Token Images: A User's Guide

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Marc Quinn *Self* 1991

Art history never tires of repeating itself, in a cycle now too wearisome to count as farce. Scandal and controversy are the inevitable companions of 'young British art', and have been for ten years. The Turner Prize helps nurture them—last year with an unmade bed, the year before with elephant shit, in all years accompanied by a rehearsal of the grounding struggle over what counts as a work of art—while in New York a painting that might give offence to Catholics was used to shore up the waning popularity of a conservative mayor. We are assured by a prominent British critic that the 'outrages' of recent years do indeed compare with those of the first steps of modernism, with the incomprehension that accompanied the public outings of work by Manet and the Impressionists.[1] Since Napoleon III took a riding crop to the backside of a Courbet nude, scandal has condensed in attacks on the offending works: two attempts were made to damage Marcus Harvey's large portrait of the child-killer Myra Hindley, while in New York the offending *Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili was smeared with white paint.[2] Yet the apparent parallels with outrage at avant-garde provocations mask considerable differences that have developed in this circulation of scandal and reaction.

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[1] Sarah Kent, 'Nine Years', in Jonathan Barnbrook and Jason Beard (designers), *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade*, Booth-Clibborn Editions, London 1999, this section unpaginated.

[2] For the attacks on *Myra*, and the instructive debate over the meaning of this painting, see my book, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, Verso, London, pp. 202-10; for the attack on Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*, see Robert McFadden, 'Art Attack', *The Guardian*, 18 December 1999.

Two recent books from the art publisher Booth-Clibborn may serve to give a symptomatic picture of the British art world: *Incarnate*, about the work of Marc Quinn, and *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade*, devoted to the collection of Charles Saatchi.[3] Both are large, visually impressive, full-colour productions, and both come at a hefty price. Like previous Booth-Clibborn books—including Damien Hirst's elaborately designed homage to himself—they are coffee-table books with high pretensions, appealing to a particular cultural and social segment.[4]

Quinn is still best known for the work with which he first came to public attention, *Self* (1991), a cast of the artist's head made from nine pints of his frozen blood. Much of his subsequent work has followed in this vein—there are similar pieces made from shit, while the work *Incarnate* is a sausage containing (once more) the artist's blood. As with the output of Damien Hirst, there is an unenlightening preoccupation with death; as with the work of many artists of Quinn's generation, there is a media-friendly engagement with horror in a domestic setting.[5] The book carries pictures of sausage preparation in Quinn's kitchen, the fridge filled with bags of blood alongside the groceries. Transience is expressed through the device of artificial preservation. Freezing is used to maintain the freshness and the form of cut flowers and figures sculpted from ice, so long as a constant supply of electricity is maintained.

Can a book impart the illusion of the presence of flesh, and of the various bodily excretions? *Incarnate* strenuously tries to do so, its large pages being filled with high-definition photographs in pinks, reds and browns of, say, extreme close-ups of fragments of the body, with eye-lashes the size of hog-hairs. The body, when it is not subjected to the rigorous examination of close-up lenses and ring flash (reflected in the subject's pupils like an illuminated doughnut), is present in its constituent elements—blood, excreta, water—whipped into frozen discipline to represent itself.

With all this work, the unity of body, and thus by implication of the self, is denatured or dissolved. Like much photographic work that focuses upon fragments of the body, the extreme close-ups produce images of the flesh which are recognisable but also hard to imagine as the components of a living whole. They appear rather as autonomous scraps of living matter. The frozen works, in which the body does appear complete, sometimes take on the appearance of ancient artefacts, unearthed and artificially preserved. Quinn is fascinated both with the ancient past, making sculptures that refer to the remains of Lindow Man, and with possible futures, most obviously the protean liquid robot of *Terminator 2*. That celebrated automaton is present in a series of glass and silver sculptures in which body parts are arranged across the floor, the quicksilver elements of a self-assembling and disassembling whole.

Quinn's interest in the common ground of the distant past and future is linked to over-obvious statements about the rule of the body over consciousness. In one of the 'Terminator' pieces, *The Blind Still Leading the Blind* (1996), a penis leads the herd of body parts, including the head. This is typical of the literal character of Quinn's work, of his

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[3] Marc Quinn, *Incarnate*, Booth-Clibborn Editions, London 1998, £49.95; Jonathan Barnbrook and Jason Beard (designers), *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade*, Booth-Clibborn Editions, London 1999, £75.

