

From epitomising the 80's ideology of cultural self-determination, to their validation as Cool Britannia export, Young British Artists have become the ubiquitous 'household name'. Whilst autopsy art, portraits of criminals and sculptures cast in frozen blood have caused both amusement and outrage, it could be argued that the personality cult of the artist has probably never occupied such a consistently central role in public dialogues of popular culture. Artist's televised antics, ownership of restaurants, endorsements of Vodka and public friendships with the stars have guaranteed contemporary art practice a level of popular engagement that warrants serious consideration in its own right.

However, I would argue that any such consideration would necessitate a wholesale re-evaluation of art's more traditional relationships to the spheres of audience, popular culture, media and communications technologies in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. This is because I believe that on closer inspection, the contemporary cult of the 'artist as personality' is no longer a direct legacy of the Modernist ideology of the artist as 'author genius'.

Instead, I would argue that the media and publicity circus surrounding the yBa phenomenon is not necessarily equivalent to the litany of 'shock' tabloid reports that repeatedly littered reviews of art and artists throughout much of the twentieth century. Although, undeniably, the majority of reportage still takes, or rather emulates, this tried and tested format, there appears to me to be a distinct difference. In the age of reality TV, the function of yBa media personas is no longer to do with providing an unsympathetic public with 'targets of hate' — targets who can simply be blamed for the outrages of an art world that remains firmly separated from mass culture along borders of class, education and wealth. Rather, I would argue that the media function of the yBa phenomena, and the prominent individuals who make up its leading cast of characters, is to act as an interface between new public audiences and new forms of art production in a period of cultural transition.

This transition, or rather transitional period, is typified by the rapid integration of the previously distinct fields of high and low culture or, to put it another way, of 'art and pop'. I would argue that this integration, once the impossible dream of the historical avant-garde, is now becoming social reality due, in no small part, to rapid advances in communications and broadcast technologies which have been taking place since the second half of the last century. To make myself more clear, the rapid shift which has taken place over the last three decades or so, from analogue to digital means of production,

distribution, transfer and storage, has enabled both artists (and more recently public) to produce and interact with forms of culture which would have previously been unavailable to them. This, in turn, has produced not only new audiences but new audience expectations, knowledge, tastes and viewing/interaction habits. All are leaving their mark. All are suggesting new futures to which the art world will have, at some point, to respond. Let me give two initial brief, but hopefully adequate examples which illustrate these kind of shifts within the context (and confines) of this essay.

First a well known story. In October 1965 the Korean 'Fluxus' artist Nam June Paik bought one of the first available video cameras. On the day of its purchase, whilst he was caught in a traffic jam, Paik recorded footage of Pope Paul VI's visit to New York. Later that evening Paik showed his new video art work in the Café à Go Go. This event, usually cited as the first 'seminal' work of video art, is the stuff of legend. However, if we put away the historical urge to neatly fit this event into a linear cartography of individual artistic progression — just for once — its significance becomes clearer.

Paik was using the latest available electronic technology to reference and develop the themes and issues which were current at the time in the New York 'Underground Film' scene. Although the term 'Underground Film' has become somewhat of a euphemism, at the time it was a relatively specific New York based avant-garde practice which sought, amongst other agendas, to emphasise the use of the camera — and everyday subject matter — to produce real time footage that would wilfully abjure both the technique and formal structures of directors such as Fellini, Antonioni, Godard and Truffaut. In the case of Paik's work, the medium was in fact the message — and my paraphrase of Marshall McLuhan's famous adage 'the Media is the Message' is by no means accidental here.¹

Bearing in mind that this experiment using a technology that had been developed during the Cold War 'Space Race', availed both Paik and his audience with the spontaneity of instant play back, offered the possibility of immediately disrupting audience expectations of the dominant 'broadcast flow' (through its display on a standard TV monitor) and could be exhibited in a public space, the boundaries of public and private, art and everyday culture, were indeed beginning to blur. Given that Warhol's 'Chelsea Girls' wasn't screened until December 1 the following year, we get some indication of how far ahead of the game Paik really was — and how the most contemporary technology allowed him to take that step ahead. Paik had paved the way for art to be viewed in your own home at your own leisure. This is a point which I will return to later in this essay.

