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Artist-Curators and the New British Art

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If isolated amongst pure specialists, artist-curators would be curiously hybrid figures, but in fact they are surrounded by artist-theorists, artist-critics and artist-teachers, not to mention artists who wait at table, or work in warehouses, or sign on. In a time of economic insecurity and in a world of temporary and part-time work where people turn their hands to many things, artists quite naturally adopt a curatorial role. Even so, the incidental appearance of this particular hybrid has had consequences for art and curatorship which go beyond the merely economic.

That diverse, even incoherent, phenomenon which has come to be labelled ‘new British art’¹ was also an outgrowth of economic insecurity, and within it artist-curatorship has been prominent. It was there at the tendency’s retrospectively established inception, ‘Freeze’, curated by Goldsmith’s students in an empty industrial space in 1988. This, and subsequent shows, such as ‘Modern Medicine’ and ‘Gambler’, perhaps more celebrated now than they were then, demonstrated that artist-curated shows in makeshift, temporary galleries could be successful. They garnered publicity and, at first, commercial success for their participants—many of the ‘Freeze’ artists were picked up by private galleries. In no sense was this the establishment of a new avant-garde, for there was no programme, only a certain arch positioning. Nor was it anything particularly new or radical: ‘Everybody had quite grand ideas at the time [1988] which were best handled by doing big fuck-off shows that didn’t need to be compromised by working within a gallery system. But it wasn’t saying “fuck off” to the galleries. It was just an alternative...’²

In these exhibitions, the exclusion of professional curators was an important mark of the alternative scene’s authenticity; together, artists and shows marketed themselves with rawness and straightforwardness. If artist-curatorship and the new British art have become closely associated, it should be asked whether the link is more than contingent. The coherence of the

¹ See Simon Ford, ‘Myth Making’, *Art Monthly*, no. 194, March 1996, pp. 3-9.

category, 'new British art', has been questioned but, even if the unity wished on the trend is in part retrospective and has been exaggerated (especially by bodies which have an interest in doing so, like the British Council), looking at artist-curatorship may be a way of approaching the issue of its distinct nature.

The embrace of mass culture by much new British art seems at first to be a simple fulfilment of the postmodern proclamation that there is no longer a meaningful distinction between high and low. This work looks friendlier than the conceptual complexities that preceded it, and appears to speak directly to people's everyday concerns. When artists such as Sarah Lucas use spreads from tabloid newspapers, they no longer need to belabour the theoretical grounds for co-opting this material; they just go ahead and do it.³ This attitude towards mass culture has been highly successful in encouraging new and wider audiences for contemporary art, and in gaining it a good deal of media attention.

Because for such artists the transparency of material drawn from mass culture is important, specialist knowledge is rejected, not only of cultural theory, but also of art-history and curatorship. Knowing about, say, cyperpunk, or football, or the *Partridge Family*—and as a fan, not an analyst—may be more important for the understanding of this art than knowledge of Velazquez or Picasso, or even Art & Language. The use of mass culture is more than a mere enthusiasm for the popular; it is an anti-elitist strategy which runs alongside showing art outside conventional gallery spaces, and the refusal to create valuable, durable art-objects. The effect is a decided shift of power away from art-world professionals to the artists themselves and to the mass media. Even art criticism, though important, is no longer much about critique but mostly about column inches—often purchased in exchange for the placement of adverts or even works of art. As a consequence, criticism is in decline, giving comforting puffs to the favoured and entirely ignoring the rest.

Yet the inclusion of a wider audience at the level of art and theory in the new British art have produced a reaction of exclusion at another level. New British art is only apparently flippant and friendly. It exploits the transparency of mass culture to give it access to markets beyond the high-cultural elite but, guarded by a small group of well-informed, theoretically adept

² Angus Fairhurst in, Walker Art Center, *Brilliant*, Minneapolis 1995, p. 34.

³ See John Roberts, 'Mad for It! Bank and the New British Art', *Everything*, no. 18, 1996, p. 16.

insiders (often postgraduates from art and theory courses) reserves for itself a stern exclusivity. For those in the know, the works are loaded with in-jokes. These artists' philistine gestures are safe only because everyone knows that they are a matter of choice, and that if they wanted once more to make work based on Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva—the usual suspects, in short—they still could.⁴ So the work has a double face: outwards to wider audiences and media notoriety, inwards to the 'clubby' art world,⁵ where the old institutions, private galleries and public bodies, are definitely not excluded.

Curating has always been an odd mix of the professional and the aesthetic; if it is dominated by artists in contemporary shows, that makes a certain sense for it is only to play up the aesthetic side to the exclusion of specialist knowledge: Damien Hirst has said that for him there is no difference between making work and curating.⁶ Artists' curatorial qualifications are of a primary order, and artists' selections and arrangements have a weight just because of who they are. Like the art, the names of the shows compete with each other to be as flip and cool as they can, though this may have reached a terminus with Bank's most recent title, 'Fuck Off'. Such curatorship bears the mark of authenticity at the expense of critical distance.

