The Decline and Fall of Art Criticism

Julian Stallabrass

There is an advert for lager which begins with dire warnings about the consequences of global warming (flooding, encroaching deserts and so on) and, showing a burning globe, suggests that viewers have recourse to the usual political moves: write to your MP, they are urged, campaign, or—and at this point the scene changes to a winking kangaroo quaffing lager by a pool—say 'bollocks to it' and enjoy the sunshine while it lasts.[1] This advert clearly demonstrates a common feature of business propaganda: it contains an acknowledgement of the critiques that might be levelled against it. It is useless to criticise adverts for soap powder or instant coffee for being clumsy and overt, if they are knowingly clumsy and overt. The lager advert is unusual only because it contains a critique that is levelled against the entire system of consumerism.

Perhaps this tactic gives a first clue to untangling a phenomenon much remarked upon and little analysed: the decline of serious art criticism. Maybe art, like advertising, has inoculated itself against criticism by slipping a tiny dose of critique into its aged veins. Indeed, it is commonly said in Britain these days that art has become more like advertising, and in the same breath that it is no coincidence that the dominant buyer of British contemporary art made his fortune in advertising. Yet the decline of criticism is not purely a British affair. While the situation in Britain has its peculiarities, and is perhaps more extreme than elsewhere, it is part of a more general tendency. British art and criticism, then, will be used here only to illustrate the development of that broader trend.

First, we should try to establish that there has been a decline. In a short space, this can only be done in a highly impressionistic manner. Consider, to begin with, that (unlike in academic art theory) there are no longer British art critics who have a credible intellectual presence both within and without the art world, whose writing is seen as important for the culture as a whole: whatever one might think about their views, critics of previous decades such as Roger Fry, Herbert Read, Adrian Stokes, John Berger, and even Peter

[1] I would like to thank Kitty Hauser and Mick James for their help with this article.

Fuller did have such scope. Furthermore, whatever one might think about the art, the British art scene has recently been undergoing a radical transformation of the greatest theoretical interest. Yet, despite some few analytical contributions in the form of short articles, there has been little debate about it, and certainly few attempts to examine it in the light of wider trends.[2] The book-length discussions of the subject by single authors have been simply risible.[3]

Finally, I offer some concrete evidence in the form of quotes: plainly, in any era it would be easy to pick out published idiocies, and my claim must be that they are now more prevalent than previously, which a few citations cannot prove. Instead, the purpose of exhibiting them here is to give a taste of the character of current art criticism, of art critics, and of those who permit such sentences to pass unscathed to publication.

Let us start with an instance which demonstrates the very common problems of inaccuracy and non-sequitur. Stuart Morgan, an influential critic, beloved by the commercial galleries and a regular contributor to *Frieze*, writes of a photograph by Matt Collishaw, *Narcissus*, in which the artist is seen lying by a muddy puddle in an urban setting, gazing into the water:

[2] Among the best contributions have come from Simon Ford, Robert Garnett and Mark Harris. In articles for *New Left Review*, *Third Text* and other journals, John Roberts and Dave Beech have attempted to support the 'popular' in recent British art by linking it to their own view of the philistine. If their attempt has seemed isolated and paradoxical, this is partly due to the very conditions that this article is attempting to examine.

[3] See Louisa Buck, *Moving Targets: A User's Guide to British Art Now*, Tate Gallery Publishing, London 1997; Matthew Collings, *Blimey! From Bohemia to Britpop: The London Artworld from Francis Bacon to Damien Hirst*, 21 Publishing, Cambridge 1997. Buck's effort is simply a book-length press release; Collings' is a gossip sheet written by someone with his tongue so firmly in his cheek that it could equally plausibly be read as one long paean of praise or one long, loud raspberry.

> …the motive was desire and the Barthesian *punctum* lay between the artist's legs, the point at which his fist, gripping the button of the shutter release, served also to conceal his genitals. No stronger statement could be made about the mendacity of the photographic image or the role of objectivity in art.[4]

Now this sounds like good, plausible stuff. But a cursory glance at the picture in question shows that Collishaw's hand rests on top of his thigh, not between his legs, and that his genitals (unconcealed by his hand) are adequately covered by his jeans. It is also obvious, given a moment's reflection, that there is no connection whatsoever between the first sentence and the second. Such specious and over-heated prose is unfortunately commonplace.

