

#### THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

PAINTING DEPARTMENT, FACULTY OF FINE ART.

## ART IN THE MARKET-PLACE OF THE 1980'S

Remaining critical in a consumer culture.

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art

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#### INTRODUCTION

Perhaps it is part of the Post-Modern, Fin-de-Siecle condition to wish to analyse the past in terms of epochs, eras and decades as if these neat historical containment units aid our understanding better. However the ten years between 1980 and 1990 became an extraordinary decade in which the world saw so many fundamental adjustments to it's Western Culture rediscovered it's confidence and order. found a strong foothold in an ever-expanding consumer environment. It was the decade of pure Thatcherism and the Free Market in Britain. Across the Atlantic, Ronald Reagan renewed right-wing American nationalism by encouraging the image of himself as the restorer of the American Dream. However, one of the strongest images produced during the 80's was surely the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, that icon which most acutely defined the manner in which the world lay divided between Communism and Capitalism. The late 80's saw both the U.S.S.R. and most of Eastern Europe opening up to the forces of Capitalism. Consumer Culture seemed to have won it's sweetest victory - the old enemy had been seduced by and eventually fallen to Western Values.

While various economies peaked and ebbed, commodity packaging reached new heights. Advertising agencies such as Saatchi and Saatchi expanded to previously unbelievable levels. Time and Warner Bros. amalgamated into the biggest

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information supplying media company. M.T.V. brought an intense barrage of contemporary images for the video generation.

Madonna rose to fame quite suitably as the "Material Girl". Everything was subjected to Market Values, which held the twin acts of production and consumption at it's heart. This was not new, of course, but it's intensity and application was previously unseen. In this Post-Industrial society power emanated from those who have control over production and transmission of information. For information was a prime commodity which was consumed by the masses everyday. This information for the most part was transmitted through visual images. Pop artists identified the role that mass-media images had played in forming contemporary culture by the 50's and 60's. But the vast cultural importance attained by the image in the 80's was hitherto unknown.

In the 1960's televisions had not been widely acquired in Ireland but by two decades later an entire generation had grown up in it's flickering light. My generation regards "the box" as a birthright, a fundamental law of life, something that was there from the beginning is now and ever shall be, Amen. The television has become a unifying cultural force across the world.

In many parts of the Third World those that have barely a sheet of corrugated iron for shelter will still have some access to the televisual world. By the end of the 80's the average American spent half his or her conscious life in

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front of a television. Millions of people worldwide tuned into the Falklands War, Live-Aid and the fall of the Berlin Wall. T.V. is the powerful, reductionist, melting pot of our age. Reality and fantasy become interchangeable in the television world. The news and the advertisements are intercut and grapple for our attention. Television gives everything equal status and it is this equality that cheapens words like truth and freedom. Consumer choice and democracy are inalterably entwined. Susan Sontag says:

> Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself. As we make images and consume them we need still more images and still more. (No.19 P.19)

As our greediness grows and T.V. pulsates faster and faster with more fragmented images, our concentration on and contemplation of these images decreases steadily. In a world where huge amounts of information is selected by Western White Male Corporate Sponsorship, never before has there been such a need for images that analyse and offer a critique of the culture we have created. However, taking into account the vast influence the market gained in the 80's, is it possible to make this type of critical art ? The consumerist ethic will attempt to reappropriate even the most radical and critical art; perhaps ultimately debasing it's analysis and reducing it to just another commodity item.

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#### CHAPTER ONE.

#### THE ART MARKET AT WORK IN THE 80'S

#### SECTION 1

#### MECHANICS OF VALUE ALLOCATION

It could be argued that there is more to art than simply it's pecuniary value. But in the 80's, the importance of art became bound up, in many cases, with it's price. Art is, after all, like most other commodity items and can be viewed as part of a whole economy. Materials are transformed into finished products, then bought and sold. The art market boomed during the last decade. While the catch phrase "Zeitgeist" seemed to apply to the lively resurgence in figurative painting, it may really have represented the new spirit in entrepreneurship and art dealing. In Germany, Michael Werner rose to fame as a major dealer during the 80's. Promoting the work of many leading artists, Werner held the belief that the position of the artist was more important than any one particular work. Henceforth, the artist became a type of manufacturer and his works simply a set of products. Werner wished to sell much more than just an art piece. He sold the idea of the whole artist, the personality, temperament, history and attitude.

In America and contemporaneously with Werner's career, Mary Boone a New York dealer gained a prominent position in the art world. She lead the way in market expansion and was crucial in inflating so many artists' prices. Through

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what she referred to as "creative pricing", the cost of buying works rose enormously and by being extremely selective about who buys the artists' work, Boone guaranteed that her gallery became synonymous with wealth and status.

In 1986, Boone and Werner were married. As both were the leading dealers on their respective sides of the Atlantic, their marriage can be seen as a metaphor for the way in which a world-wide art market opened in the 80's, crossing all the traditional divisions between separate American and European markets. This vast transatlantic market also differed crucially from the previously segregated markets of Europe and America. It had no definitive centre. Paris had been the world's art trading capital at the start of the century, only to be replaced by New York as America became a dominant economic and military But by the 80's, New York had ceased to be the power. centre of the Art world. The new united intercontinental market had many centres instead of just one. Thus Cologne, New York, Paris, London and Berlin gained equal status as art was bought across all borders.