In fairness to Warhol though, the obvious candidate for first 'artist as media celebrity', he can be credited with making underground film 'public'. The Chelsea Girls, which grossed over \$12,000 in its first week prompted, amongst numerous other reviews, this statement from the New York Times chief critic:

'It was all right so long as these adventurers in the realm of independent cinema stayed in Greenwich Village or on the south side of

42nd Street and splattered their naughty boy pictures on congenial basement screens... But now that their underground has surfaced on West 57th Street and taken over a theatre with carpets... it is time for permissive adults to stop winking at their too-precious pranks.' (Hoberman. J, 1995)

Sounds familiar? Just swap 'Greenwich Village' for the East End and the south side of 42nd Street for the Old Kent Road etc. — you get the picture! What needs to be born in mind with the above quote though is that distaste for Warhol's film, when articulated, is articulated around the distaste for its display in a 'theatre with carpets': The significance of the underground surfacing 'on West 57th Street' is the issue here, not the films content. This is no longer criticism aimed at outrage caused by the work itself. It is criticism of art, whatever its content or form might be, appearing outside of its quarantined remit within the gallery space. It is a distrust of critical, difficult, taboo breaking art stepping over its agreed boundaries and becoming public — and this is an entirely different thing than 'public art'.

My second example, to draw us back to the contemporary art scene in London, is taken from the Royal Academy of Arts' show 'Apocalypse: Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art' of late 2000. The piece itself, by Chris Cunningham, was exhibited in the tradition of a video installation, had been commissioned by Anthony d'Offay. Much of the press response to this seventeen-minute piece, cut to the music of Aphex Twin, were predictably divided. However, the division did not centre around whether or not the work was any good or not. Press concern seemed to be with either its alleged 'obscene' content or a concern/fascination that the work of a 'commercial designer' had been considered 'art' in the first place. For example, The Sunday Times of 17 September 2000 carried a Richard Brookes article titled 'Royal Academy's sex show angers artists'. Here, Flex was described by Brookes as:

'...the 15-minute film by Chris Cunningham, best known for music videos for Madonna and Bjork, shows one couple, two dancers, making love and fighting violently but with two unnamed porn stars doing the explicit sex scenes.'

He then goes on to cite joint Apocalypse curator Robert Rosenthal as being no stranger to 'gratuitously shocking territory', having also curated the 1997 Sensation show. For Brookes, this was the:

'ground breaking display that served as a launch-pad for young British artists such as Damien Hirst (pickled shark), Tracey Emin (love tent), Jake and Dinos Chapman (child mannequins with genitalia on their heads), and Chris Ofili (Virgin Mary with elephant dung).'

It is clear to see the function of the yBa phenomena as an explanation which is not, of necessity, about individuals, their work, and its quality — but of a struggle to quantify a new phase in the development of contemporary art practice and its relationships with popular culture and new audiences. Brookes accepts that the Royal Academy has shifted away from — and in doing so alienated many of — its traditional 'middle England' audience in order to attract a 'younger and newer' cliental. Interestingly, the shift from older to newer audiences, and the consternation it seems to be causing, is explained by

Rosenthal in this way:

'It may be easy to make fun of the Young British Artist scene... They drink, take drugs and have sex. Yet artists have always lived on the edge. I'll also bet that the YBA movement will never be written out of the history of art.'

Within this journalistic environment, we have the increasing evidence that the media hype of the yBas is not the same as the Modernist construction of a fictive auteur/author god whose 'genius' underpins the meaning of their expressive outpourings. Instead, you have a cultural discourse which is trying desperately to keep up with changes in cultural production, distribution, display and consumption that are facilitating increasing alternatives to the normative 'gallery space' experience of art — or even the traditional conception of what art and artists are themselves. This accounts for the other journalistic fascination with Cunningham's work 'flex' — namely how did a major award winning digital producer, responsible for some of the most outstanding music videos and advertising campaigns of the '90's (most will probably remember him for his Sony Playstation 'Mental Wealth' add campaign in 2000) become an 'artist' represented by a major international gallery (d'Offay). In an Independent on Sunday article of 24 September 2000, titled 'The video nerd who found life after MTV' Ekow Eshun asked Cunningham what was the difference between a video shown at the Royal Academy and one screened on MTV. The reply:

'I don't know. At the beginning it did worry me, but I'm not saying what I do is art, I just try and do my thing. A gallery is just another venue'.