To move on to the next example in which a pop star takes on the role of art critic (these days everyone thinks they have something to say about art which is worth publishing) and criticism takes on the role of gossip:

> …there in the centre of the floor is one of the icons of late twentieth-century art: not Jeff [Koons] himself, of course, though he is, but the *Hoover Celebrity Trance (Quiet Series)*. All soft round plastic form and leaf green and cream. Jeff and his assistant, Gary, have detombed the pristine piece from twenty years of storage and are now standing before it scratching their heads and muttering. The apes before the obelisk. 'Is this for the Guggenheim retrospective?', I ask. 'Or has some collector decided to make an extremely late purchase?' 'Not at all', replies Jeff Koons, the puzzled child. 'This place is getting so messy that I just wanted to vacuum.'[5]

If you wanted to parody pseudo art-speak, you could hardly do better than this passage by David Bowie, and (like the adverts for coffee or soap powder, or Koons' work itself) critique is hard to mount because the text is aware of its own absurdity. The interest here is legitimate enough: the reverse-Duchampian move of taking a ready-made and making of it once more a functional object (Joseph Kosuth, so I have heard, sacked his cleaner

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[4] Stuart Morgan, 'Forbidden Images', *Frieze*, February 1996, p. 55.

[5] David Bowie, 'Super-Banalism and the Innocent Salesman', *Modern Painters*, Spring 1998, p. 27.

for using his edition of Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm* to shovel up some rubbish). The tone, however, is simultaneously fawning and pally, and the passage is the prelude to a prolonged exercise in arse-licking—one of many that now grace the pages of magazines like *Modern Painters*.

Last, and worst because published in *Art Monthly*, one of the more serious British art magazines, and in their special 200th edition at that, was an essay by David Barrett which propounded the universal truth that living art must always and can only be experienced within its original social environment. Since, for all the works in the National Gallery, that environment had long passed away, they are dead, and no one who goes to seem them is really appreciating art. Aside from the obvious point that people remake contexts around old objects, the piece was prey to the prevalent fault of schoolboy relativism. Since the works in the National Gallery have lost their original, specific charge, wrote Barrett, the 'most meaning we can hope to derive from them are the good old universal truths, which are of course not worth knowing since the idea itself is specious.'[6] It is obvious that even if this statement can avoid internal paradox (that there are no valid universal truths sounds like a universal truth itself—but perhaps it is a new one), it could be applied against the argument of the article itself.

To move away from these depressing examples to the more general picture, it is necessary to relate briefly the story of the British art world from the 1980s on, although its development has not been untypical and many of its elements will be familiar. The changes that occurred were closely tied to the trajectory of the economy as a whole, and this became more and more transparently so as time went on.

In Britain, the growth of service industries was particularly strong, due to the great and indiscriminate destruction of manufacturing industry that took place under the Thatcher government's economic strictures. We shall look at this in more detail later, but there was a marked rise in the profile and profitability of businesses which sell intangible goods, and rely heavily on marketing and advertising. For businesses which sell essentially the image of themselves, their perceived cultural profile is extremely important, and they burnished it through an involvement in buying or sponsoring high art.

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[6] David Barrett, 'Art ain't wot it used to be', *Art Monthly*, no. 200, October 1996, pp. 32-3.

After the recession of the early 1980s had ended, the art market became part of the speculative boom in which money was funnelled from poor to rich. For some, a way to make sense of the prodigious growth of a new and brash art market was to say that it had left the thinkers behind. The dealer Karsten Schubert argued that critics lost their position during the 1980s because the narrowness of their views was overtaken by the market which went ahead and just did the things that they had sternly legislated against: the market 'totally undermined critical judgement'.[7] Already at this stage, something of the situation which made criticism difficult (or simply irrelevant) was in place. Art criticism might and did make justifiable complaint against the crass, dubious art that passed fluidly through the sale rooms, but as long as so much money was being made from it, who really cared?

The Conservative 'economic miracle' turned out to be a short-term, consumption-driven boom of the kind Britain had often experienced before, and when recession once again struck in 1990, the British art market burst like a balloon. This did not, however, lead to much revival of criticism. Artists were for a time forced to look for new markets outside the commercial gallery scene. Many of them did so by appealing to the mass media, and their art became a mirror of the mass media's concerns. That market (unlike the cosmopolitan fine art world) was British-based and thus focused largely upon national concerns. This goes a long way to explaining the character of the art which slowly emerged from this change. It purported to be 'popular', and it was insular, consumer-oriented, obsessed with sex and violence, extraordinarily self-regarding, and anti-intellectual. These were novel qualities in high art, but not so new in the British press, especially since the rise of Rupert Murdoch's *Sun*. Yet this art—which for convenience we may call 'high art lite'—was still high art, and could only indulge these qualities in a sly, considered way, for it had an eye to its other, and in the final analysis more important, audience: the established art world. There developed a split between the wide world of the passive consumers of this art, and the narrow one of its active agents and buyers.

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[7] Karsten Schubert in Andrew Renton and Liam Gillick, eds, *Technique Anglaise: Current Trends in British Art*, Thames and Hudson/ One-Off Press, London 1991, p. 15.

