

The Fate of 'Young British Art'

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What I want to look here is still something of a puzzle, though it is a puzzle that could be stated two ways. Something has shifted on the British art scene over the past two years, and 'young British art', if we want to call it that, is no longer as influential or critically bulletproof as it seemed. So it can be asked:

Why has it lost influence now?

Or alternatively: Why did it last so long?

Even ten years ago, contemporary art in Britain was generally met with a mix of derision and wearied apathy. 'Young British art', or 'high art lite' as I have preferred to call it, helped to change all that, in part by fulfilling people's worst expectations, producing an art that played at being sensationalist, crude, shocking or stupid. Now contemporary art is a minor star in the mass cultural firmament. Press coverage has massively increased, even in the popular newspapers. Style magazines, like *The Face* and *I-D* have developed a productive relationship with the art world. There is a good deal of TV coverage, of the annual Turner Prize, and in shows by the ubiquitous Matthew Collings, while the BBC, late in the day, is producing a celebratory series on the young British artists.

Yet it was not high art lite alone that made contemporary British art popular. Rather, there were a number of underlying causes that we can sketch in quickly. First, the marked rise in the number of people going through higher education. Up until the 1990s, Britain had until the 1990s an elite university system through which a very small and socially select proportion of the population passed. The Major government initiated a great broadening of this system which still continues. How does this affect museum and gallery-going? Pierre Bourdieu's 1960s work on the educational attainments of gallery-goers still holds. Visitors to the Tate, for example, are overwhelmingly well-educated, and this is indeed their strongest social characteristic. Increase the level of education in a country, and gallery-going will follow along.

Second, there have been profound changes in class stratification in Britain (as elsewhere), which has changed not just working lives and incomes but also the traditional cultural attachments of each class. The middle class has grown and diffused, losing some of their cultural particularity which used to include a hostility to high-brow visual arts. The working class, as it used to be understood, has been squeezed by growing numbers of service sector workers on one side, and an enlarged lumpen sector on the other side. Members of the latter are rarely found among art world audiences. The enlarged middle class has growing disposable income, money wrapped up in housing and stocks which apparently provides security, and delay starting families: more and more of its expenditure is devoted to leisure, of which gallery-going is a part.

Third, the saturation of the culture with commercial imagery, especially advertising, has produced an effective, informal education in the way images work. This effect is reinforced by the interplay between advertising and art, as advertising borrows from art, and art plays with the techniques of advertising.

Lastly, the galleries themselves became much more dependent upon private funding, and as a result opened themselves to commercial deals, sponsorship, marketing and advertising. They became more and more like other commercial cultural concerns, and are more effective at drawing people in (or gaining market share).

So high art lite was in no way solely responsible for the rise in popularity of contemporary British art, though it did respond to it intelligently. The novelty of this new scene of popular high art may go some way to explaining the tendency's durability. That generation of young artists were the first to break through to a wider audience, and art world people were dazzled for a time by the glare of publicity and their new-found importance.

Lately, however, there have been signs that things are no longer going so well for high art lite. Recently a number of West End London galleries opened branches in Hoxton, an increasingly gentrified area of East London where many of the artists lived, worked and showed. This should have been the triumphant return of these artists to the area of their birth but the general reaction was of weariness (especially among those younger than the now not-so-young young British artists).

The artists seemed to have run out of ideas, falling back on repeating well-established clichés that traded on their branding, albeit sometimes on a grander scale. Increasingly desperate attempts to shock failed to do so because shock was expected. Various exhibitions that were also forlorn attempts to revive the recent past, Saatchi's *Ant Noises* and the Royal Academy's *Apocalypse*, received a hostile press, even in the previously supportive liberal newspapers.

The condemnation came from other sources: in the catalogue to *The British Art Show 5*, Matthew Higgs, one of the most influential younger curators, took the tendency to task for nurturing too many mediocre talents and leaving no room for criticism.

More positively, there was an attempt to move the discussion on from the postmodern terminus at which high art lite had arrived. In the Summer of 2000 Tate Britain mounted a show with a one-word title—*Intelligence*—which seemed pitched against *Sensation*. One of its curators, Charles Esche talked of how the time had come to move on from artists that espoused 'social irresponsibility', and everyone knew who he meant. It was a time, then, for an art with some social or even political resonance or perhaps role.

But most striking of all was a front-page article in the *Guardian* (pre-eminent liberal newspaper) at the time when the nominees for last year's Turner Prize were announced: Nicholas Serota, the head of the Tate and certainly the most powerful figure in the UK art world, announced that young British art had had its day, and that it was time to move on to look at fresher figures. This is the as close to an official death certificate as we are likely to see.

Why has this happened now? High art lite was in many ways a product, first of recession, and second of the cultural and political impasse of the Major years. Since 1979, public art institutions were starved of funds by governments that were hostile to their values. The artists youthful, knowing works and attitudes looked radical against the background of a rudderless, backward-looking government that abhorred modern cultural forms.

The Labour government, elected in 1997, was sharply different. They continued to successfully manage the economy, continuing the years of relative growth set in train under Major. Avoiding up to now the deep recessions that marked the Conservative administrations, they have inculcated a cautious optimism among the middle-class—something that has cultural consequences since wallowing in sheer negativity or irony no longer seems quite so cool or plausible. While Labour's economic policies have been 'prudent', that is neoliberal, culture is one area in which they have felt that they could exercise government initiative and spending without alienating the markets. The government has done so to very mixed effect: among the disasters, the Millennium Dome, of course, with its patronising and unfocused displays celebrating nationhood, and containing various more or less interesting pieces of British installation and sculpture. But there have been notable successes, too: most especially Tate Modern, London's contemporary art museum, which has attracted almost universal praise in the press, and has far exceeded its projected numbers of visitors by about three times (one million people visiting in the first six weeks).

Furthermore, there has been a substantial increase in arts funding, partly through the Lottery, but also with money going direct to the Arts Council. Arts organisations may still cry out for more but the increases have been truly substantial. Admission charges to many national museums, controversially introduced under the Conservatives, have been scaled down and recently dropped entirely. All this has led to a certain revival of confidence among the cultural elite, and has made nihilist high art lite look out of joint with the times.

There was an equally important change in culture: high art lite set itself against the culturally backward looking Conservative regimes—famously against Major's comforting, stultifying vision of Britain as a land of warm beer, shadows lengthening on cricket grounds and invincible green suburbs. 'New Labour' is all for the modern, for innovation, creativity and technology. As elements of high art lite were drawn into the mainstream institutions, particularly after 1997, they no longer seemed oppositional but part of an official culture. The negative edge of the tendency, always its strongest point, was lost.

Most importantly, Labour want the arts to serve a social role. They are deeply worried that Margaret Thatcher's notorious statement, 'There is no society', now reflects a truth in Britain in which so many social structures and old certainties were torn up by years of unrestrained exposure to market forces. Culture is supposed to play a large role in the process of social cohesion and healing, bringing together the elements of a divided society in the celebration of creativity, enlivening work, even being linked into educative programmes in health or civic responsibility (this is the vision laid out by the one-time culture minister, Chris Smith, in his book *Creative Britain*). Young British art, with its winking crudities, sensationalism and glorying in social degradation, is useless for this task.