Just as the two markets on either side of the Atlantic had blended during the 80's so too did the separate roles of dealer and collector. Larry Gagosian, a New York dealer, became known for developing the practice of what is called "secondary market" dealing. This actually eroded the part played by the middle-men dealers during a painting's transferral. Collectors were now being facilitated to buy and sell between themselves. One of the benefactors of

this means of dealing was Charles Saatchi, the advertising company owner, who became renowned for the bulk-buying of New Expressionist and School of London art-pieces. Saatchi also proved that the hand that gives can also take away when, after buying a considerable amount of Sandro Chia's work, he deflated that artist's career by re-selling all Chia's work en masse. Not only was ample attention applied to Saatchi's buying tastes but when he set up his own gallery off Abbey Road in London he became a sort of dealer/collector, who also curates. While private collectors remained vital in the workings of the market, their importance was overshadowed by the increasing power of corporate investment. Deutsche Bank turned it's two tower office-blocks in Frankfurt into a type of gallery, with every floor representing a different artist. It was the Japanese who turned the blending of commerce and collecting into a fine art in itself. Fugi run a television gallery financing it by dealing in 19th and early 20th century masterpieces. Seibu has one of it's directors on the advisory board of Sotheby's and Seibu also act as Sotheby's Japanese agent. When Yves Klein had a retrospective at the Seibu museum, Klein International Blue Powder was sold in the museum foyer. Many other companies involved in art investment, use their collected works or the artists themselves to endorse products. Private collectors from the Medicis to the De Menils have sought through the consumption of art a prize more valuable than anything any other commodity can give - secular immortality. In the

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80's, corporate enterprises sought the same type of status for their companies through art patronage.

Art exudes power, to consume it is to imbue oneself with that potency. No other art-works contain so much cultural significance and status as what are called "Master Pieces". During the last decade Old Masters set higher and higher prices. In 1987 Australian business man Alan Bond bought Van Gogh's "Irises" at Sothebys for \$53.9 million. This effectively meant that in the forty years since it was last sold, it's value had multiplied 130 fold. It consequentially turned out that Sotheby's had, in fact, loaned \$27 million (half of the cost) to it's prospective client in order to sell the work at that ridiculously inflated price. When it was revealed that Bond was failing in his attempts to pay back the loan, a huge question mark hung over the exact ownership of the work - did Bond fully own it or did Sotheby's still half own it? There was talk that the picture would again be on auction but leading dealers agreed the price would be considerably less this time. whole affair highlighted the grotesque The complexities caused by equating monetary and artistic value. You can never put the price high enough on a painting by a master. Also, as in this case, "creative pricing" had it's limits and the most extreme type of hype couldn't produce financial resources that didn't exist.

Robert Hughes complains in his book "Nothing if Not Critical", that what was witnessed in the 80's was a return to the Victorian art market on an industrial scale:

where historical art is better value than contemporary art and contemporary art is overpriced (No. 10 P.403)

The massive inflation of historical art's price (Van Gogh, Picasso, Rembrandt, De Kooning) created numerous problems for the exhibition of artworks as a whole. As the auction room prices soared, so did insurance costs. This made the loaning and borrowing of works extremely difficult. Every collector and owner wished to believe that somewhere in their collection was a multi-million masterwork. They were not likely to allow such a piece be damaged during delivery to or from a museum. The age of the Blockbusterretrospective-all-inclusive-masterworks exhibition reached it's zenith during the last decade; it may also have become a memory with the 80's. This may not be a bad thing, in fact: people crushing past each other glimpsing overhyped art for a few seconds before the milling crowd swell propels the viewer onto the next in a countless line of Nevertheless, at least there was a possibility that works. many people could get an opportunity to see a lot of great art (and many did, figures show that more Americans visited museums than got to football games) (No. 10. P. 389). Other problems also arose; paintings, that had been on

extended or long term loans to American museums from private collectors, were placed in danger of being requisitioned or sold off as the lure of escalating prices grew increasingly stronger. What is most worrying is that in a system where Market principles are so seemingly omnipotent, money not only decides what works are seen but also how they are seen.

The further the price of an art work rises the more cultural importance it is imbued with. Like surrounding an artwork with a red velvet taper or ornate golden frame, a high price applies an external value to a work, which then becomes seen as it's intrinsic value - art equals treasure. In such a situation, a work of high price moves from being communicative to being absolutely authoritative. (No. 10 P. 400)And as this scenario suggests, the more inflated a work's price becomes, the less willing people become to dissent aesthetically (No.10 P. 401) How could mediocre or bad art be worth so much money?

#### SECTION 2

#### A NEW SPIRIT IN PAINTING - SELLING THE EXPRESSIVE MARK

At the same time historical works were setting new records price-wise, contemporary art saw both money and reputations being made over night. The leading young artists of the 80's (mostly under forty) were lauded with claims of genius almost as exaggerated as the prices paid for their works. Painting rose again in the art world's absurd hierarchy of importance. The "expressive" mark and male-hero painter came back in vogue, the individual quality of that particular myth suited the times. Neo-Expressionism was a term that applied to a vast number of artists, whose work not only differed in concerns and country of origin, but also in it's cultural influences (Germany, Italy and America being the main three cultures).