[4] Damien Hirst, *I Want to Spend the Rest of my Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now*, Booth-Clibborn Editions, London 1997.

[5] I analysed the work of Hirst in 'In and Out of Love with Damien Hirst', *New Left Review*, no. 216, March-April 1996, pp. 153-60. This argument is updated in *High Art Lite*, chapter 2, while the domestic uncanny is examined in chapter 5.

advertising-style ability to give clichés sharp and immediate visual form. In *Rubber Soul*, Quinn made a Perspex replica of his head, setting into it a frog in suspended animation on a refrigerated platform. The frog was positioned at the base of the head, the location of the reptilian brain, referring to the idea that within humans lies just such a dormant, ancient nature.[6] Quinn's work, and this is well reflected in the glossy surfaces of this book, trades in swift repulsion and attraction, and also in swiftly grasped, because already familiar, concepts for which images are vehicles.

For Quinn complexity is always non-intentional, being the intricate pattern of the fractal image and of emergent order. The mix of prehistory and futuristic elements is telling. In both the primal soup and the promised cybernetic order, elements with no volition of their own (or whose volition is incidental to the process), create an overarching order, like that of a termite colony. This is also the theme of a short story by Will Self included in the book, and containing the same ambiguity between primeval past and equally distant future.[7] The age of humanism is long past or yet to come—and in many of the sculptures the figure has escaped, leaving behind a mould or a skin sloughed off, or is a ruined and ancient remain, or is held in delicate suspension, at the brink of extinction.[8]

Readers, or rather viewers, of *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade* are first confronted with the portraits of three women that adorn the book's cover and first pages. The cover bears a much-manipulated picture of the Queen in her regalia, cut about with arrows and dotted lines. Her face is cropped just below the eyes, the space above being masked with a giant bar-code. Next comes Marcus Harvey's notorious painted version of the notorious photograph of Myra Hindley. Turning the page reveals the menacing visage of Margaret Thatcher. It is obvious, then, from the start that the book will lay out a series of visual tags, hitting the mental buttons that summon up hackneyed thoughts of Britishness.

Every page of this massive book is printed in full colour, and the designers are at pains to let the reader know this. A double page spread of text set against saturated yellow is followed (wincingly, if you actually read it) by another of complementary blue; newspaper cuttings are presented, reversed out, against equally bright blue or pink; illustrations of artists' works are dealt with only a little more delicately.

While much care has been expended on such looks, writing is not merely subsidiary but suffers various forms of overt humiliation. Even one of the authors, Sarah Kent, complained about this in a review of the book for *Time Out*. Essays are hacked into their component paragraphs, presented in different fonts and sizes, and hedged in with borders of repeated ASCII characters, sometimes making patterns, sometimes pictures: there are twee little borders of daisy-chained hearts or British bobbies, matching the retro computer graphics of which they are made. The abuse of text is most evident in the handling of the essay by Dick Price (otherwise known as the 'New Neurotic Realist' painter Dexter Dalwood) who has the longest piece in the book, interspersing the sections devoted to each year. This text is anodyne, it is true, recounting the familiar narratives that hang about 'young British art', but even so it seems a little cruel of the designers to have placed it over a background of floral wallpaper.

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[6] David Thorp, 'A Universe of Oppositions', in *Incarnate*, n.p.

[7] Will Self, 'A Report to the Symposium', in *Incarnate*, n.p.

[8] *The Great Escape* (1996) is giant banana-like mould, torn open to reveal the shape of the absent figure; its pendant *No Visible Means of Escape I* (1996) looks like the product of an efficient flaying.

Just as the paragraphs of the essays appear as discrete fragments, marked off from their neighbours, so with each component of the book: these are (aside from the essays) images of works, bits of information about the artists, news headlines, and reproductions of newspaper stories about the art (the latter are the most interesting and useful part of the book, but here too the imperative of design rules over that of information, as the articles are bled artily over the edge of the page). The resulting mix of elements is a puzzle, an elaborate rebus, the solution to which the reader is supposed to vaguely intuit. The book has the fragmentary appearance of an overtly brash website that crams in discrete nuggets of data and lets the surfer sort it out—the navigation device here being flip rather than click. In this light, the retro computer graphics begin to make sense.