Yet to say that art has become more like advertising, or more like the press, is only a fragment of the truth. Rather, art has become more like business, at the same time as business has become more like art. This convergence is the secret of contemporary art's limited popular success.

This is not to argue that high art was ever not a business, at least not within the confines of advanced capitalism. Yet, with the fall of 'actually existing' socialism, and the consequent rise in capitalists' self-confidence in the inevitability of their system, the once spectral connection between art and business has become explicit. An article on Gary Hume which appeared in the *Guardian* newspaper's 'Living' pages illustrates this well. His 'easy serious' paintings are presented just like any other consumer object. The accompanying article made little pretence to any higher significance, and was followed, as logic demanded, with an 'exclusive print offer'.[8] This at least has the virtue of honesty.

In Britain that art has become more overtly like business has been due to the gradual, long-term withdrawal of state funding and, under Thatcher's reign, to a deliberate and ideologically motivated attempt to involve private business in arts sponsorship at every level.[9] Museums and galleries have, of course, become increasingly run on business lines, judged primarily by the numbers who are channelled through their halls. Those visitors are expected to shop, and are subjected to marketing speak and merchandising deals. Museums and galleries have also become prized venues for business wining and dining—the display of corporate largesse, as well as important focus points in urban regeneration schemes and land speculation.[10]

Art has followed the changing character of its institutions; the avant-garde has fallen away for, as in fashion, there is expectation of novelty but no longer of development. The dissolution of a generalised, universal politics implicit in much modernist art gave way first to a divisive and atomised identity politics, and more recently—in a move from

[8] Lindsay Baker, 'The Beauty Bomber', *The Guardian Weekend*, 2 May 1998, pp. 40-3.
[9] For a detailed and revealing analysis of this development, see Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Aspects of Corporate Art Intervention in Contemporary Art and Art Institutions during the Reagan and Thatcher Decade*, PhD thesis, University of London, 1997.
[10] For a recent examination of the role of art in business and the promotion of a commercially successful national culture, see Simon Ford and Anthony Davies, 'Art Capital', *Art Monthly*, no. 213, February 1998, pp. 1-4.

atomised identity to the atomised exercise of that identity—to an art of pure consumer choice.

If art has been pulled towards business, driftwood on an outgoing tide, the impulse has largely come from business, which lately has itself become more like art. In the advanced capitalist world, since the advent of 'postmodernism' (a cultural expression of a shift in economic structures), the greatest profits have been made in offering services, often in conjuring value from the intangible.[11] When an artist signs an object it may leap in value; similarly well-known brand names are applied with great flexibility to a range of objects and services, and can create value in and of themselves. The brand name 'Virgin' is used to sell flights, condoms, cola, Internet access and pensions. Brand names are not unlike artists' identities, but they can be rated at specific monetary values (and are for accounting purposes), and can be bought and sold. Though intangible, they can be copyrighted and defended in the courts—as Damien Hirst has fought advertisers who plagiarise his art. Some firms, like Benetton, are little more than brand names—the company makes no clothes (branding those made by others) and owns no shops (they are franchises). In the drift towards marketing the intangible, which was particularly strong in Britain, as we have seen, image becomes all-important. So companies like Pepsi are planning to brand the hues that they hope have become inextricably associated with their products.[12]

Given this cultural and commercial convergence, it is hardly surprising to find that art criticism serves largely as an adjunct to the business of art, and the art of business. The places in which the debates of serious art criticism were once aired have either fallen silent (like *Artscribe International* which folded during the last recession) or transformed themselves. The most widely looked-at art magazines are now picture-sheets, charting the ever-shifting micro-fashions of high art lite. Not unlike style magazines such as *The Face*, their images are vastly more important than their words. Text still serves a purpose because its length and prominence within a magazine confers importance on its subject—it gives the appearance that someone has bothered to think about the stuff on show, and implies that this stuff is worthy of that homage. With the dissipation of art

[11] This passage follows the interpretation of David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell, Oxford 1990.
[12] See Gail Johnson, 'Pepsi Blue', *Adbusters*, no. 20, Winter 1998, pp. 13-14.

into the broader cycle of business, art criticism increasingly rejects the specialist language it picked up in the academy (no bad thing in itself) and value is built up around work less with heavy theoretical constructions than with rhetorical devices such as whimsical references to music, literature or popular science, or with precious exercises that flaunt a critic's sensibilities. It matters rather little what is actually said, so long as it is affirmative. Better, in general, that it is anodyne than that it risks offence. Intellectual rigour, logic, truth (conveniently unfashionable concepts) matter not at all.

Above everything, the battle is fought over column inches for the worst fate in a world so dependent upon received opinion is no press. Artists and dealers, press officers and PR types tussle over them, and are not above purchasing them with advertisements and other inducements. The result is that critics are rarely critical, and that there is a small and impoverished market for that criticism which is.

