commonplace in the thirties and forties. It is a notion that has little following in the cool climate of ironic detached work emerging as an aspect of postmodernism. That is not to say that some of the main theorists of the post-modern are not politically committed. Foucault is one example who located his political activity, influenced as he was intellectually by Nietzsche rather than Marx, in specific local campaigns and libertarian causes. Politically active theorists or artists in the current climate are rare.

The term *critical* has a long history as signifying an oppositional stance. Originally perhaps stemming from Kantian philosophy, in its attempt to found rational and scientific knowledge, as well as correct ethical and aesthetic thinking, and then for a while implying left-wing or Marxist thinking, it now is a term that denotes a wide range of theoretical and aesthetic positions. For a while Kantian ideas have appeared to represent the ideology of a Eurocentric and paternalist Enlightenment. However Kant's ideas in the aesthetic field are now receiving fresh consideration, for example, in Jean-Francois Lyotard's book, *Lessons on the Analytic and the Sublime*. This is part of a broader attempt to locate an ethical position within post modernist culture and practice such as in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas. These implications for contemporary practice, especially in relation to the sublime, are beginning to be discussed in the art press (see Paul Crowther 'The Postmodern Sublime; Installation and Assemblage Art' *Art and Design* Jan-Feb 1995.) The sublime here is discussed in relation to the absence of a fixed centre or meaning, described

by Crowther as "ex-centric"; a consequence of this is that the whole edifice of modern media and culture is seen as being a source of the sublime. Because this makes aesthetic so much a part of everyday life, it generates on the one hand a populist approach, but on the other a relativism that embraces commercialism unreservedly. This is made clear by statements of Damien Hirst (Damien Hirst Interview with David Bowie *Modern Painters* June 1996.)

Ideas linking the world of the consumer with the production of art was clearly evident in the development of Pop art in the 1960's, which many of the supporters of yBa are so eager to claim as their artistic precursors as Neville Wakefield and Richard Flood argued in the catalogue of the "Brilliant" show. However, in 'Pop Art, the critical dialogue' Barbara Rose and Donald Kuspit helpfully analyse some of the Pop art legacy. Rose points to the disingenuousness of Pop artists in acting as if they are naive participants in popular culture, while actually being highly educated performers. While Kuspit points to the reification of popular culture as somehow being an honest manifestation of culture;

"Fine art and popular culture have the same underlying logic: they are superstructures simultaneously disguising the real workings of the world they originate in workings that show it is not the best of all possible worlds and generating allegiance to it. ...In a sense, the discovery of their mutuality, and thus ability to assimilate each other, is a way of the use of the one by the other to increase the influence of both.... Pop realism keeps the spectator from questioning media cliché images (and) encourages us to view this cliché image as a kind of dream realisation or self-fulfilling prophecy about the actual, given world: the way it looks on the the media is the way it was meant to look, for that is the way it truly is . Pop art in effect encourages the assumption that the world as known through the mass media fatalistically confirms the actual world. The media seem to say: this is the world, make the best of it, for it cannot be changed for it since it has already happened . It can only be made newsworthy and glamorous- only celebrated , for better or worse ."

Kuspit's point, made in relation to the use of mass media, pornography and advertising by Pop artists in the 1960s has relevance in the 'yBa' enterprise where the embrace of the fatalistically commercial is just as apparent.

Many writers involved in the post-modern world deal in a flip and ironic way with both theory and criticism, for example, Jean Baudrillard or the London-based critic and reviewer, Sarah Kent, so that the line between serious theory and the entertainment industry are blurred. I would define the ironic as a refusal to state a sincere political or ethical stance, or if in stating a stance, to continually undermine this, or to change it as suits. It is the opposite of what used to be called 'engaged' or 'committed' or 'sincere'. I have a suspicion, which I hope to explore, that there a sense in which it is possible to speak about an artists practice as being and having an ethical position; in these terms it would be possible to look at Jeff Koons as practising his art with cynicism.