The book is divided into yearly segments, and the news headlines are meant to remind the viewer of the media moment in which the art was produced. Dwelling on international military and political events, the headlines certainly bring out the fatuity of the art when compared to the turbulent accompaniment of its time—Gary Hume's self-consciously vacant paintings share the page with the massacre in Tiannamen Square, and Peter Davies' formal conceits with the threat of famine in the Sudan. It is obvious that the art-types who compiled this melange of headlines have only the vaguest notion of the importance of the events signalled: how else could so many mistakes have slipped through—the Panamanian dictator 'General Moriega', for instance. Nevertheless, a spurious feeling that the art is of its time, and that the time is suited to its art, is supposed to emerge from this juxtaposition, reinforced with dark statements that a 'critical mass' was reached by 'young British art' in 1995, while corpses were being dug out of Fred West's house.[9] What is strange about this assemblage of headlines is that the political and economic events drawn on had very little part in informing the art that Saatchi collected, which generally has not been so much apolitical as simply uninterested in politics. Material from *Hello* and other gossip sheets, from the tabloids and the mass media, with which this art was most certainly concerned, is absent.

Yet, despite this fragmentation, this apparently disinterested presentation of shards of the 1990s zeitgeist, this book does serve Saatchi's purposes, and not only by displaying and publicising his collection. In joining the spinning of the epoch's spirit to a display of Saatchi's collection, this book—like the *Sensation* exhibition before it—makes out that the art that appealed to the taste of the advertiser-dealer-collector is in fact that most representative of its time. There are particularly clear examples of this advertisers' art illustrated in the book: for instance, Terence Bond's *Flash Art* consists of a checkerboard pattern of floor tiles, filthy, but for a brilliantly clean line that sweeps through the middle. The title refers to the well-known magazine of contemporary art, the motif is taken from adverts for the cleaning fluid Flash, and the result is a clever but one-dimensional pun that might efficiently occupy a billboard.[10] Or there is Lucy Wood's *Can't Play, Won't Play*, a trampoline frame with a glass sheet where the fabric should go.[11]

Price's text also continues Saatchi's recent attempt to push the products of the next generation as a reaction against 'young British art'. This is supposed to have produced

> an art no longer consumed with redefining the subject of art … but rather one which concerns itself with a redefinition of beauty. Content no longer has to be reclassified, but can actually be ontological [sic]. The work of young British artists

[9] Dick Price, It was the Best of Times, It was the Worst of Times', in *Young British Art*, p. 26.
[10] See *Young British Art*, pp. 242-3.
[11] Ibid., p. 435.

> has begun to change in its look and means of delivery… Artists, numb from the over-prescribed agenda of contentious subject matter, needed to find other, more reflective ways to make art.

In presenting 'young British art' alongside the 'New Neurotic Realism' (although that term, widely ridiculed, is no longer employed here), one is made to seem the natural precursor of the other, and another round in Saatchi's successful speculation in contemporary art is furthered. Yet what emerges from an examination of this book is a strong impression of uniform character of the work, past and present. The younger generation of artists patronised by Saatchi are not notably more beauteous, less contentious, more neurotic or realist, and certainly no more reflective than their predecessors.

As with the *Sensation* catalogue, in this book devoted to the Saatchi collection there is no concrete information about Saatchi's activities in the art world.[12] Yet in unravelling the puzzle, certain suggestions are whispered in the reader's ear: the newspaper clippings for 1998 (the last year covered in the book) end with Saatchi's not entirely altruistic donation of works to the Arts Council collection. Price's essay concludes with the words

> In an ocean of artistic production, British art of the 90s has charted a course across shifting tides; the work featured in Charles Saatchi's extensive collection plots the range of positions that artists have held along that journey.

This is both vague and mendacious, for Saatchi has very partial taste, being enamoured of illusion and of brash, clever statements, and there is a great range of 'positions' that he has ignored.

