

29 May 1997

Dear Patricia

In his reply to my article, John Roberts gives another outing to views, both on my book, *Gargantua*, and 'new British art' which were pretty exhausted on their previous excursions. Nevertheless, there are one or two points worth making about what he says.

It is striking that while he expresses astonishment at being dubbed a 'spokesman' (his word) for the new art, in the very first sentence of his letter, Roberts mistakes an attack on his views for one on the art itself. He can't have it both ways: if he's not a spokesman, then he can't shelter his opinions behind the supposed richness and complexity of the new art; if he is, then he should admit as much.

Roberts pretends to think it odd that an editor of *New Left Review*, which recently published a piece co-authored by him and Dave Beech, should later choose to attack his views (largely, in fact, those published in other magazines and journals). But it's not strange at all: the *New Left Review* publishes a wide range of opinion and a good deal of debate. The people who work there are not expected to agree with all of it.

I am characterised as a 'rank idealist' (that phrase alone speaks volumes about Roberts's attitudes) and a Puritan Jacobin—more Robespierre than Danton, then. More seriously, Roberts sternly levels the charge of Puritanism against *Gargantua*. But it's wrong-headed: those that bother to read the book will find in it a specific critique of Puritan attitudes (echoing that of Frankfurt School thinking which often faced the same shallow criticism). Furthermore, much of *Gargantua* was arguing, not that people are having such a good time that they no longer think about serious issues, but that much of mass culture, while certainly distracting, is banal, uniform and conformist. Its character is not a matter of morals but is rather inherent in the system of mass cultural production.

While people having a good time is a fine thing, that does not mean that we should not ask questions about who is having it and how, and who is not and why. I cannot support a system of economic and cultural production which gives a (qualified

and etiolated) ‘good time’ to some while leaving three-fifths of the planet’s population in a state of poverty and insecurity, and a further fifth without enough to eat. I imagine that Roberts does not either, though from his recent writing you would not know it. The interminable rearrangement of today’s buzzwords (‘strategies’, ‘pleasures’, ‘concretise’ etc. etc.) in opaque sentences has no purchase on this state of affairs, and nor does it ‘defend the critical and emancipatory potential of art’.

Then there is the problem that Roberts seems incapable of reading and understanding sentences, even those written in ‘*Reader’s Digest*’ English—a grave disadvantage in a book reviewer, one might think, though not necessarily in a spokesman for the ‘new art’. Nowhere did I say that Malcolm Bull’s piece on the philistine, fine though it was, ‘resolves’ the issue, and I doubt that even its author would claim *that*. Nor did I say that Roberts was an Althusserian (only that his prose exhibited a lofty Althusserian disdain, quite another matter). Roberts had indeed been developing a critical realist position in some of his better writing—unfortunately, his work on the ‘new art’ has lacked much in the way of either critique or realism. I am glad to see that in his letter, Roberts acknowledges that the scene is, at least, mixed and that some work in it does appear to ‘betray the values’ upon which any positive view on art should be based. I do not by any means think of the ‘new art’ as being entirely negative and have said so in various places. Understanding its positive and negative features, how they are entangled and how they are produced is an important critical task: these are the grounds on which a more useful debate could take place.

Lastly, what AM published was an extract from a reply I had written for *Variant* to Roberts’s review of *Gargantua*. The full text placed his views on the ‘new British art’ within the context of his attack on my book. Anyone who would like to read the whole thing should contact me at the address below.

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