Sarah Lucas

Sarah Lucas' work has received considerable critical attention, featuring in *Shark Infested Waters*, the Saatchi collection exhibition and catalogue of 1994, and most recently a major exhibition at Museum Boymans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, 1996. As an example of her work I want to explore the collage *Great Dates* 1992 (Saatch Collection). Sarah Lucas uses her own image, eating a banana collaged beside newspaper extracts featuring everyday tabloid sex- and -schlock stories. In addition cards advertising prostitution services and sexually explicit photographs are collaged onto the canvas and areas of newspaper painted in bright colour. Writing of this piece, Lucas says:

'With only minor adjustments, a provocative image can become confrontational... I don't take pornography as my subject, I take the acceptable stuff available at 25p, common currency rather than the deviant and the marginal.'

My view of this work and her engagement with issues of gender and sexuality is that it is precisely the minimalism of her interventions in these areas of debate that ultimately makes the work become redundant as effective engagement. In the catalogue for *Shark Infested Waters*, Sarah Kent writes of Lucas as 'an aesthetic terrorist, pillaging mainstream culture. In doing so she acts as a mirror, monitoring the sexism and misogyny routinely found there.'

In this work I see the conflation of the languages used in tabloid newspapers and the commercial possibilities of the sex industry becoming an example of the product relations that Benjamin spoke of. Crucially Lucas does not invest these languages or their treatment of the female body with any significant critical intent. To reproduce the tabloid extracts on a canvas, with her own image, does not provide an adequate reading of these languages that Lucas professes to find problematic. The inclusion of Lucas's own photograph of herself eating a banana makes reference to the role of women in pornographic imagery, however, it does not undermine or even disrupt the fragments of sexually explicit material positioning women as servicing male desire which surround her image. If anything it becomes a trite or teasing provocation. A photograph of the rapist Peter Sutcliffe is juxtaposed with imagery of newspaper 'Page 3' girls (topless models) and sports stars. It is hard not to infer that Lucas does not have a coherent theme or concern. The use of the forms of popular culture is unmediated here into a fine art context with unchallenging result.

In *Eros and Civilisation* Marcuse writes:

'Under the predominance of rationalism, the cognitive function of sensuousness has been constantly minimised. In line with the repressive concept of reason sensuousness as the *lower* and even the *lowest* faculty furnished at best the mere stuff, the raw material for cognition, to be organised by the higher faculties of the intellect.' (pp 180-81)

This helps make sense of my criticism of Sarah Lucas's work. The use of sensation, in particular in making reference to gender and sexuality is overt, in a way that for

me closes down readings of the work, denying an open reading. If one looks at pieces like *Receptacle of Lurid Things* (1991) or say some of the phallic work the impact on one's senses is limited. They have a quality of sensation unmediated by engagement or empathy. The spectacle they present is one of a deadening affect. Marcuse would call this "unpleasure", echoing Kant. The sensuous should inform our sensation of a work of art or else the concerns of the work remain alienated, closing possible readings and inviting only a self reflecting irony.

Sam Taylor-Wood

The uses of photography and video by Sam Taylor-Wood are more sophisticated than much of Lucas' but still, to me, seem reliant on a knowing sense of self-detachment from the work and as such towards the viewer. The ambiguity of meaning ultimately becomes dissatisfying and easily passed over. *Wracked* (1996) Taylor-Wood's photographic reconstruction of the Last Supper from a Baroque painting relies on our identification of the apostles as the artist's friends, as members of the 'yBa' gang and London art scene crew. If we don't know this, or even if we do but don't care for the game, the set-up becomes uninteresting, insular. Descriptions of the work (for example the British Council exhibition in Rome 1995) make much of the high art and banality meshed together in this work.

The recent collaboration between Taylor-Woods and Bookworks, a London-based artists book organisation, in the production of *Unhinged* is similarly redundant in establishing connection or our contact with the loose theme of two adults, a young woman and older man as they are shown on and off a film set. The concertina format of the book unfolds to show us these photographic and video extracts from a narrative, but the combination of the partiality of the selection, the absence of text and the banality of the imagery leaves us detached and alienated, passive spectators, unengaged and untouched.

The accompanying press release from Bookworks describes how the "denial of a sequential format excludes the reader from the action and from interpreting the images in one particular way". One starts to feel an all-enveloping banality to the writing accruing on Taylor-Wood's work. It seems that more gets written about the absence of purpose and the significance of emptiness in the work than can be supported by the body of work in question.