This leads me, finally, to the shifting role and function of the gallery space itself within the new communications environment and its relationship to new and varied audiences in the age of reality TV. As we know, during the Regan and Thatcherite boom and bust economies of the 1980's (the period in which Hirst and his Goldsmiths colleagues organised the Frieze show of 1988) national museums and galleries throughout Europe and the US, and especially the UK, became increasingly starved of governmental subsidies. Concomitant with this was an expectation that they become overnight profit makers and 'stand on their own two feet'. Urgent needs produced urgent measures and, in a most peculiar and unsuspected way, the door swung open for a new relationship to be forged with popular (and profit making) audiences who flocked to 'blockbuster' exhibitions of Van Gogh, Manet and whoever else was flavour of the month. As a new public plundered the gift shops and trotted home with calendars, Old Master jigsaw puzzles and Monet 'Water Lilly' bath candles, many in the know feared that the seriousness of contemporary art and art criticism seemed not only under threat, but in terminal decline.

However, I would argue that such a cynical financial exploitation of both art and public was nothing more than a significant indication of an outmoded art establishment desperately trying to maintain a condition of privileged inertia. As a gawping public financially propped up entrenched and conservative notions of what counts as art by simply taking away souvenirs of a day out the long term net result — through an amazing act of unconscious institutional Dadaism — was to reduce high culture in the eyes of the public

to the equivalent level of 'Empire State snow storms' and 'Kiss Me Quick' hats. The very guardians who's self appointed public service was to maintain arts significance and separateness from everyday life seemed blind to the irony of selling Dega stockings or Salvador Dali soft clocks. As a corollary to this, the mystique of 'high art' began to loose its 'aura' in the eyes of an increasingly knowledgeable and technically literate public.

As I have mentioned before in this essay, new technologies and their increasing availability and access have not only allowed artists to work in any number of media, they have shaped and formed a new type of audience. A 'general public' who's members can capture and transfer digital film footage, send live web casts of themselves to distant relatives, download MP3's, play them on their mobile phone and digitally edit their own twenty four track sampled sound works will not interact with culture in the same way as they may have done one or two decades ago. The link between everyday life and the production of culture no longer has so much of a 'them and us' feel about it. People know, quite frankly, that they can produce it themselves. The artist as interpreter, as iconoclastic 'revealer of the ideological 'state apparatuses of power', is a thing of the past. Everybody knows the plot. If there is a political imperative today, it is surely the task of increasing access to the physical production of culture rather than its elitist use as educative tool for an allegedly miss informed proletariat. As I mentioned earlier, Nam June Paik's early use of video was probably closer to propagating the spirit of Fluxus and neo-Dada than he ever could have imagined. You no longer have to wait for an art video to be broadcast by Channel 4 at some ungodly hour of the morning to have art in your living room anymore. Go to Cunningham's home page (<http://director-file.com/cunningham>) and download it. After all, its poor playback quality at this present time is only due to the bandwidth and software. Soon we will be able to live stream our movies — and we all now that that is no longer a technically utopian dream (though pay for view and copyright issues will be interesting to observe over the next few years.

In terms of the future of popular criticism let me take, for example, the discussion of film as a fictive narrative construct, containing internal and external references and quotations to other 'genres' in the same and other media. Such discussions are no longer the discursive territory of post-structuralist lecturer. They are now common knowledge — all be it articulated in a different way. That sales of DVDs have by far outstripped initial sales of VHS videos is not down to play back quality alone — scene selection, alternative endings, the making of sets and production of effects, directors 'talk throughs', out-takes and cast interviews have offered an entirely new way for individual members of the public to organise, and discuss, their own viewing agendas. No longer is the public at the mercy of the auteur/director (or film companies) sole vision of linear narrative progression. Such discussions are to be found in new 'Life Style' publications such as iD and Dazed and Confused. In preparing a keynote talk on film, art and digital technologies last year, I found the commentaries of Cunningham's work in iD much more helpful than the editorial journalism quoted previously.