Given this, the distinction we should look at is not so much that between pure curators and artist-curators, but between those curators who are part of the scene—whether or not they are artists—and those who remain outside. Carl Freedman, for instance, who most recently curated 'Minky Manky' at the South London Gallery last summer, is not an artist, but his exhibitions certainly fit the pattern of artist-curatorship we are concerned with here.

The scene is exclusive aesthetically as well as socially but the grounds of the former exclusion are hard to define. In one sense, as Matt Collishaw pointed out, because of the post-minimalist nature of this art, these alternative shows were not hard to put together: 'it was not that difficult to curate an exhibition out of works like that because they've all got the same

⁴ On the definition and radical nature (or otherwise) of philistinism, which has important implications for recent developments in the British art scene, see Dave Beech and John Roberts, 'Spectres of the Aesthetic', *New Left Review*, no. 218, July-August 1996; and Malcolm Bull, 'The Ecstasy of Philistinism', *New Left Review*, no. 219, September-October 1996.

⁵ On clubbiness, see Roberts, 'Mad for It!', p. 19.

⁶ Interview with Marco Spinelli posted on the World Wide Web at illumin.co.uk.britishart/artists/dh.

flavour and they work quite well together in a group situation.’⁷ When the shows are taken together, selection occurs less at the level of curatorial decision than at that of the scene itself.

The difficulty with definition is a fundamental matter. When Martin Creed's band takes apart the rhetoric of pop, starting a song, and then continually restarting it, or beginning counting, 'one, two, three, four', but then carrying right on up to one hundred, it is easy to appreciate the humour and to know that some responses—like dancing—are inappropriate, because we have a good feeling for the rules which are being violated. With high art it is rather more difficult since this kind of critical dismantling has been continuing for decades, and it is hard to know with what level of reference we are dealing: is a work referring to something else or to itself, to rhetoric or reference, or to some still further recursion? A shop which Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas ran in 1993 to sell art-junk, most notoriously ashtrays with photographs of Damien Hirst stuck to the bottom (stub out your fag on the face of that celebrated lover of cigarettes) was in one sense a powerful curatorial statement about commerce, but it was also an actual shop which made and sold stuff, and, as Emin says, they lived off it for six months.⁸

Faced with such difficulties, the frequent recourse of critics and historians has been to rely on the statements of the artists. This has always been a dubious strategy because it assumes not only that these informants are open and honest but also that they know exactly what they are doing, and are able to express it. Now artists are often (rightly) refusing to let critics off the hook in this fashion; Hirst says 'I sometimes feel I have nothing to say, I often want to communicate this',⁹ and in general is anxious to place all responsibility for the reading of his work with the viewer, while Lucas responds to critical questioning with: 'I'm saying nothing. Just look at the picture and think what you like.'¹⁰

But this undecidability is not a product of the postmodern condition, or the liminal or deconstruction in any essential sense, but of a specific situation in which art simultaneously addresses diverse audiences, facing outward to the general audience and inward to the in-crowd. Since the connections between the two are rather tenuous (the mass media are intent on seeing some connection with Brit-pop, for instance), the task of the critic and the curator becomes very difficult. A manifestly subjective and detached attitude is one of the few ways

⁷ Matt Collishaw, 'The Freeze Exhibition', posted on the Web at illumin.co.uk/britshart/artists/mc.

⁸ See Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, *Brilliant*, p. 31.

⁹ Institute of Contemporary Arts, *Damien Hirst*, London 1993, n.p.

out. This manner of working is a choice and a strategy. It breaks the dead hold of professional standards, of high theory, of the inverse but vulgar Marxism of political correctness over high art, but does so at the expense of a new powerlessness. While there may be a certain radical charge in the act of negation against the high-culture industry, there is no sense in which anything is recommended except the loosest and hippest of liberalism, defended but also defanged by irony. The inner art circle are far too cool to be offended by anything—ask yourself, especially if you are on the scene yourself, what it would take to offend these people (the Chapmans don't come close—not, of course, that they are trying).

The result is lots of shows which all claim to be unique but which all say much the same thing: that they are 'alternative'. The most important claim that these exhibitions make is negative: it is to proclaim what they are not. That they are not earnest, forehead-creasing displays of postmodern rectitude, nor are they faux-naïve nature- and spirit-vendors in the British tradition, like Gormley, Kapoor or Goldsworthy, so beloved of the mainstream institutions. As a consequence, the links between works in artist-curated group shows may have little to do with their content; for those in the know, they are much more to do with certain social sets, or who went to college where, or was taught by, and/or is going out with, whom. Of course, it is foolish to think that such factors do not intrude into professionally curated shows, but they are generally not so primary, and also a little better concealed.

