

## A Comedy of Errors

Julian Stallabrass

The recent success of ‘new British art’ (or as it is sometimes known, with dubious accuracy, ‘young British art’) has naturally attracted critics; some seek simply to celebrate it and ride on its coat-tails for as long as its popularity lasts; some to explain it; and a few, rather bizarrely, seek to give this most demotic of tendencies a rigorous theoretical base, not merely to explain but to guide it, to become the Clement Greenbergs of ‘Fuck Suck Wank Spank’.

One such critic reviewed *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture* in the last issue of *Variant*.<sup>1</sup> I did not much recognise my book in John Roberts’s review, and I don’t think many other readers will either. It was, in more ways than one, a densely argued piece, and reading it one wonders why Roberts went to such trouble over a book he apparently thinks rather little of. To refute every misreading in his review, and each unwarranted supposition presented as a rigid link in a cast-iron argument, would require a reply of inordinate length. I will unpick just a few of Roberts’s more peculiar assertions, but then turn to a question of slightly more general importance—why did he bother to attack the book, and how does this attack fit in with his recent campaign to establish himself as the theoretician of a certain strand in new British art?

The first third of Roberts’s review is an attempt to place *Gargantua* in context by giving a potted account of leftist thinking about mass culture—a useful thing to do, if done accurately. However, we cannot take seriously any account which constructs an eccentric lineage terminating in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, and which omits many of the figures vital to the development of left cultural studies including (to mention only the most obvious) Herbert Marcuse, Wolfgang Iser, Pierre Bourdieu and Stuart Hall. So the debate which Roberts would have *Gargantua* ‘step into’ is a curiously pallid and one-sided affair. Furthermore, the point of this passage seems to be to present the book as an isolated and off-beam attempt to condemn mass culture and its postmodern apologists. This account neglects to mention many recent books which have made arguments along similar lines, most notably Jim McGuigan’s *Cultural Populism*. Nor does it take account of works which analyse production rather than reception, such as Todd Gitlin’s writings about television. The intellectual turn in which many of the more absurd aspects of postmodernism, once taken as truisms, are held up to examination is hardly confined to cultural studies; in writing *Gargantua*, I hoped to contribute to this broad process.

Roberts’s attempt at situating the book is revealing, however, in that it deals exclusively with figures of the Left. Yet the book was only partly intended as a contribution to left-wing debates. It was also, and more importantly, a polemic against right-wing views and against corporate culture as a whole. *Gargantua* took on figures like John Fiske, part of the antipodean legacy of Stuart Hall, whose postmodern relativism can by no stretch of the imagination be called leftist. Such writers have

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture*, London, Verso 1996.

enjoyed a great deal of influence, and their views need to be challenged. It is vital—and this is something that Roberts seems not to grasp—that the Left does not only talk to itself.

The review is in fact a typical Roberts text, for it is loaded with extensive theoretical references and much building up of his credentials to talk about the subject, strenuous defensive manoeuvres concealing flimsy propositions. It is strikingly military in tone—it's all Stallabrass 'attacks' this and 'defends' that in what Roberts takes to be a warfare of ideas. The dialectic, a rich and complex manner of thinking, is here reduced to mere battle. Like Tristram Shandy's Uncle Toby, Roberts is obsessed with fortifications, raising textual earthworks, palisades and towers in a display which is supposed to demonstrate competence but is actually revealing of something else.

Roberts's basic argument is that *Gargantua* is written from within the 'ethical legacy' of Adorno, Benjamin and Lefevre (he here conflates three highly distinct figures) 'and thus out of a philosophical engagement with the artwork as the negative "other" of commodification.' The 'thus' in this sentence is purely Roberts's, so the surprise he expresses on finding no such engagement is concocted for the purposes of the review. *Gargantua* is in part an argument that *certain* aspects of Frankfurt School thinking are still applicable to mass culture today, and indeed that they give a better account of its detail than many postmodern readings. (The detail of my readings about mass culture, whether on photography, computer games or the aesthetics of the automobile is a matter, incidentally, which Roberts never addresses.) This view does not commit me to any defence of high art on, say, Adorno's grounds, and there are very good reasons not to attempt one since high modernist art of the kind Adorno thought contained some positive moment is no longer dominant, and high culture has become quite as commodified as mass culture. To apply Adorno's modernist aesthetics to today's demotic high culture would be perverse in the extreme—though this does not, as we shall see, stop some people from trying.