Like the gravitation of art towards business, the dumbing-down of art criticism is only partly a result of changes in the art world, since it is also a reflection of wider changes in the media as a whole. There has been a growing split between specialist academic journals, flaunting the difficulty of their prose and catering to libraries and tiny groups of professionals, and those magazines that aspire to a wider audience and depend upon advertising. In the latter, particularly the newspapers, there has been a flight from ideas into consumerism—not to satisfy the readers, many of whom yearn for a diet with more roughage, but the advertisers who require copy to support adverts, and dislike brow-furrowing disturbances of the buying mood.[13] This is the source of competitive dumbing-down which, being an industry-wide trend, not the result of the whim of this or that proprietor, does indeed affect readers' habits and expectations. So newspaper critics generally treat their readers to a mix of condescension and triviality, anxious lest these skittish, skimming buyers bolt at the appearance of any difficulty.

This division between academic publications and popular rags has been an important factor in the decline of art criticism. The discipline is, after all, a curious one—part specialist, part general; part exegesis, part reading against the grain; part education, part

[13] On this long-term development see Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, Boston, Beacon Press 1992.

publicity; part historical, part oriented to the future. In Britain it typically flourished in those publications (such as the *Listener* and the *New Statesman*) which assumed that there was a single and unified national intellectual life which could be drawn upon and appealed to.[14] The shift from seeing art as an integral part of an intellectual culture which also involved politics, philosophy, music, literature and the sciences, to one that sees it as a lifestyle issue, a complement to an interest in furnishings and floor coverings, is a profound one. In one paradoxical sense, it is a victory for criticism in that contemporary art, which for so long needed to be defended from the small-minded and philistine suspicions of large sections of the British middle class, has now found acceptance in their homes as decoration and on their screens as entertainment.

The decline of serious criticism is a register of the more general decline in a unified intellectual life but is also connected to the linked disappearance of any agreed perspective from which to judge things, or organise perceptions. This has affected conservative views of culture, too, but has much to do with the demise of the avant-garde, both in art and politics. Without it, there is no stable or concrete position from which to criticise, no shared trajectory or vision of the future, and no link to wider social or political issues, since even the limited ideals of postmodern orthodoxy have fallen to consumer atomism. Without such a view, flurries of incidents remain just that. Art criticism becomes like fashion writing, obsessed with the minutiae of the season's trends, and addicted to their facile and servile exposition.

As art and business draw closer together, it becomes increasingly difficult to criticise art because that amounts to criticising business. The trend in British high art lite to use material from mass culture, to present it but not comment on it, to be neither affirming nor condemning, is a precise reflection of the place in which art criticism finds itself. To praise or criticise seems, on the face of it, to be as pointless as judging the weather. Yet to make no judgement is to accept complicity with a system of things which only appears natural.

[14] The *Listener* ceased publication in 1991; the *New Statesman* is now a reliable mouthpiece of 'New Labour'.

The system does indeed take on the guise of a second nature, monolithic and irresistible, particularly so in Britain, where media figures like Damien Hirst tie their colours to New Labour's mast, and where political opposition appears to have evaporated. Yet there are already signs that relativistic intellectual games have had their day (among the most obvious, the revival of interest in the work of Darwin and Marx); for the time being, the shopper shambles along, picking at this or that, but the Real lurks around the corner, axe in hand.

Even in the art world, the system is contradictory and unstable. Art cannot both be seen as a consumer good like any other, and remain the repository of transcendental values that millionaires and corporations require to let people know that they value more than mere money. There is a focus for criticism here, and at other pressure points of the system. The rise of high art lite was in part possible because it subjected the elitist, established art world to devastating (if only implied) critique. Its promise of opening art out to the world, and the use of accessible, non-specialist language in art and writing are positive features which can be turned to radical uses.

For finally the fate of criticism will be determined by what people—the wider audience, not merely the art world insiders—want from art. If they are satisfied with an art which offers no more and no less than the system of consumer culture, then criticism has no role to play, at least within the art world itself. If they are dissatisfied with this fare, especially if they once again look to art for some sliver of the utopian, some element of resistance, then criticism will have an essential part to play in reflecting on the present and looking to the possibilities of the future.

Guerrilla raids on the absurdities of the contemporary art scene can be effective when they compete with the art itself in terms of accessibility, wit and cool—not perhaps such a high requirement. But for criticism to be truly effective, it must take on the art world as a whole, showing how it is thoroughly entangled with the society, its economy and politics. Such criticism will have to start with an examination of its own apparent powerlessness in the market-led vacuum. Its success or failure will depend on factors far outside itself, particularly those events and social forces which throw into question the

inevitability of the economic and cultural ocean of capitalism—of that which flows over the gills of high art lite.

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