

Conventionally Unconventional

Julian Stallabrass

John Molyneux's view of the art world and its public is extraordinarily comforting. In last month's issue of AM, he assured his readers that the growth in the contemporary art audience is due to a marked political shift in the UK population to the left (they elected Blair, don't forget); racism and homophobia are on the wane, as is deference to established institutions, and the newly leftist white-collar masses flock to an art which satisfies their non-conformist urges.

I'm all for optimism of the will, and I also think it's important that real political gains are acknowledged, for to pretend that nothing changes is the surest path to defeatism. The rise in public interest in contemporary art in this traditionally resistant country, which it was one of the considerable achievements of 'young British art' to help create, does offer opportunities for radical artists and writers. Yet any such action for the left has to start from where we are, not where in our dreams we would like to be.

If, as Molyneux acknowledges, the leftwards shift in public consciousness has gone unnoticed by the media and academia, this is for the good reason that it doesn't exist. It is true that the public's faith in right-wing mantras has declined since the triumphant days of Thatcher, but not to the benefit of left-wing beliefs. Molyneux himself concedes that the Major government lost support because of its economic mismanagement, rather any large ideological shift in public opinion. As for his other evidence of burgeoning leftism, distaste for state institutions, anti-racism and anti-homophobia is not confined to the left, and cannot in isolation be used as evidence for a resurgence of left-wing opinion. You only have to look to the US to see that revulsion towards state institutions can be a feature of extreme right-wing thinking.

What Molyneux outlines is simply liberalism. The prejudices against women, people of colour and gays, or in favour of traditional enclaves of privilege are obstacles to the most efficient functioning of capitalism. It was Thatcher, we should remember, who vigorously attacked selected areas of middle-class privilege. The battle against such prejudice is certainly worthwhile in itself, and many leftists have been prominent in those struggles, but the fact that in political discourse, at least, they have become near-universal shows that they are no threat whatever to the overall system of finance and government.

Molyneux describes some disturbing 'countervailing tendencies' to his leftward swing (though he decides that they can be safely discounted), including such small matters as the decline in the power of organised labour. Yet among them can be found further evidence of the decline in deference that he admires: the 'new lad' phenomenon, along with other pieces of middle-class misbehaviour, were made possible by waning attachment to the conventional mores of distinction, as damaging to the virtues conventionally supported in academia, including many left-wing sentiments, as they were to belief in the justice system. Emin and Lucas' work are an entertaining part of that backlash, quite distinct from the works fostered by academic feminism.

So to the crux of Molyneux's argument which is that contemporary art is attractive to the left-leaning masses because it is closely associated with a spirit of rebellion and non-conformity. It is true that there have occasionally been times when an interest in contemporary art was likely to indicate an attachment to the left. Then, prominent tendencies in contemporary art demonstrated political commitment, the audience for that art was smaller but the numbers of politically active people greater. Now that (almost) everyone seems to like Tate Modern, does it follow that everyone is left-leaning?

Ubiquitous and insistent voices urge us: be different, break the rules, stand out from the crowd, resist the usual, rebel. Yet they are no longer the voices of radical agitators but of business. Non-conformity and rebellion have become standard marketing devices, the new highpoint of capitalist convention. As the writers of the excellent US magazine of cultural analysis, *The Baffler*, remind us, we are swamped by these injunctions.¹ They come up with a wonderfully condensed example of this imperative: William Burroughs' appearance in an advert for Nike. The art world is a tame exemplification of those conventional corporate virtues, a Darwinian testing ground for novel products, images and personalities.

It is hard, amid the ruins, to characterise what is left of the left but minimally it must involve egalitarianism and collective action, both deeply alien to large-scale commerce and the mainstream art world. The image of rebellion has been stolen for the exercise of empty corporate cool, and for the matching manufacture of an art that too often sports an avant-garde sheen but little content. This congruence is hardly a matter of chance, as from the 1980s onwards the art world became increasingly dependent upon corporate funds and imbued with business thinking. Indeed, the increase in the audience for art is partly due to the more efficacious marketing that this coupling produced (though also to the rise in the number of people entering higher education).

There are tensions in this situation that can be exploited. Art and business have come closer together yet the art world remains wedded to practices that would long ago have been swept aside by any half-decent management consultant: it is elitist, exclusive, tied to craft production and ancient forms of patronage. Sales of art over the Internet (a modernising, Thatcherite gust) rattle the old practices but in itself this development holds out no more than the prospect of turning a cottage industry into a contemporary mass industry. There is also a conflict of interest between the government, who sees culture as a social balm and wishes to widen access, and the sponsors of art, who are interested only because art delivers into their hands a privileged and well-educated section of the population, wary of the usual forms of advertising.

Recent radical developments that Molyneux mentions, including anti-capitalist movements, have little connection with the widened audience for contemporary art. The artists associated with these new movements—both online and off, including the Artists Tendency Against Capitalism which demonstrated at the opening of Tate

¹ For a selection of articles, see Thomas Frank/ Matt Weiland, eds., *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1997.

Modern—are hostile to a mainstream art world which they see as being in hock to corporate interests.

The art world has done little to take its new audience seriously and is unlikely to, since to foster democratic cultural forms and genuine participation would require deep changes which cut against its fundamental interests. In present circumstances, sadly, to call the art world or its audience leftist is to indulge in the same wishful expansion of meaning as those off-message politicians at Labour Party conferences who assure the delegates that, despite everything, there is still some lingering sense to calling their party ‘socialist’.