Roberts is fond of accusing people of Romanticism and, while these accusations are rarely backed up with any evidence, it has the advantage of making him look like a flinty, hard-headed pragmatist.<sup>2</sup> The charge in this case is that, shrinking from embracing the truly radical nature of the avant-garde, I 'defend' the work of unconsciously radical modern primitives—graffiti writers and amateur photographers. The charge fails, first, because I do not simply defend these practices—rather I take their positive aspects to be both marginal and precarious: graffiti, it is argued in *Gargantua*, is dominated by the forms of advertising, and amateur photography is a conservative and petit-bourgeois form of art. Second, because the positive aspects of both practices are perfectly conscious, as should be obvious since much of my evidence is drawn from their practitioners' statements; I don't think that graffiti writers reject the values of the commercial art world because I have analysed some on my couch, or have an occult insight into their unconsciously radical nature, but because they regularly and clearly say so in their own publications. To think otherwise, to doubt their self-awareness and to think them capable only of

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance the accusations levelled against Jay Bernstein and Andrew Bowie in Dave Beech and John Roberts, 'Spectres of the Aesthetic', *New Left Review*, no. 218, July-August 1996. Bernstein and Bowie's replies to this article will be published in the Review in the near future.

‘unconscious resistance’ as Roberts apparently does, is to show them a marked lack of respect, smacking of class prejudice.

Roberts imagines that he sees something ‘loosely reminiscent’ of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque in the chapter on graffiti, and takes me to task for it. Now this is a very odd criticism; any other reasonably well-informed critic might take pause at a book entitled *Gargantua* (referring to Rabelais’s tale, and thus, one would conventionally expect, to Bakhtin and his writing about the carnivalesque) which does not mention Bakhtin once, and never discusses carnival. This omission was a small unstated joke designed to wind up the more rigid postmodernists. But Roberts is so uptight that not only does he miss the point, he actually fabricates Bakhtin’s appearance! This episode is symptomatic of other source-chasing in Robert’s review, little of it accurate—rather it is a matter of identifying a subject (say, trash) and then assuming that the analysis must derive from the first theoretical precedents that spring to mind (Bataille, the abject). Roberts’s theoretical compass regularly swings in any direction but North, but this way of working does, at least, have the advantage of allowing the reviewer to ignore what a text actually says.

Lastly, Roberts tries to have some fun at my expense over my chapter on trash and the photographs associated with it, though he shows little sign of having understood either the argument or the connection between the text and the pictures. Indeed, it is hard to see what his objection actually is, other than a certain distaste for poking about in rubbish. But even this does not bear a moment’s examination for, when it suits him, Roberts celebrates ‘rag-picking’ as a radical practice which has an ‘illicit proletarian edge’ (see his odd fantasy in the recent Tate Gallery catalogue about Bill Woodrow cruising the streets of Brixton for garbage).<sup>3</sup> Again, Roberts sees Romanticism in the argument that trash might serve as an allegorical critique of consumer culture—he even characterises trash as ‘unconscious’ critique, though it should be even more obvious with inanimate objects than with photographers or graffiti writers that this cannot be so. All that I claim is that trash *can* serve as critique if we take the active, conscious steps necessary to see it that way, as many Greens and others have, of course, done. Without such conscious effort, trash remains trash, and I am well prepared to believe that Roberts’s own overflowing kitchen bin gives him no pause for thought whatever.

Roberts seems to expect a fully formed cultural theory to spring, like Athena, from the head of the critic fully armed. To think that way is to deny the implication of the critic in the culture, something I have suggested particularly in the book’s more personal passages. My own writing and photography cannot but be affected by the damaged culture from which it is produced. There are plenty of good reasons to criticise *Gargantua*, naturally, and I am probably more aware of them than most; yet with unerring inaccuracy, Roberts has fixed on none of them.