In conclusion I would have to argue that, as well as the cat being firmly out of the bag in terms of public knowledge of, and interest in, the mechanics of cultural production, nobody wonders how on earth people become famous actors, musicians or artists anymore. Whilst it is arguable that star quality may still remain in a particular performance, and whilst the often excessive lives of the rich and famous remain a constant fascination to most, increased knowledge of the industries they work within increasingly reveals that their public status is a result of their job. In terms of physical production, access to the equivalent technologies has also laid the framework and structures of previously distinct, unreachable, unknowable and mysterious industries open to public participation as well as scrutiny. There are increasingly more and more examples of individuals and groups working creatively in industries that would have previously been disbarred to them though lack of finance, equipment and, as a consequence, opportunity². If the long way doesn't suit, then one can line up and compete to participate in Fame Academy, Pop Idol or Big Brother. Vying for ones Warholian 'fifteen minutes of fame' is now staple of prime time TV. Like it or lump it, the yBas who got together in 1988 to put the 'Frieze' show together are just early examples of such a shift in cultural participation. Unwilling to hang around on the vague possibility that someone, sometime might just discover them, they took a pro-active stance. As we all know, many of their images, works, public performances and advertising campaigns are now firmly ingrained in the syntax and grammar of a participatory culture.

This does not mean that all that is new is good. Nobody's that naive. There will still be as much dross to sort through as ever, its just that the nature of the game has changed. As soon as more traditional artists and critics get over the loss of their historic dream — and realise that times are just different — then the sooner they can deploy their skills and knowledge in the environment of a distinctly new cultural era. After all, just because something is made using a new technology doesn't guarantee quality. Most of the video and digital art I have seen (and there has been a lot — believe me) would have been instantly forgettable had it not been for the excruciatingly painful scars it left on what passes for my taste. Some of the best yBa art, in my view, is the painting. It just has to be accounted for in comparison and dialogue with the other choices of medium (and media) available to artists in the present climate. To critically engage with it in isolation, within a vapid history of 'painting in and for itself' seems to me to be increasingly absurd.

My final point is this: The vaunted utopian rhetoric of our digital futures, the possibility of previously distinct disciplines merging into 'multi media' and the political, economic, social, racial and sexual consequences of boundary 'blurring' (once the dream wish of the historical avant-gardes) are no longer possible futures. They are with us. So what are we to make of this situation and, quite simply, what are we going to do about it? After all, today's complexity, provisionality, instability and awkwardness of the alienated individual — increasingly open to the scrutiny of publicity in the age of reality TV — is the direct result of nothing more (or less) than the

remaining ghosts and echoes, shards and fragments of a Utopian future that, collectively, we once wished for in the past.

Footnotes

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1. In a conversation I had last year with Ben Patterson, a leading member of the Fluxus movement, I asked if McLuhan's work had been influential on the group in the early sixties as, in the usual litany of Fluxus' literary influences his name is absent. According to Patterson, McLuhan's work was both well read by the group and figured as a particular influence upon Paik. Further conversation lead him to speculate that the influence of McLuhan's writing, on both the Fluxus movement and New York intellectual circles of the time, had tended to be underplayed (more often completely ignored) by latter writers due to its popularity and ease of understanding.

2. A couple of years ago I had the good fortune to meet an old friend who (Circa 77–81) I sat next to in a comprehensive school in Liverpool. To my more than pleasant surprise he had written, played and produced the musical score for 'Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels', 'Dark City', 'Liam' and several other major movies — he now lives in Hollywood. Another old school colleague recently scripted and directed a ten minute film which won the BBC 2 best short film award for 2000. In Liverpool itself, new production companies such as LA, Media Station and Toxteth TV are offering the possibilities for local, national and international talent to participate in film and TV production at the highest level of professionalism. This is now not unusual — that's the point.