Perhaps the new, united international market needed a transatlantic movement to reflect and even propel itself. But Neo-Expressionism was an applied term deployed by critics and dealers rather than a movement created by artists. Indeed it's various detractors have disputed the term "Neo-Expressionism" referring instead to it as pseudoexpressionism or even para-expressionism. Donald Kuspit, perhaps conveyed it's major elements best in title of one of his essays - "Art as Damaged Goods". Clemente, Chia, Cucchi, Penck, Immendorf, Fetting, Luppertz, Baselitz Schnabel - all these artists fell under the definition of Neo-Expressionist art. But none of these possessed the same sense of desperate questing, frustrated fury or existential loss as had the original German expressionists from the beginning of the 20th Century. The viewer recognises the churned surfaces simplistically crude drawing and immediate, unmixed colours. But these paintings are too self-conscious to be called naive. Hans Haacke says of their works:

> The attitudes associated with much of the Retrotype painting amounts to a gold frame celebration of a romantic individualism of a by-gone era, which clearly predates and differs essentially from the attitude of the original expressionists. (No.18 P. 177)

The paintings may look brash and direct, but in reality they are far too calculated to be truly anarchistic. Thomas Lawson in his essay "Last Exit Painting", refers to them as "Fresh but not too alienating". (No. 8 P.147) The Neo-Expressionists refer stylistically to Modernist rebellion and primitivism but in their content they are filled with Post-Modern Irony. They are well aware that their style is

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no longer the language of dissent but one that has a fixed value of grandiose individual heroism.

The Neo-Expressionists were much favoured by Werner, Boone and Castelli. And it must be added Charles Saatchi undoubtedly furthered the careers of Salle, Chia and Schnabel when he bulk bought, as mentioned before, their works in the very late 70's. Thus carried by a wave of market forces and salesroom hype many Neo-Expressionists became not only successful artists but also achieved celebrity status. Julian Schnabel was one of these and he is perhaps indicative of the worst elements of Neo-Expressionism. It is important therefore to study Schnabel in some detail as, without a doubt, he drew some high praise as a prime mover of painting's Zeitgeist. However, Schnabel also seems to bring out the worst vitriolic streaks in his less favourable critics. Dena Shottenkirk writing in C magazine referred to himself and his peers as possessing "Discus thrower techniques..... with German Back-up singers, "(No. 21 P.22). Robert Hughes on the other hand indulges in personal mud-slinging. (No.10 P.299). Put simply, Schnabel was hailed as a messiah by some critics and was without doubt the main beneficiary of the 80's art market boom. His work embodies all the factors that lead to a confusion of monetary and artistic value. However one might dislike his work, when studying the art of the 80's, it is impossible to ignore him. His paintings are bombastic affairs, usually looming large before the viewer, the surface plane clogged up with

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velvet and crockery. Incongruously drawn samples from art history and mythology are daubed across the objects. For Schnabel the surface is essential. Perhaps it is even the dominant concern. Schnabel says of his surfaces:

> It is important for me to get this unsettling effect and at the time the plates seemed to me the best way of doing so. Not only were the plates unsettling in themselves, but when the paint was put on top of them. (No. 22 P.155)

But the reality is they fail to provoke, move or even unsettle. The velvet and crockery smack of second-hand Beuysian rhetoric (both supposedly everyday examples of middle-class luxury and utility) but rather than alerting the viewer to the picture's fragmented surface, the cracked crockery serves only as a personalised gimmick, a stylistic selling point i.e. once you see broken plates you know it's got to be a Schnabel (fig. 1).



Fig.1

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But the reatily is they fail to provoke, more of meantiles. The salivat and croatery small, of accounterny beuystam thetaric (both supposed); ecenter examples of middle class linked and utility) but rather then alorable the class linked and utility) but rather then alorable selfing point is a presentation strated and the selfing point is a presentation plates you moving solution to be a some of the presentation plates you moving a The painting on top of the plates then seems somehow weak and even a little irrelevant, the images become subservient to the surface. The paintings are literally lost in between the cracks. Donald Kuspit argues in his favour that:

> ....only in his surfaces can we find depth Schnabel's art is like oxygen tanks to be used in a spiritual emergency brought about by the collapse of faith in the reduction of cultural symbols to linguistic status. (No. 15 P.296-7).

But it is Schnabel who is engaged in reducing painting to a set of recycled signs - removed from their original context where they rightfully belong. There are strong echoes of Beuys, Rauschenberg, Nauman and even Pollock in Schnabel's work - but that is all they are, echoes, repetitive remnants of once real voices. The failure of late Modernism was, that rather than liberating technique it slid into pursuit of novelty. Julian Schnabel and many of his Neo-Expressionist cohorts fall into this trap. The 80's market demanded something new-looking regularly, scared of stylefatigue. Schnabel could satisfy this need and anxiety with his overwrought, over-sized work, providing a type of manneristic Modernism. This passive art is quite content to be a commodity on a conveyor belt of production, nothing too troubling for potential purchasers. Schnabel speaks the language of revolt but offers no real social engagement (No. 8 P.146). No longer the agitator for social change as Modernism had once been, this expressionistic mannerism has become an actual prop of the status quo Western Consumer Culture.