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<sup>3</sup> Tate Gallery, *Bill Woodrow: Fool’s Gold*, London 1996, p. 9.



Now Roberts has been very busy lately taking a theoretical stand embracing various aspects of new British art. So the question arises why would he spend so much time and (unpaid) effort in a long attack on *Gargantua*? Of course, as soon as we start thinking about personal motivation, we are in murky climes: what appears to be conspiracy may be coincidence—or malice, ignorance, obtuseness or carelessness. But there does seem to be a theoretical reason, unstated in Roberts's review, for his attack, and that is surely to do with the relation between new British art and mass culture. Although I say little about high art in *Gargantua*, in attacking mass culture and its theoretical defenders, I might by implication be commenting upon new British art, and treading on what Roberts takes to be his territory.

Roberts has pursued his ideas in articles in *Everything*, *Third Text*, and *Art Monthly*, and in a long theoretical piece co-authored with Dave Beech in *New Left Review*. This last text did not mention new British art but discussed what Roberts thinks is an important concept for illuminating it: philistinism. Roberts has expended many words in the elucidation of his notion of the philistine, much to the confusion of many readers who find themselves at the mercy of his muddy prose and the fact that what he means by 'philistine' is at total odds with the usual meaning of the word.<sup>4</sup> One of the clearest expositions is found in the Woodrow catalogue (perhaps we have the Tate's editors to thank for this): first we must understand that for Roberts the philistine is a totally reactive category, defined by what is excluded or suppressed by

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<sup>4</sup> Beech and Roberts, 'Spectres of the Aesthetic'. A more coherent essay on the subject by Malcolm Bull was published in the next issue: 'The Ecstasy of Philistinism', *New Left Review*, no. 219, September-October 1996. This did what Beech and Roberts's piece failed to do—to give a glimpse of what a serious and consistent philistinism might become.

the art of the day, particularly the avant-garde. There is no core to it at all: 'there is actually no empirical content to philistinism...' As a consequence 'philistinism as the voice of the excluded has to be constructed *theoretically* in response to dominant and prevailing discourses and practices of art...' <sup>5</sup> So people who are actually excluded from the art world for one reason or another have no say whatsoever in the construction of the philistine; rather (surprise!) all the power to define this category accrues to the critic.

What is also clear from this account is that the philistine, as Roberts defines it, has only a contingent relation to the popular and the proletarian. Given that it is a purely reactive category, what happens when working-class forms, or at least middle-class artists' views of them, move into the mainstream? Will Roberts take to recommending bourgeois high seriousness as the excluded alternative? <sup>6</sup>

This critical campaign has been arduous for both reader and, I imagine, writer but has at least been leavened with moments of unintentional comedy. It is touching that in mid-life Roberts has found an art he can believe in, and which also has the virtue of riding a wave of hype. His new-found enthusiasm may stiffen this artwork with theoretical rectitude, and at the same time bear its philosopher to the shores of success. The campaign has perhaps at times been conducted with a little too much mutual back-slapping. For Roberts, one of Beech's articles in *Everything* was a 'beautifully inflected piece' on interpreting the new British art, while Beech, surveying various critical attempts to deal with new British art in that very piece, surprisingly finds that, above all others, 'John Roberts's writing is a clear case of trying to interpret recent art in a way that might contribute to the artists' self-understanding, and to get them to think about their work more historically and critically.' <sup>7</sup> Given his usually elitist prose, most comical of all have been Roberts's attempts at populism. He has been busy recommending playing dumb, shouting 'arse' and 'taking your knickers down'. All good fun for the lads, no doubt. 'Imagine a kind of artist you've never met before', Roberts urges the reader in an extraordinary puerile fantasy, 'she's openly sexual, bawdy, mischievous and wants to show you how good at football she is'. <sup>8</sup>