Such shows certainly have many precedents, not in the public but in the private sector, in the numerous group exhibitions which brought artists together by commercial accident and celebrated their diversity. As a pure strategy, the fact that for a time such shows were run by artists rather than galleries may turn out to have little long-term consequence, and indeed we have seen that private galleries have found it very easy to bring this work, and the practices which govern its curating (which were always their own) back within their confines.

Yet not all artist-curated shows have been exactly the same. Bank and Plummer, for instance, have made distinct curatorial interventions. I was involved as a writer with 'Candyman II', in which the curators, Matthew Arnatt and Peter Lewis, were interested in making an exhibition which questioned the resolutely affirmative role of curating. To make a show, in other words, which did not support the work, which was, at best, neutral towards it. In many ways, this

¹⁰ Sarah Lucas interviewed by Marco Spinelli, *Brilliant*, p. 64.

looked like a typical alternative show, with a group of diverse artists shown in the vast spaces of an old biscuit factory. No attempt had been made to renovate the space, however, which was so massive that even large works looked lost within it, and viewers were at one point herded into a space surrounded by an electric fence. 'Candyman II' raised questions about the attitude of viewers and curators to art as a pursuit worthy of time, space and attention. When the show was reviewed, however, it was treated like any other alternative event. It was an instructive experience since it showed the liberal tolerance of the system for an activity which tried to go against it, and the difficulty of doing anything which could stand visibly outside its ambit.¹¹

Others have tried to break with the atmosphere of pure authenticity surrounding the alternative scene. Two very different exhibitions curated by Beaconsfield, a curatorial organisation run by the artists, David Crawforth and Naomi Siderfin and Angus Neill, illustrate this. In a show called 'The Lisson Gallery', and publicised using Lisson-style adverts, an old pub was converted into a gallery showing drawings by David Mollins and text works by Matthew Arnatt—the latter was also responsible for the idea. David Crawforth had covered the floor of the pub with straw and had a herd of 26 guinea pigs living in the space—these are herd animals, you realise, when seen en masse. This was obviously to disrupt the viewing of art with defamiliarized domestic elements, but the guinea pigs also stood in for artists, and referred to competition and selection—based of course on experimentation—in the bright laboratories of the gallery system.

Very different was the Beaconsfield show *Cottage Industry* in which various artists reflected, either in the gallery or from their homes, on their different roles as artists, workers and mothers.¹² Again, though, the lottery of the market was questioned, as was the fate of the vast majority of artists who do not 'make it', or who at any rate do not make quite enough. This exhibition brought art up against the contingencies of the everyday, showing how it connects to the ordinary world of work and life. It acknowledged that fine art is very often a cottage industry, and allowed a more democratic identification with it from those who also have to juggle work, family and the pursuits which happen to be their passion.

¹¹ I was asked to write a similarly unsupportive catalogue essay. Although the catalogue never appeared, an edited version of the essay appeared in *Art Monthly*, no. 182, December 1994-January 1995, pp. 1-3.

The loose group show, by contrast, the one which says only that the selected group of artists are on the scene, is a consequence of deep but masked scepticism about the effects and the ethics of art. Yet, despite themselves, these shows did have lasting consequences because attitude and venue reinforced each other. As Robert Garnett has put it, 'It was one thing to be claiming to be launching an assault upon the "scopic regimes of modernity" from within the confines of the pristine spaces of transnational Postmodernism, another to make the same claims' from 'a disused storefront in the East End.'¹³ There is an implicit project of openness and democratisation within aspects of new British art, but if it is to be fulfilled such work needs to take its wider audience seriously, and to explore the conditions which make the work's existence and distribution possible.

Despite its positive aspects—which as we have seen are partly negative, though it has to be said that not being Anthony Gormley is a very good thing to be—new British art is very much a product of its time; it is generally apolitical, cynically careerist, and out for a good time. New British art is, then, the cultural equivalent of New Labour—and this is not an entirely arbitrary comparison, for both are products of the apparently global closing-off of radical alternatives (so that radicalism becomes a matter of pure image) and of the bankruptcy of the accepted order. When new British art elides high and mass culture, it is just like New Labour when it assures us that there is no distinction between efficiency and fairness. Like New Labour, new British art is an establishment in waiting. How much can we expect from it? Well, as Margaret Thatcher once put it, describing her concessions on sanctions against South Africa while holding her fingers the tiniest distance apart, 'this much'.

¹² 'Cottage Industry' was held at Beaconsfield, Vauxhall in November 1995. It was curated by Naomi Siderfin, and included the work of Sonia Boyce, Siobhan Davies, Mikey Cuddihy, Kate Bush, Elsie Mitchell, Clare Palmier and Naomi Siderfin.

¹³ Robert Garnett, 'Beyond the Hype', *Art Monthly*, no. 195, April 1996, pp. 43-4.