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#### CHAPTER TWO

#### DEFYING THE CONSUMER ETHIC IN THE PAST

In a culture where virtual reality seems to be replacing nature and consumption is slyly guised as choice it would appear as if there was ample opportunity for artists to cast an analytical eye on the surrounding social currents. Of course, the process of commodification, which seems to control art's production, is not new. People of great power have always acquired and exchanged artwork not merely because they loved beautiful objects but because they realised that art was a prime symbol of power within their culture. As long as the economic order of the Western World remains intact, art and commerce will always be forced to have a relationship. However, during the 80's, with market values so all-embracing, critical distance between art and commerce was difficult to maintain. There are explicit cases where artists like Schnabel and many of the Neo-Expressionists or Basquiat and the Graffiti artists were intricately interwoven into the process of commodification through their disinterest in the context of their own work. With such a sense of overwhelming materialism, art that portrays "spiritual truth" or "contemplation" should surely sound refreshing. Unfortunately, given the extraordinary gravitational pull of the market during the 80's such art adopted an increasingly hollow ring. Rather than dealing with the forces that surrounded it, such art attempted to

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ignore the commodification process that involved it. There is caustic irony in the fact that a figure of such stature as Joseph Beuys could be found endorsing Nikka whisky for a Japanese corporation (No. 1 P.100). Beuys exposes the extraordinary paradox of making art of transcendant substance in an age of materialism. Robert Hughes says of him:

> He is an emblematic figure too, typical of the late modernist dilemma, a social critic whose work is underwritten as a prime cultural asset by the West German Government and collected by every third banker in the Bundesrepublik. (No. 11 P. 371)

On one hand we are presented with Beuys the Shaman, a visionary green supporting people power and democratising On the other hand we have Beuys the Showman, always art. dressed in his standard uniform, hat and fishing jacket, who was, it would seem, merely a fortunate opportunist. Fifty years previous to Beuys, a Dadaist called Baader had tried to enter public politics but not only did he fail to enjoy any of Beuys' commercial success, he was also regarded with mocking disdain. Obviously social and artistic conditions had altered drastically in the following half century. The truth about Beuys probably lies some where in between these two images. There is no doubt that he was a crucial factor in the birth of both Neo-Expressionism and environmental awareness in art. It is this type of clash in values between art as both cultural bastion and critic - that forced many artists to fall into a mode of severe cynicism and sarcasm during the 80's. But as the 80's wore on, irony became just another jaded Post-Modern strategy for

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creating art. Rather than giving the creation of art a sense of purpose it actually justified it's stagnation. Irony, in fact, seems to have been the language of the decade. Everything has now become ironic - the news, the T.V. presenters, pop music, advertisements, fine art, comics, newspaper articles, kid's cartoons.

In a society of such self-conscious sarcasm, has an artists' ability to express passion and conviction become tainted so much by commerce, hype and public relations, that he or she will always appear less than pure in his or her motives for criticising their culture? Even selfexpression is institutionalised (No. 8 P. 149). It is the expected act of an individual, the demanded etiquette in a culture that adores the ideology of individualism. It could thus be argued with such cultural forces ranged against the artist and the act of art-making, that perhaps the Dadaists and Situationists were right, tear down the social institutions - from government to museums - and negate those systems which infect art with false values. Since art was, through it's cultural identity a symbol of power, an institution of the status quo, to lay siege to and destroy art would logically free artists from the system of self-commodification. During the 'fifties Situationists had taken Dada philosophy to extremes. Invading Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral, they read Nietzsche from the pulpit. They also mapped their own freeform rambles around Paris calling it "psychogeography". Their art was merely the act of walking, the decision about which street to walk down

n and a second state of a second s The second s next. Such art can neither be purchased nor hung on a wall and because it's absolute antipathy for the Bourgeois was part of it's making, it should have been guaranteed a sceptical market unwilling to invest in it. But, by the 80's, a heavy dose of Post-Modern Irony insured that the artifacts and memorabilia of Situationism's anarchic art were on show in galleries side by side with the commercial artwork they sought to destroy (No.9 P. 25). Rebellion, as well as self-expression, has become expected. It has a fixed price like novelty. It is the connotation of "real" art. Duchamp was a rebel, Van Gogh was a rebel, Courbet was a rebel, so was Manet, Rembrandt, Caravaggio and Giotto. Revolt is required, it is the formal wear of modern art.

In the 70's, many artists decided that rather than revolting against the art economy they would retreat beyond it's reach. At that time there was a feeling that painting, the language of high art, was dead. This strain of thought was not original since some artists had envisioned painting's demise as far back as the middle of the 19th Century. But in a world of rapidly increasing technological media, painting then did seem outdated and irrelevant to the times. It appeared that after a long hard battle throughout the last century, painting had finally passed away. It was thus that the new bearers of art's torch headed off into the mountains, canyons, deltas and deserts where it was believed a purer form of art might be achieved, free of art galleries, dealers, critics and marketing. Land art seemed to herald a new age. But the

reality was that it merely reinvented a lot of old forms of art making and marketing. For instance, whatever artistic concerns were represented by Land art, the fact remained that artists needed funding for projects involving either distance or scale. Secondly, most Land art is traditional in that it represents man controlling nature for man's sake Dena Shottenkirk says:

> Whatever separate aesthetic issues might be at hand with site specific 70's work i.e. fantasy, allegory, spiritual communion with nature etc., the basic motif remains the same as the shopping mall, the physical and architectural manipulation of nature in the service of entertainment and commerce. (No. 21 P.22)

The illusion that Land Art actually liberated art from capital commitments and market forces had the same attractiveness as the illusions surrounding Performance Art and Conceptualism. Concepts were the key to pure art. You can't possess a concept in the same way as you possess a painting. One was simply in your mind, whereas the other was registered in your financial record of assets. The reality is that Christo sells drawings in galleries in order to fund his projects. The Dia Art foundation actually purchased a whole volcano crater in the Arizona desert so that James Turrell could produce his earthwork "Roden Crater". The Dia Foundation was created by Phillipa De Her family are renowned for their art patronage Menil. (having financed the Rothko Chapel in Boston) (No. 1 P. 104).