On the role of the Sensuous

In connection with this work, I believe that Marcuse's recommendation on the role of the sensuous and our engagement with feeling is crucial for artists to hold and to envision in work. It is integral in this writing to think about work that has a physicality, a sensuousness that feels and sweats, cries and caresses. I find the quality of irony in much current work leads to an alienated experience both for artist and viewer. The work is ironic to the extent that we are not sure what the intention of

the artist is, and that they do not care to be clear about this, either to themselves or to their audience.

I now want to consider further ideas of Herbert Marcuse in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (and also as discussed by Carol Becker in *The Subversive Imagination: Artists Society and Social Responsibility* which she edited). Becker writes:

'For Marcuse, art is a location - a designated imaginative space where freedom is experienced... at times a physical entity, a site .. but it is also a psychic location - a place in the mind where one allows for a recombination of experience, a suspension of the rules that govern daily life, a denial of gravity.... For Marcuse, hope lies in the particularly human ability to envision what does not exist and to give that imaginary dimension shape.'

The place of the imagination is where we envision change and possibility. Becker expresses the concern, shared by Marcuse that *political art* can be limiting in its audience or its vision and asks us to think more broadly about the circumstances in which the world of the imagination is a liberating place. She sees the imagination within a political context by enabling us to take action to change circumstances.

'For Marcuse Art presents the possibility of a fulfillment, which only a transformed society could offer. It is a reminder of what a truly integrated experience of oneself in society might be, a remembrance of gratification, a sense of purpose beyond alienation.'

She continues by discussing how art can allow for this sense of possibility but need not be literal or documentary. She points to a place for eliciting emotion in artwork, where reference to the unspeakable or buried (viz the abject category of Kristeva) can be made. Clearly, as Becker recognises this is a utopian project, and at times apparently romantic and liberal humanist rather than necessarily Marxist in its terms. It is in art's estrangement, in the sense of an alternative transformed and transported reality, a transcendental art removed from *ordinary life* that Marcuse sees the potential for change.

Carol Becker (writing in 1994) comments on how little discussion there has been about what constitutes politically engaged work. She cites lack of metaphor and an overliteral portrayal of a miserable reality as inadequate artistic responses in political art and I would say in art generally. This clearly applies to the work of Sarah Lucas where a style is presented as a miserable reality, which is in turn interpreted as a valid political intervention, whilst remaining in my view devoid of content. I could point to many other examples, eg Jake and Dinos Chapman's work exhibited in 1995 at the London ICA as work concerned with the scatological, the pornographic and the violent which is equally repressive of our sensation and presented in a way that provides little space for engagement or our response. Rather, we are assaulted by the work.

How can it be possible to have art work that could deal with a range of human experience and a sense of possibility that does not become sentimental or nostalgic?

To quote Marcuse again:

"The discipline of aesthetics installs the order of sensuousness as against the order of reason. Introduced into the philosophy of culture, this notion aims at a liberation of the senses, which, far from destroying civilisation, would give it a firmer basis and would greatly increase its potentialities."

So, sensuous qualities are a necessary, but insufficient condition for an ethical practice. Here I'd like to consider the writings of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-95), a Jewish philosopher, whose belief in our obligation to each other led him to posit a sense of ethical responsibility to each other, especially in the recognition of difference and the other, as opposed to other philosophers who have held as central the idea of the self explored in isolation. Levinas, in his essay 'Time and the Other' (1946-7), writes of the role of suffering as entailing

"the impossibility of detaching oneself from the instant of existence... In suffering there is an absence of all refuge. It is the fact of being directly exposed to being. It is made up of the impossibility of fleeing and retreating. The whole acuity of suffering lies in this impossibility of retreat. It is the fact of being backed up against life and being."

The ability to make work that is bold enough to be concerned with an emotional charge demands an honesty in locating feeling and making it explicit, rather than attempting disassociation. The current valorisation of ironic, cool detached banal work is in itself a sign of our disassociation from each other, and the deadening of affect.

The current climate of ethical practice

This is an area that has received much critical discussion amongst contemporary cultural writers, who refer to the legacy of the Enlightenment in considering current political and cultural events. Following Jean Baudrillard's writing on the Gulf War many cultural critics were angered by his apparent moral and ethical detachment from the issues and were concerned to combat this (see for example, Edward Said or Christopher Norris). If art is potentially, an act of freedom, as Herbert Marcuse would have us believe, then the possibilities of the subjective imagination must be the determining factor. He compares the scorn that traditional Marxist critics held for the "inwardness of personal experience with the attitude of capitalists for the unprofitable dimensions of life."