The most amazing feature of the campaign, however, is Roberts's attempt to become the theoretical leader of a tendency (a radical avant-garde, remember) which is in flight from exactly the kind of worthy, authoritarian, politically correct theory that he was pursuing throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. New British art has been strongly characterised by the rejection of expert opinion, especially that of critics; its artists are most unlikely to look to any theoretically entangled scribbler for guidance (indeed, on the evidence of a questionnaire conducted by Rose Finn-Kelcey's, they are much more likely to read James Ellroy than Jacques Derrida). <sup>9</sup> Now Roberts is not entirely unaware of this, and has secreted within his theory something of its 'other'. Beech

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<sup>5</sup> Roberts, *Bill Woodrow*, p. 32, my emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Roberts senses the problem at one point, asking 'Is the category of the "philistine", then, just another way of talking about the positional politics of the avant-garde?' See 'Mad for It! Philistinism, the Everyday and the New British Art', *Third Text*, no. 35, Summer 1996, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> John Roberts, 'Notes on 90s Art', *Art Monthly*, no. 200, October 1996, p. 3; Dave Beech, 'Chill Out', *Everything*, no. 20, 1996, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Roberts, 'Notes on 90s Art', p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> South Bank Centre, *The British Art Show 4*, London 1995.

and Roberts's essay, theory-laden though it was, stressed the submission of theory to the particular, and its helplessness in the face of unmediated bodily pleasures in a fashion close to uncritical postmodern positions.

This covert anti-intellectualism allows various terms within Roberts's writing to remain entirely unexamined; of these, the most obvious is the British 'popular'. In popular culture, Roberts includes cinema, porn, television, aspects of culture largely produced and managed by multi-billion dollar corporations. The use of such 'popular' forms in high art are nevertheless considered to be 'gestures of proletarian and philistine disaffirmation'.<sup>10</sup> The way Roberts links the rude, demotic trend within new British art with the 'proletariat' is somewhat naive. Here the working class is allied with the wild body, with unregulated hedonism, with drugs and sex. For the majority of working-class people who are not fans of the *Sunday Sport*, this simple-minded identification of their culture with the products of the porn mongers and media monopolists is pretty insulting. Long ago, Georges Bataille had the number of those who hold such patronising views: 'Communist workers appear to the bourgeois to be as ugly and dirty as hairy sexual organs, or lower parts...'<sup>11</sup> And in that old liberal, primitivising view the negative value of these associations may have been switched to positive, but they remain as clichéd and inaccurate as ever.

For Roberts, the vulgar and profane aspects of recent British art should not be seen as courting media sensationalism, but as a refusal to feel shame about engaging with the everyday.<sup>12</sup> This view exhibits a marked lack of awareness about the power of institutions. Is it mere accident that artists turned to the mass media just at the moment when the recession had iced the commercial art market? Does Roberts really think it doesn't alter the art when artists are treated like pop stars, and featured in the Sunday supplements? Does he think that booze companies sponsor modish openings out of a laddish sense of fun? Or is he simply so attached to the power of a high art that pretends to be no longer high, that he thinks that the artists, safe in their hallowed avant-garde status, can shrug all this off?

To proclaim that everything's dandy with the British 'popular' is to play into the hands of the worst commodifiers, and to serve the system in a very real sense, for the powerful are quite happy with that cool British culture of which the art scene is a part—it has even been praised recently by John Major. *Gargantua* attempted to examine some of the pretensions of a culture which aspires to be popular but is made and marketed by global corporations. It is best for Roberts's views that people do not think about such things. Adorno, of whom Roberts apparently thinks much, wrote of the possibility that the two halves of torn culture, high and low, could be brought together in a specious assimilation in which high art, once the refuge of a fragile critique, would become reconciled with life as it is (the passage is referred to in *Gargantua*). Since he is currently recommending just this false synthesis, it is a remark that should make Roberts's blood run cold.

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<sup>10</sup> Roberts, 'Mad for It!', p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The Solar Anus' (1931), in *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, edited by Allan Stoekel, Manchester 1985, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Roberts, 'Mad for It!', p. 36.