After so many artists had created their stone circles, built their sweat lodges and buried their concepts only to dig

a ser i server e se anarez, seĝe radogo kijed, esperentato e na se esteraj e servezio e e serve, kodiseral satigo kijed, server esteraj correctio entre estera estera e serve them up again, it became amply obvious that the new age was not around the corner. What was around the corner was the 80's when the power of the market would seem to suck all art into it. Thomas Lawson says in"Last Exit: Painting":

> For as too many Conceptual artists discovered Art made on the peripheries remains marginal. To open debate, get people thinking one must be (in the market) and one must be heard. (No. 8. P.153)

Like Dadaist and Situationist works, Land Art proved that the market had no problem in recuperating what was made to be unpurchasable. The same electronic media that made painting look irrelevant also made even the most ephemeral or temporary work completely permanent. Installations, photographs or video records of Land Art made it as much a consumer item as a can of Campbell's Soup or a Julian Schnabel painting.

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## CHAPTER THREE

# VOICES OF DISSENT IN THE 80'S

The 80's brought a new set of artists, who rather than revolting against dominant culture or retreating from it, attempted to confront it and question it's system of value allocation. The difficulty was in maintaining critical distance from a market with an avaricious appetite, which sought to appropriate everything onto itself. As we have seen, it was very easy in the past for authentic voices of dissent to be denigrated to uphold a system which they These authentic voices could be heard coming from oppose. the most surprising places. Leon Golub, for example, had long been associated with the Neo-Expressionists. But he is unlike Schnabel or even the over-productive Baselitz in that his art attacks political and state violence directly and manages to escape defining itself as simply and purely an art product. By concentrating on painting male figures he investigates the stereotypes of masculinity and the links between these stereotypes and male violence. Golub is considered a hot potato in American museums as he brings home to roost images of American aggression and involvement in Latin America. The paint barely adheses to the canvas, looking as though it's been cut off with a cleaver as soon as it's put on. Sometimes the paint has been so violently scraped on that the canvas weave can be seen to have become worn and even frayed. Stretchers are discarded and the

## Barris Art - 200 Collector

## a product in contraction, the industry of

canvas is stapled directly to the wall towering over the viewer: big pictures with big figures making big protest statements. (No. 13 P. 54-59) But sometimes there is a feeling that the content is diluted by a certain aestheticism. The rigid, twisted figures portrayed in thin paint residue are almost reminiscent of the tres chic Shiele. Also, in a gallery context, it may be possible to manipulate these paintings out of their overtly political context. In other words what the viewer sees very often is the act of violence but rarely can we see a full indictment of it's cause. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2

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Despite the sense of threat we are hopelessly impotent, unable to save the anonymous victims from their unnamed assailants. There is a general statement of objection, but our knowledge and anger can do nothing.

Barbara Kruger also rose to prominence in the 80's. Her poster-format works attempt to unnerve the viewer on a first glance. The sound bite catch-phrases and appropriated images are directly mimetic of our advertising speak - but pose disturbing questions by the poster's combination of image and text. Issues of gender and commodity value arise in that most banal of everyday forms the billboard. Usually a billboard advertisement seeks to create in us a desire which we then satiate by buying the advertised product. In Kruger's work we find not only are there no answers, the questions are entirely different from those posed in normal ads. "Your Comfort is my Silence" one work reads. A figure in a hat, face shadowed, raises a finger to his lips commanding silence. The threat is imminent and the conspiracy to create fear is obvious. But who is this shady conspirator? What is the cause of this threat? Certainly the answers will not be found within the work. Robert Hughes is openly dismissive of Kruger's work (No.10 P.16). But perhaps Douglas Crimp's criticism of her work is more thorough and well founded. He claims that although she attempts to subvert advertising images she is easily recuperated by both the art and advertising industries. Her images are neutralised by the fact we have already seen the black, white and red of Russian

Constructivism and we know the photomontage of John Heartfield. The generic images of the 40's and 50's lead to only a very general statement not rooted in time. The work is too graphically astute to truly disturb us. Finally, Kruger's artistic strategy changes little. One can expect the poster form now. One can expect images and text from the same pool of cultural imagery and iconography. In a sense, the viewer can pre-empt Kruger's next move and this cannot be an achievement for an artist who is attempting to unseat us from our armchair of passivity. (No. 18 P. 199) (Fig.3)



Fig. 3

Her piece "We don't need another Hero" was displayed in Derry during the 80's. Feedback from the public suggested that some people had thought it was specifically commenting on the violence of the North. Others mixed it up with a state sponsored A.I.D.S. campaign, thinking it was advertising the use of condoms. When placed in as specific a political and social context as Derry, the piece was interpreted according to very particular cultural conceptions. In many media-conditioned minds, Kruger's artwork was actually converted into the very medium she was attempting to subvert. Rather than questioning gender through advertisement it became just another advertisement. (Fig. 4)(Also see Appendix A.)