If one took the work of Bank, the small London based group of artists /curators one is struck by their complete abnegation of anything as personal as lived experience since this would be seen as an embarrassing lapse of style and ironic detachment. What Bank do is invite other artists to show in their state-funded space, acting as curator and administrator, to which they then add their own pieces, often creating the whole environment, and certainly the title of the show and its publicity, which then usually reflects on the invited artists in an ironic way. Although they sell the invited artists work on display when they can, and sales have been made of the better

known artists, taking a commission, salaries are not drawn from Bank's funds. Nevertheless they attract considerable kudos for themselves from their shows, blurring the distinction between commentator and curator, artist and critic. Much effort is made to create a club atmosphere almost to the point of an unstated dress and style code. Having recently acquired a lease on a warehouse near Old Street through Arts Council funding, they curate exhibitions with a combination of free-enterprise thinking and detached irony that repeatedly stops short of making an engagement with any critical position.

John Roberts celebrates the work of Bank as using practices of *behaving badly* to unsettle an academic and intellectual framework that has a base in the work of Mary Kelly, Victor Burgin, Hans Haacke. My difficulties with the work of Bank and John Roberts claims (*Everything* magazine Spring no 19 1996) for the value of the Bank endeavour stems from the failure of the work to lead anywhere. The use of sensation as an end in itself (evident in their frequent Zombie references, links to cocaine, drug culture) are ultimately unsatisfying as they accumulate, deliberately refusing to accrue or resolve. It is possible to read the references to drug culture as an actual blocking of affect, with the references to contemporary drug use as both making one more detached and at the same time heightening sensation of self in isolation to others, while supporting a booming style economy.

The use of the languages of commodification, and pornography require more critical engagement than simple repetition. This simulation as stimulation ultimately becomes redundant. I am interested at how readily the retort arises, that if one is critical of these works or indeed of these artists, one is being over serious or, a worse crime, earnest, as if this is an unacceptable loss of cool or style that reflects uncomfortably on the critic. Better to be detached, an flaneur, an ironic observer, than a passionately involved arguer, whose very engagement is somehow an admission of emotional messiness and the breaking of current social style codes. John Roberts ('Mad For It' Lecture in June 1996) speaks of the "shattered expectations" that surround the practice of Bank artists in their ironic reflections of the everyday. As expectations go, its hard to feel that the circumstances surrounding a small group of graduates from the London colleges of Goldsmiths' and St Martins have been shattered too disastrously, or that their perceptions are obviously linked to anything "authentic" or plainly about the *everyday*.

In parallel with Bank one can see on a wider stage the claims behind some of the currently fashionable young British artists such as those shown in *Brilliant* at the Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis. The artists include Sarah Lucas again, but also Dinos and Jake Chapman, Damian Hirst etc. One notes the self congratulatory title, which is presented typically as if ironic. (The two most recent Bank show titles, *Cocaine Orgasm* and *Fuck off* working to similar effect). The work is seen as being avant garde, avowardly advertised as reflecting a new energy within British arts practice. I am interested in how the work, in its banality and strategies to create

detachment combined with a deliberate aesthetic and moral perversity sit very comfortably within a freemarket conservative ideology.

This group of young, mainly male, almost entirely white young London-based artists have used their state-funded education and state supported and exhibited art practice within the last vestiges of a welfare system in Britain to make works of spectacular cynicism. There is a complete failure to engage with the any ideas of difference. It is also worth noting that the deliberate absence of identity politics in much of the "young British artists" debate means that the traditional young white profile of the artist is continued. I detect a certain relief in John Roberts writing that the few young women represented in this debate are not making overt reference to feminist thought (presumably the success of Black and gay artists and writers in addressing cultural hybridity are further examples of impossible earnestness of thought, and as such, deeply un-stylish. This positive absence of debate around difference begins to assume an unsettling edge in its definition of "British.") Neville Wakefield's earlier scorn for post-structuralism also refers disparagingly to the foreign philosophy in a way that shares a broad anti-European suspicion noticed by two recent speakers at the Turner Prize debate, Tate Gallery 1996; Hans Ulrich Obrist and Ute Meta Bauer.