Both books, though they appear very different, have in common a cavalier treatment of data and concepts. With Quinn as presented in *Incarnate*, the forms of the body are presented as exchangeable tokens, while unity is elusive, or is sustained only on the cusp of dissolution, and order is attained only in the unconscious interaction of primitive elements. In the Saatchi book, works of art are treated uniformly as fragmentary data, set alongside other data, as if meaning will spontaneously emerge from their juxtaposition.

This attitude to subject matter is linked to the readership for whom these books are intended, inadvertently described by Kent in a telling malapropism as 'well-healed yuppies'. Both books are expensive, both operate above all as design objects before they are vehicles of information, let alone analysis. In both, it is a little difficult to say who the authors are: *Incarnate* is clearly a collaboration between the artist and the designers, with writers as minor attendant figures; in the Saatchi book the designers head up the colophon.

Given the success of 'young British art' in attracting attention and publicity, the audience for art has become more differentiated. There are, as always, the buyers of the objects themselves, private and public, but they are tiny in number: these books are altogether more aesthetic, more designed and less instrumental than the expensive, limited edition catalogue raisonnés that appeal to collectors and dealers alone. Then there are those who go to galleries, read newspapers, watch the Turner Prize on television, and sometimes

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[12] These are rarely examined, such is the power of Saatchi over the art world. There have, however, been exceptions published in *Art Monthly*, by Patricia Bickers and particularly in the regular accounts of the art market by Colin Gleadell.

buy catalogues at modest prices. For these viewers of art, too, the books are not intended. Rather they seem fit for a segment of the cultural middle class, who are mostly urban, quite young, quite well off (or they expect to become so), and whose work involves them in the intersection between culture and commerce. This sector has been lauded by New Labour, both as the coming power of an economy based on 'creativity', and as a group whose rise will ensure social calm and satisfaction at work.[13]

For these employees and entrepreneurs, working in advertising, web design and the cultural industries broadly, issues of presentation are paramount, as is the productive miscegenation of high and low culture, as is the use of the image as the vehicle for the readily grasped idea. Quinn's work, in particular, is suitable for this segment, with its mix of literal reference, over-the-top and visceral materials, its considered blend of naff and gloss. The affinity is also signalled in the text by Will Self, in some senses a mirror, like much British pulp fiction, of 'young British art' (with the great difference, of course, that Saatchi cannot dominate the book market by marching into a branch of Waterstones crying, 'I'll take the lot').[14] The fragmented form of the Saatchi book is ready-made for appropriation, designed for users on the lookout for ideas and images that can be recombined, renewed and reused.

In Quinn's work, the body—and it is strongly implied, the mind—is a set of interchangeable tokens. In the Saatchi collection, the works are presented as fungible material in the predictable exchange of tokens that is commercial culture (indeed, Gillian Wearing complained recently that one of her works had been plagiarised by the Saatchi advertising agency shortly after entering the collection).[15] Many of the works that dwell in the collection (or once did), have this fate written into them from the start, like words in seaside rock. And it does not seem to matter much whether or not those words were written with a heavy heart.

For collectors, works of art are often conveniently portable and semi-liquid forms of capital. For the sector to which these books appeal, works of art appear as tokens, swappable at will in the ceaseless creation of novelty. Scandal is one of these tokens, and is among the most useful. Yet in its manipulation of public response, and of the subsequent assaults upon works of art, of people prepared to risk prosecution in defacing a work by Marcus Harvey or Chris Ofili; or in the engagement with the art, with Tracey Emin's Turner Prize bed, for example, by the wider sector of art viewers who do believe that the works have something to say about their lives, there is a refusal to accept that works of art are commercial tokens like any other. In drawing on the old avant-garde forms, in making art that looks as if it is meaningful, even the most craven of the Saatchi artists have inadvertently generated idealist expectations. Both *Incarnate* and *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade* present fragmentary images and texts, and implicit instructions for their use, but the broad audience that this art has fostered, exceeds the habits of its makers and its publicists, and will dispose of the manual.

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[13] See Chris Smith, *Creative Britain*, London 1998, passim. On this sector, see also Simon Ford and Anthony Davies, 'Art Capital', *Art Monthly*, no. 213, February 1998.
[14] For a recent selection of British pulp literature, see Tony White, ed., *Britpulp!*, London 1999.
[15] Dan Glaister, 'Saatchi Agency "Stole My Idea"', *The Guardian*, 2 March 1999.