Fig. 4

One artist who has made us expect a constant change of strategy is Hans Haacke. He seems to employ every device, every style and form in his on-going battle with the consumerist society. From sculpture to painting, from advertisements to even holding polls, Haacke is relentless in switching methods to get his message across. In the University of New York, he presented a piece that on first viewing could have been assumed to be a minimalist sculpture. Made of planks of wood this plain cubic structure with two rectangular holes at one end, might easily have fitted into a popular New York minimalist exhibition in the late 80's. However, the cube is in fact a replica of the crude detention unit used by U.S. troops for holding subversives when they invaded Grenada in 1983. Haacke, in one simple swipe, hits out at American Foreign Policy and at the decided aloofness of so much minimalist artwork. (Fig.5)

In his poster works the viewer sees a change in form but essentially the same subversiveness at work. The posters appear as though they are advertisements supporting or promoting corporate businesses. However in reality once one studies the combination of photo and text, it becomes evident that Haacke is accusing and condemning these corporations in very specific terms. Leyland, Phillips and Mobil are among the companies, which Haacke singles out for examination in detail (Fig.6). In the case of his work on Jaguar cars, what is first seen looks like an ad for a car but reading both text and image we find it is attacking test in the second second should be all the second s Leylands' dealings in South Africa and the use of automobiles, like art, as a status symbol. The posters tell us Jaguar is a car that is a breed apart but they are also telling us those that drive the cars are a breed apart - in terms of economic class but also in South Africa's case, in terms of race.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6





# Fig. 7

( Also see Appendix B.)



Besides three dimensional work and mass media parody Haacke also works in paint. He says of paint: "Paint means art with a capital A - with all the glory the piety and the authority that it commands." (No. 18 P. 175) In his work "Taking Stock" from 1984, Haacke makes a direct statement on one of the dominant forces and driving influences of the 80's - Thatcherism (Fig.7). Appearing regally dressed with head held high, Thatcher sits on an ornately carved chair with the queen's image engraved on it. In the background an academic statue reminds us of the Victorian values espoused by her. On the shelves there are several books with the names of businesses linked to Thatcher imprinted on them (App. B). The picture is surrounded by an ornate frame.

Then, high up in the right background, there are two broken plates painted with the images of the Saatchi brothers, Charles and Morris. This is a reminder that where this painting was exhibited in the Tate in 1984, two years previously Julian Schnabel's work had hung. In that particular exhibition nine out of eleven Schnabels were owned by Doris and Charles Saatchi.

The Saatchi name, as noted earlier, is synonymous with the collection of art but also and more importantly, during the 80's, the Saatchi brothers were renowned for managing Mrs. Thatcher's media campaign in general elections. Thus Haacke draws attention to the complicity that exists between politics and wealth, power and art and the media and politics. Haacke drives home his point in simple,

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figurative, readable language (No. 18 P. 179). However, it is these same positive elements that can be translated negatively. The simplification of imagery to give more power to content, the contextualised political specificity of the work, means that it lacks any aesthetic value. This is the undoubted aim but the sheer blunt directness of the work leaves it stranded on a plane of political discourse. Perhaps art should reach beyond merely offering a sermon on the evils of the world. Possibly such direct presentation of critical content is necessary when too much art is coopted into acting as a commodity within a consumer culture. But, unfortunately, at times Haacke borders dangerously on becoming merely illustrative of political ideology rather than grasping art's power to transform belief into cultural image. Pictures such as "Taking Stock" can have meaning drawn from them by piecing each clue within the picture together, as the meaning is intrinsic not extrinsic. But once the meaning is ascertained, the painting has nothing else to offer since meaning is allocated and fixed precisely within the parameters of a political context. Haacke like many other conceptualists (Sherrie Levine in particular) comes too close to making Post-Modern one-liners - artpieces where once one understands the fundamental concept, the entire work has nothing else to give us. We are involved in a purely intellectual process rather than an emotional or sensual exercise.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

## SHERMAN - MAKING TROJAN HORSES IN A COMMODITY CULTURE

Cindy Sherman is an artist who steers carefully between the dangers of the "anti-intellectual elite" of Neo-Expressionism and the "anti-aesthetic intellectual elite" of conceptualism and minimalism (No. 8 P. 144). Though her work remains art photography, simply by using the photograph she connects artwork and the everyday. For at present the photograph is the modern world (No. 8 P. 153). As discussed earlier the mass media penetrate into the most private of our worlds, direct into our living rooms the outside world filters through in the photography of T.V. and We seem to actually receive reality through newspapers. photography. By using this particular medium, Sherman gives us the best of two worlds. We get Modernist immediacy in the frozen action of the photograph, for it "catches the moment". At the same time we achieve aesthetic distance, we are left outside the frame, existing in a space of contemplation, an essential idea from Pre-Modernist art. In another sense, we are made voyeurs. Sherman plays on the mass-media reference to give her work present relevance. But there is more going on in her She is referring back to Rembrandt and pictures. Caravaggio. Both were artists who liked to stage things, catch the viewer in a set-up. Witness Rembrandt dressed as

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St. Paul or Caravaggio's magnificently staged "Deposition" in Rome. Sherman shows a "truly painterly concern with composition, light, shadow and line." (No. 5 P. 86)(Fig. 8).