Mark Harris writes of the *Brilliant* exhibition in *Art Monthly* (Feb. 1996) that "It might be worth considering what possibilities of political radicalism are concealed or found intolerable by the acclaim shown this now familiar group of artists making works that 'thumbs its nose at authority'? Other than glancingly, the following issues, randomly chosen but critical to the period marking the emergence of these artists, are just not in evidence: Aids, Racism, Gay or Lesbian Activism, the consequences of the Gulf War, the intentional creation at British Government level of a new economic underclass, Economic colonialism, or the evisceration of organised labour or the decline of the welfare state. From artists regarding themselves as Thatcher's children and described as transforming 'boredom into the impetus for action and provocation' you'd expect to see occasional instances of deep engagement.

Simon Ford, in the March issue of *Art Monthly*, continues this political placing of this group of artists by pointing out how easily the myth of independence has grown in a culture that is so approving of the free-market and privatisation. Pointing to the promotion of 'yBa's through the Eton-educated, Conservative minister's son Jeremy (Jay) Jopling's agenda in his London gallery White Cube, Ford points out that there are no oppositional intentions in this gallery owner's work, a clear refusal in his "non - political" agenda to promote critical work. It is time that the right-wing embrace of commercialism is recognised in this currently fashionable work. Other galleries are springing up, such as Entwistles in Cork Street and others around Fitzrovia and elsewhere that carry this agenda even further. The objects of fashionable dress and style become the very substance of art work, embracing consumerism uncritically. The previous generation of galleries in the eighties e.g

the Lisson, exhibited artists who expressed traditional aesthetic feelings often in minimal sculptural terms. The current position whilst exaggerating the commercial strategies has turned matters on their head - artists who deal with minimal feeling in unaesthetic terms. The refusal of the artists to acknowledge themselves within the orthodox arts establishment wears thin as they become more assimilated into the Saatchi collection and contribute uncritical lifestyle articles to the British Sunday newspaper's colour supplements. Our relation to the modern world is not problematised in the work but instead uses the language of ironic detachment.

I am struck by the consistent refusal of such work to have any sense of history or space for the imagination of the viewer. The moral and ethical relativism inherent in such work has implications within our current political climate, where the valorisation of the individual and erosion of a sense of community or society has clear social and political implications.

In the final chapter of *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 'From polis to Post modernism' Eagleton writes of the avant-garde response to the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic as '...quite unequivocal. Truth is a lie, morality stinks, beauty is shit. And of course they are absolutely right. Truth is a White House communique; morality is the Moral Majority; beauty is a naked woman advertising perfume. Equally, of course they are wrong. Truth, morality and beauty are too important to be handed contemptuously over to the political enemy.'

Eagleton also writes of the political ambiguity in considering ideas of the aesthetic: 'There is in the aesthetic an ideal of compassionate community, of altruism and natural affection, which along with a faith in the self-delighting individual represents an affront to ruling class rationalism. On the other hand... (L)ived experience, which can offer a powerful critique of Enlightenment rationality, can also be the very homeland of conservative ideology.'

The link between the aesthetic and the ethical is to do with the sense of possibility in achieving change. Of course it is not any change that is desired, but change for the better. How is it possible to consider change without becoming a utopian romantic, a member of the Conservative moral majority or alternatively adopting a position of cynical detachment. Kant asks us to consider the link between art and ethics in relation to *the good*. The activity of exercising aesthetic judgement requires an assessment of 'the good', which is currently deeply unfashionable and suspect within intellectual circles. Whose *good* has always been the correct question at this point.

However, leaving the stage to a post-modern relativism creates an intellectual vacuum that is too readily occupied by right-wing ideologies of the free market and consumerism. The true banality of much of the *yBa* enterprise is made more overt as it becomes ever more incorporated into the commercial mainstream. Irony has political and ethical implications. That is not to say that at times irony cannot be used in the service of *the good*. The point about aesthetic and ethical judgement is these judgements must be made; they cannot hide behind a veil of detachment

without substance, sensuality or commitment. The lack of critical discussion and the silencing of opposition, partly through media complicity and partly through the endorsement of the political hegemony of the current art establishment, prevents an adequate testing of the moral vacuity and inertia of much contemporary practice. I regard it as important that we now reconsider the position of ethics in contemporary art practice.

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