A final but remarkable aspect to this affair is the extraordinary regard that Roberts and his associates have of themselves. They really do believe that the deliberately scrappy bits of work exhibited in old warehouses, and the critical apparatus that they construct about them, represent some major and permanent change in the cultural climate, which will be treasured and argued over by future generations. In the self-serving introduction to *Art has no History!* Roberts places his attempts at theorising in a tradition of leftist thinking about art history which includes Max Raphael and Arnold Hauser (though not, for some reason, Anthony Blunt). Let us cite a typical passage of Roberts: ‘*Selected Errors* needs to be read as a kind of companion text to my *Postmodernism, Politics and Art* (1990) (hereafter PPA). But whereas PPA deals with the modernist/realist debate from within the confines of an analysis of postmodernism, *Selected Errors* concentrates specifically on the modernist/realist legacy itself.’<sup>13</sup> Anyone who can *begin* a book with these lines has a fantastically elevated sense of their own importance and an absolute faith that readers will be prepared to hang on their every word. I doubt whether this was ever the case for left theory, but it certainly seems to have escaped Roberts’s attention that the Left has been having a hard time of it lately, and that it has a great deal of work to do just to persuade people that its ideas are worthy of any attention whatsoever. Roberts, if he is still attached to the Left, is shirking the job.

I did not spend three years writing *Gargantua*, and considerably longer taking the photographs illustrated in it to ‘defend’ graffiti writing or amateur photography or even the exploration of garbage bins. Only someone resolutely determined to plough their own theoretical furrow could think that I did. Benjamin and Adorno both showed ways in which to think about the culture as a whole. Adorno, in particular, was not sanguine about its prospects, and there is good reason to think he would be horrified by the contemporary art scene today. This is not just the nay-saying of some po-faced elitist, but is based on the clear understanding that the enjoyment of our culture is based on the suffering of others, and that this taints the culture as a whole, and affects its every aspect. *Gargantua* was simply an attempt to explore some of those effects, and to raise awareness about them.

Roberts has a talent for accusing people of his own most flagrant faults: inconsistency, Romanticism, primitivism and the neglect of social and institutional analysis. While celebrating particularism and plurality in theory, in practice Roberts is one of those writers who thinks that they alone occupy the royal road to enlightenment, any departure from which is to be condemned with one or more of the standard critiques listed above. Yet, despite the apparent rigour of his writing, Roberts is a true postmodernist in the original sense of the word. His Adornian defence of artistic autonomy is at obvious odds with his uncritical celebration of the ‘popular’, but no matter—in an eclectic fashion let the most diverse and incompatible styles cavort in his theoretical edifice.

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<sup>13</sup> Roberts, *Selected Errors. Writings on Art and Politics, 1981-90*, London 1992, p. 1.

I have no doubt that Roberts will claim to have been misrepresented by this article, as he has by many replies to what he has written.<sup>14</sup> If I find myself somewhat bemused by Roberts's effort, it is because most other reviewers of *Gargantua*, friendly or hostile, have not had much trouble understanding what the book is about. Roberts's work, by contrast, is regularly greeted with incomprehension and confusion, and if this happens often enough, it might after a time dawn on the author that it is not only the readers who are at fault.

As for Roberts's campaign on new British art, while there are plenty of postmodern obscurantists around who mask idiocy with theoretical jargon, there are few critics who share Roberts's lofty Althusserian disdain—to read him is to breathe once more the musty air of the 1970s. There are fewer still who combine this with a covert postmodern particularist and anti-theoretical view. And in adding a demotic garnish celebrating bawdy and mooning football-loving chicks, Roberts has certainly decided to hold himself in a, shall we just say, unique position. He is welcome to maintain it for as long as is anatomically feasible.

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<sup>14</sup> See for instance the debate between Roberts and Stewart Home conducted in *Everything*. The full texts, including Home's final reply which did not make it into *Everything*, can be found in the booklet by Home and 'Friends', *Disputations. On Art, Anarchy and Assholism*, London 1996.