Fig. 8



It is, perhaps, the fine art reference to painting in particular that raises the largest amount of critical debate about her work. Because it has no brush marks and is not hand crafted, there is a cultural assumption the photograph is non-expressive. Secondly, within a culture that places it's trust in technology and science, it is a common assumption that photographs give us objective reality because they are produced by mechanical instruments. Barbara Rose attempts to pass off photography as a "minor art". She states that "photography cannot transcend reality". (No.8 P. 68) This argument is deflated when one examines the work of Cindy Sherman. Her work is not in the realm of the real. It is a vast theatre of stereotypes and demons where reality itself is questioned rather than transcended. Fact and fiction fuse and the borders between artifice and actuality become blurred. Perception, in this world of virtual reality, is called into question.

Her strategy is simple. She assumes the identities long given to women, "but none binding, none invented by or belonging to women"(No. 15 P.395). In her black and white film stills she appears in a variety of given roles; woman in kitchen, girl next door, girl lost in Big City, as a hooker and a hiker, the Femme Fatale and the Woman of the Night. But as her oeuvre grew in size these images changed gradually. The main figure grows in size and attention filling the frame. Then slowly retracting, masked, glimpsed in a mirror or buried in the background. False

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breasts and backsides are introduced and now she's playing a gender game - forcing us to see sexuality as a cultural construction, yet another guise under which the real person Next comes the Horror Film sets and at last lies unseen. the devil dolls. Sexless beings trapped in surreal nightmares and sexually charged dolls, inanimate yet charged with perverse connotation. Sherman obliterates all traces of herself in her pictures. All that is left are senseless roles being played out by empty characters frozen in action. Our shock is substantial because we expect the camera to feed us objectivity, to feed us reality. But our passivity is shattered as Sherman dissolves fact. What is staged is reality and reality is staged. Michael Fried stated "Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre" (No. However, Sherman is producing the art of 26 P. 175) degeneration - the degeneration of certainty, the degeneration of a sense of self in exchange for advertised individuality, the degeneration of a sense of direction (for there are no Utopias left) but most of all the degeneration of content, for in the end all Sherman leaves us with are images, freeze-frame moments from an unknown narrative.

While other 80's artists lost themselves in surface, Sherman through photography, gives us only one surface, the conceptual surface of image. We cannot go beyond this surface in her work. Just as we are a narcissistic society lost in our own images, so too is Sherman lost within her own images. Her work has no pretence to primitivism for she is engaged in sophisticated subterfuge. Most
importantly she is aware that whatever else comes through her work, it has a status of commodity item once on the gallery wall, and that she herself becomes a consumer item as artist. When doing commissioned ads for Dorithee Bis and Dianne B, she portrayed models (herself) wearing glamorous fashion items in the normal manner of fashion photography. But the faces were mutated, disfigured and masked. This created a tension between the glamour and artifice of the clothes and the brutal iconoclasm of the face.(Fig.9) Attracted and seduced by the clothes we are disconcerted by the masks. She says herself fashion photography interested her because of the "artificiality and lying". (No. 22 P.273) Kuspit has suggested that Sherman provides us with pieces that deal with the contradiction of attraction and repulsion. He claims Koput's idea of aggression as product of the self's fragmentation / disintegration is relevant to Sherman's pieces. What we see are fragments of Sherman's person in all of these characters but when taken together they do not add up to a whole. We are normally used to seeing film stills flash before our eyes - Sherman halts this process, singling out moments randomly, even meaninglessly. We see decontextualised role - players stopped in the middle of an unknown action. We desire to know more but there is no way to engage what's going on. We must gaze voyeuristically and then examine our gaze "It's a kind of slap in the face to those who would get off on nudity", Sherman says about her pictures containing false body parts (No.22 P. 277). We can be seduced by Sherman's

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rich sense of colour and dramatic lighting, we even may wish to possess the "victimised" or "seductive" females of these works but ultimately our desire for possession is false because the image presented is not only fake (Fig.9), we know it to be fake. It is that knowledge that forces us to question how we look at images, particularly in the media. It is also that knowledge that sent "a real shudder of feeling into media based work" (No. 10 P. 16) as Robert Hughes put it.



Fig. 9



There is nothing more attractive about an art-piece than knowing it brings us closer to the artist. But we can never find Sherman in her work. She has buried herself Kuspit calls her "an ultra elegant nihilist". alive. (No. 15 P.396)(Fig. 10) Consumerism has permeated our very manner of thought. Like window shopping it is possible to consume without parting with money; to be attracted by looking is enough. We consume the concept behind the image by the simple look of desire. When we buy into Sherman's image bank we find that we have been conned, cheated, because there is nothing there to possess. She has long since obliterated herself. She is the ultimate subversive wreaking havoc from within, with her artistic Trojan Horse, a consumer item with an inbuilt mental time bomb. Buried

within it's image is the source of it's own devaluation:

....the come-ons we encounter in today's art are more sardonic, grotesque, defeated, blackmailing. We are still the spectacle's captive audience but there's now something rancid in the blood it sucks from us; now our very resentment and panic at watching social life invaded and colonised, not to mention having it's vitality sold back to us, is showing up in the commodities themselves. (No.20 P. 39)

Influenced by the sarcastic ads Bengelis, Antin and Morris made for Art Forum, Sherman says she loved the idea:

> they were using themselves as a commodity that makes fun of their art as a commodity and they made fun of the art world as a sort of playground of hype. (No. 22 P. 279)

Sherman likewise mocks this playground of hype through her work. In a decade where it was difficult to see anything other than the price of art or avoid it's sometimes didactic conceptual tone, Sherman found a means of working which

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produced forceful images that considered issues of gender politics but also drew attention to the work's nature as a commodity.



