Introduction to Ruskin Degree Show Catalogue, 2000

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Figure 1 Rose Finn-Kelcey *It Pays to Pray* 2000

The art world into which this year's Ruskin graduates will emerge is an unstable and conflicted one. Still blinded by the flashy success of so-called 'young British art', many artists and curators are groping towards what they hope will soon come into view: the 'next big thing'. Young British art itself is marcescent, its once radical products declined into forlorn self parody, its novelties greeted with automatic rapture in the mass media, and a weary rolling of the eyes among the younger generations of artists. Its encroaching death is most clearly seen in the tendency's over-triumphal return to the East End, this time not in warehouse shows but mainstream galleries, where viewers can delight in a chicken protruding lewdly from a T-shirt and Ping-Pong balls jiggling over the eye-sockets of a plastic skeleton.

It is hard to say what will replace these trifles. Will it be the post-conceptual whimsy currently pushed by some writers and dealers? Here a justifiable horror of bombast and scandal-mongering have led to highly self-conscious work which is modestly amusing or paradoxically empty. Or will clever and decorative works—pieces we are tempted to call, without much qualification, 'painting' or 'sculpture', and are a register of the moderate but sustained revival in the economy—step to the fore? While we wait, it seems safe to fall back upon standard tactics: a mix-and-match art that brings recognisable elements into novel combination or conflict without (this is one of the rules) any hint of resolution.

The next prominent wave in mainstream art—if this country is host to it—will be largely determined by the uses to which art is put, just as young British art was. Two powerful forces are at work, and they do not necessarily go hand-in-hand.

First, there is the commercial art market which is slowly moving beyond the sale of small numbers of coloured objects to smaller numbers of wealthy people (though this remains the core of their business). The British mass media's attitude to contemporary art has been transformed over the past decade. As art has become a central part of the culture—this is most clearly seen in the extraordinary opening of Tate Modern—the views of a wider public than those who buy increasingly come to matter, while art objects move closer to the status of other more mundane, commodities. There is a growing market for secondary products (editions of various kinds, fine books, domestic objects designed by artists or, at the cheapest end of the scale, mugs and souvenirs) sold not so much through galleries as shops and Internet sites. All this has a salutary effect, demystifying the products of high art and, by implication, bringing into uncomfortable illumination the arcane market practices of the elite galleries. The intimate link between art and urban gentrification is increasingly visible, too: in a recent video exhibition shown in a warehouse building, viewers could wander directly from the bare galleries into an elaborately furnished show flat (glimpsing the future of the building) and see on its walls pictures by artists in the show.[1]

Second, the government believes that art can be an important ally in its attempt to restore the cohesion of a nation that for years happily condemned a third or so of its citizens to poverty and marginality. Art and culture, we are continually assured, can help to renew run-down urban areas, revive the civic instincts of the public, transform business practices so that work will become creative and self-fulfilling, and even be tied to programmes promoting health.[2] This can only happen, we are warned, if art loses its elitism and openly embraces everyone, no matter what their social category or minority status. This attitude is plain in the art and displays of the Millennium Dome, a large playground that is supposed simultaneously to provide pleasure and foster civic virtue. In the 'Self Portrait' zone, devoted to the British nation, the insecurities of this fractured assemblage are on frank display in text panels that trumpet the superiority of our technology, comedy, culture and even system of justice. 'We're the envy of the world—no wonder!', concludes the culture panel. Yet the mantras of state dedication to mandatory creativity, multiculturalism and, more generally, opposition to sin fills the mind with an oppressive ennui, and the suspicion of hypocrisy. It is well summed up in a piece by Rose Finn-Kelcey, a sequence of converted chocolate-vending machines set outside the Dome, selling prayers named after confectionery. Here's one called *Time Out*:

> I feel so lazy
> I don't want to bother
> It's too much trouble
> It's not worth it
> I don't get anything out of it
> I just want to curl up and go to sleep
> For a 1000 years

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[1] The show was run by the Lisson Gallery in a building in Covent Garden, May 2000.
[2] For an official statement of this view, see Chris Smith, *Creative Britain*, Faber and Faber, London 1998.

A hymn to the Millennium sneaked past the overseers of the overblown, tawdry Dome and seen alongside their other worthier stabs at public art.

Private market and state are not necessarily in conflict over the role of art: New Labour strive to lessen social distinctions, bringing each one of us into a state of blissful and creative consumerism that would include aesthetic appreciation. Yet, on the no doubt lengthy path to this Nirvana, there are tensions: the worthy morals of government rhetoric sit uneasily with the conventional cynicism and vacuity produced by the market; the accessibility implied by universal consumption faces a market system that defines value through arcane sophistication. The terms of this complicated little language game, of art talking mostly about itself, are not conducive to social ends.

Artists must decide how to relate to this dual system, and what kind of work it permits them to produce. Serving state or market or both are options for individuals. Yet only from within the narrow confines of the London art world can the current situation seem of interest. Matched against both current global developments—social, economic, political, cultural—and with the art that is produced from within them, British art (or at least the British art that soaks up most media attention) appears parochial, complacent and reactionary. It chatters fluently enough about itself, but is struck dumb in the face of the pressing issues of our time. Compare the limp productions of young British art to the urgent and complex work of artists from, say, China, Cuba or Brazil.

There is a natural suspicion of art bent to social use, a suspicion that the catastrophes of the last century confirm. Even so, the separation of art from all use is not less ideological or social in its effect than the enslavement of art by the state. The fact that New Labour's truisms are mouthed by professional media managers does not automatically make them lies. Making art is in principle—and sometimes in practice—free and unalienated labour: every art student should feel privileged to have had those years of self-development and self-expression. Equally, a more egalitarian, democratic and participatory art is worth striving for. Recent technological and political developments mark a break with the postmodern miasma which so many theorists are eager to assure us is eternal. There are the possibilities for wide distribution and participation opened up by the Internet, and already there have emerged virtual spaces for sophisticated and unfettered discussion, alongside forms of art that tread the margins between culture and activism. Further, the new anti-corporate politics that rose slowly through the 1990s, and came to prominence in the successful anti-World Trade Organisation demonstrations in Seattle last year, has produced distinctive forms of culture. Activists build art installations that also hinder bulldozers, or in a war of images subvert adverts, or flood government servers with messages about human rights in actions that approach a collective form of conceptual art.[3] These works have little to do with the mainstream art institutions, public or

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[3] On such activities, see Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Flamingo, London 2000, Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*™, Eagle Brook, New York 1999, and George McKay, ed., *DIY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain*, Verso, London 1998. MA curating students at the Royal College of Art made an exhibition about art with explicit social engagement: see *Democracy!*, RCA, London 2000.

private. They are on the margins of art. At this border, where it is unclear what is and what is not art, and at the points of tension and contradiction, creative practices are at their most free (sometimes precisely because most restrained by utility) and are most open to others. In these places—physical, conceptual and virtual—works of art are not merely accessible but public, available not just for viewing but for dialogue and change.