Fig. 10



#### CONCLUSION

In the 80's, the resurgence in Painting was financially motivated as the example of many of the Neo-Expressionists rise to fame suggests. Thomas Lawson argues that the extreme difficulty in restoring painting as a truly creative force is due to the belief that painting requires faith and we have no faith left. He would suggest:

In an age of scepticism, practice of painting is

crippled by suspension of belief. (No. 8 P. 155) Lawson also argues that this scepticism will not be overcome by photography. He would suggest photography is the language of realism. But as we have seen, in the hands of Cindy Sherman, photography leaves the realm of the real. She offers a critique of mass media, Post-Industrial consumer culture but though she gives no answers it is the questions which are more important. She reflects the cultural concerns of our times. In the age of satellite T.V., leaps of faith become increasingly difficult as all gaps of understanding seem to be filled by technological The increased belief in materialism during the innovation. 80's can only have nurtured our lack of faith. Post-Modern emphasis on the forgotten past has also instituted a feeling of fate - what goes around comes around. Revolution leads to counter revolution. The idea of progression is seen as of deceased Modernism's belief part in an artistic eschatology. Suggestions by Robert Hewison and Brandon Taylor that an escape from the mire lies in a return to some type of social realism or surrealism are acts of wild

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desperation, indicative of a decade that lacked artistic imagination. Robert Hughes chillingly prophesies that the 80's will be with us for many years to come because:

....few of the social conditions that fostered the decades cultural traits have changed or seem ready to. (No. 10 P. 6)

While early Modernism fostered antipathy towards dominant culture, 80's Post-Modernism openly embraced the dominant consumer culture of the West. Until this changes, art will remain part of the power and status codex of the elite. The response of art in such a culture splits between the withdrawal or blissful ignorance of naive primitivism and the obvious confrontationalism of conceptualism. Cindy Sherman appears as one of the few artists to act creatively in between these extremes, finding a means to offer a critique of consumer culture through the subversion of it's governing mechanisms.

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# APPENDIX A

RANDOM ACCESS: Conference on Time-Based, Site Specific and Live Art, held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art on 6th and 7th of November 1992.

Session 4: "Accomodating Time-Based Art". Saturday 7th Nov. 2.00p.m. - 4.30p.m.

During this session of the conference, Declan McGonagle, director of I.M.M.A., gave a talk on the role of gallery director as facilitator for site specific work. He referred to Barbara Kruger's piece "We don't need another hero". McGonagle, while he was director of the Orchard Gallery had helped facilitate the placing of Kruger's work on billboards around Derry City. While expressing great respect for Kruger's work, McGonagle felt that her piece had been misinterpreted by the public because it's meaning was too intrinsic to the image and text. The public mis-reading occurred because the piece was allocated "extrinsic" values according to a culture concerned by religious and national identity. In other words, the piece was not really site specific. McGonagle felt that a piece by Gormley was more successful because it was open to "extrinsic" meaning. He claimed the Gormley's cruci-formed figure was imbued with meaning by the public, rather than being misinterpreted.

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## APPENDIX B

Hans Haacke's "Taking Stock" contains the following inscriptions:

1. On the spines of the books in the bookcase; Allied Lyons, Avis, BL, Black & Decker, Blue Nun, British Airways, British Arts Council, British Crafts Council, British Museum, British Rail, Campbell Soup, Central Office of Information, Conservatives British Elections, Conservatives European Elections, Cunard, Daily Mail, Dunlop (acc. lost), DuPont, Gilette, Great Universal Stores, Johnson & Johnson, IBM, Massey-Ferguson, Max Factor, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, Nestle, Playtex, Proctor & Gamble, Rank Organisation, Rowntree Mackintosh, Royal Academy, South African Nationalist Party, Serpentine Gallery, Tottenham Hotspur, TV-AM, United Biscuits, Victoria & Albert Museum, Wales Gas, Walt Disney, Wimpey, Wrangler.

2. On the paper hanging over the edge of the table; In the year ended March 31st 1978 Brogan Developers Ltd.(Saatchi Investment Ltd.) sold art works valued at £380,319.

3. On the paper lying at Thatcher's foot; Saatchi & Saatchi Company PLC/The year ended September 1982/Furniture, equipment, works of art and motor vehicles/Gross current \$15,095,000/replacement cost/Depreciation \$7,036,000/Netcurrent \$8,059,000/replacement cost. Tangible net assets are stated at historical cost or valuation less accumulated depreciation. The cost and valuation of tangible fixed

### APPENDIA B

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assets is written off by equal annual installments over the expected useful lives of the assets: for furniture and equipment between 6 & 10 years. No depreciation provided for works of art.

4. On the foot of the column, left: ES SAATCHI TRUS/ITECHAPEL GAL/TRONS OF NEW/ART COMMITTEE/HE TATE/GALLER.

5. On the top shelf of the bookcase: MS, CS.

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