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**National College of Art & Design**  
**Faculty of Fine Art, Painting**

**Trauma & Abjection: An  
Analysis of the Sensation  
Exhibition**

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**Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and  
Complementary Studies in Candidacy for Degree of Batchelor of Fine  
Arts, 1998**





## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank my tutor, Dr. Paul O'Brien, for his invaluable help.



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## Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to examine the trend towards the traumatic in recent art production. I wish to ground the argument in terms of the recent Sensation exhibition held in the Royal Academy in London last autumn. This exhibition was selected from the collection of one man, Charles Saatchi the advertising tycoon, and was curated by Norman Rosenthal. It is the difficulties inherent in the project of portraying these artists as a innovative contestatory group, that I wish to discuss and not the merits of individual works or artists in the show.

Saatchi has been collecting art for some time, but it is only recently that he has so heavily invested in the work of the Y.B.A.s, (young British artists). This development is not incidental to the general opinion abroad (specifically the United States), that London is currently enjoying a culture revival. It is also significant to the fame many of these artists now enjoy. This celebrity is of some concern to those who keep an eye on the art world and has often been an excuse to accuse the artists of being nothing other than a hip gang. My own concern as an artist is that I cannot see how the production of art and perhaps more specifically the exhibiting of this art can be divorced from the heavy influence of a far from neutral collector. Saatchi, the leading advertising guru of the eighties who was credited with engineering several Tory election victories, and with close ties to Thatcher and thatcherite policy, is becoming the major financial supporter of an art practice which is most usually referred to as contestatory, disturbing and even subversive. Can this encourage a subversively political art practice?

The production of images that are somehow extraordinary by artists is not new, but the move towards images that are





disturbing (which heavily rely on images of the body in distress, the of corpse, or of pornography) is significant and can be detected in the Sensation exhibition. The need to read these images other than as immediate shock/pleasure/ disgust is fundamental. There must be a context to view this work other than as tabloid sound bytes of life.

The deconstruction of identity through the reworking of the body has been a preoccupation in many art practices since the 1970s and seems to have come to mainstream art production in the 1990s. The re-emergence of the figure can be seen in terms of an interest in corporeality and bodily functions. Much of this work is either informed by or directly due to feminist deconstruction of identity, leading to the emergence of the body as a political site. The politicising of the body (although not exclusively feminist) is perhaps the dominant artistic concern of the last thirty years.

The production of art based on the abject relies heavily on the theories of Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva and George Bataille and is situated historically and theoretically. Much of the work that deals with the body is, historically at least, issue based. Artists who wished to discuss the structure of marginality in society often placed their work in terms of the body, using it as a metaphor for society's orders and hierarchies.

The recent history of art production referencing the body has been preoccupied with the political. The referencing of the formal strategies used in this political art (the corporeal and the traumatic) in much of the work in Sensation is coupled with an anti theory stance.

This anti-intellectual stance leaves the viewer relying on the immediate impact of the work to read its meaning. If the work



depends on immediate impact, then the use of the traumatic is the favourite method of achieving it. I feel an over-reliance or reference to theory can make much interesting art obtuse. Given the televising of recent history (the war in former Yugoslavia, the famine in Ethiopia and the A.I.D.S. crisis) the horrific or traumatic image is frequently one we see without a move to action or a questioning of subjective identity. To produce images of trauma with no wider relevance or reference other than its position as art, makes that work irrelevant. This thesis will consider this recent art production in terms of developing an aesthetic of trauma in the anti-intellectual context of recent art production.





## Chapter One

### The Theoretical Object

In contemporary art and theory, there has been a general trend towards the explicit depiction of the traumatic or that which is in some way disturbing. This often takes the form of an emphasis on scenes of violence or on illustrations of pornography. Hal Foster refers to this in terms of a change in general perceptions of the real. The preoccupation with the representation of the 'real', and the extensive use of the object (this will be defined later) in its name is the concern of this thesis. There are a number of ways to consider this proliferation of art production in the late nineties. This thesis will consider the historical relevance of theory to this subject. The 'object' is referenced in an array of catalogues introducing art work by very different artists. At this stage in art production a historical overview is needed to clarify the claims made for these different art practices. Also, after seeing the Sensation exhibition held in the Royal Academy in London last autumn (in which there was an immense amount of images of trauma) I became increasingly concerned that interest in the object was becoming 'apolitical'. The trend towards anti-theory in contemporary art divorces these images from a meaning, leaving the use of the traumatic as purely sensational.

John Lechte asks why there is a need at all to look into the "universal horror" of abjection but with the refusal to confront the object, a fundamental part of individual and social structures remains in oblivion. Also the object in late postmodernism has been splintering into different terms used to describe different art practices, but which ultimately all claim Kristeva's work as their starting point. Along with a need to



investigate the abject is a need to define it before it can be used as a political tool for change.

The abject can be divided up into three main strands, the anthropological abject, the philosophical abject and the psychoanalytical abject. There is also a need to define converging theories of the informe, the obscene/sublime dichotomy, and the traumatic. These terms are often glossed over very generally and sometimes interchanged in much contemporary criticism, especially in the kind found in the opening pages to exhibition catalogues. There is a trend to place "controversial" work in terms of the abject, with little consideration for the difficulties this may incur. For the most quoted theory though we must look to Kristeva, the heralded Matriarch of Abjection.

It should be made clear at this point that Kristeva's theory relies heavily on the work of two other theoreticians, Georges Bataille and the anthropologist Mary Douglas, (both of whom are also heavily referenced in late nineties art criticism) . Although Kristeva has used Douglas' work extensively it is the symbolic<sup>1</sup> in which Kristeva is interested not the social and as such Kristeva maps this work in a psychoanalytic plane.

### **The Anthropological abject**

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<sup>1</sup> The symbolic is the order of the father, the world of language. The symbolic abject is the state incurred as the child enters the world of the father, by separation from the presymbolic order. To do this the child must reject all that is in the presymbolic world, and refers to this as abject.

The social abject is the state when social borders are dissolved, showing the subject's differentiation from the presymbolic as precarious.





In Douglas' work, danger lies not in a given state or position but in the transition from one state to another. It is the process of belonging to neither one state nor another that is most threatening to the imposition of social order. For Douglas the idea stretches from the social to the specific, and the body becomes a metaphor for the social order.

For Douglas filth is not a quantity in its own right but that which relates to a boundary, that which is outside. Douglas refers to filth as being in the eye of the beholder, it works on the subject as an acceptable or unacceptable force. When filth is combined with a purification rite it is elevated so to speak to the level of defilement, since the sacred is employed in the action. The filth is now non-object and becomes abject. Defilement is what is jettisoned from the symbolic order, that which does not subordinate itself to social rationality.

Douglas suggests that the abject is not understandable for humans, but is "inherent in the structure of ideas". That is the abject cannot be assimilated but is placed at the level of the abstract notion of that which is outside social law and therefore impossible to grasp.<sup>2</sup>

Douglas suggests that the body be seen as the place where the symbolic order is played out on the subject. This is the main significance of Douglas work for Kristeva and the starting point for many artists in considering the relevance of the body in contemporary art. The body is political and social then and stands as a metaphor for the social order. This is the basis for much feminist theory of the body. Thus a body out of control is a

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<sup>2</sup>This point is relevant when discussing the representability of the abject. If the abject cannot be comprehended then how can it be represented?



society out of control. The forces or prohibitions which control the order in society also control the body. (The potency of the pollution is not inherent but proportional to the potency of the taboo, or prohibition). Prohibitions simultaneously allow for order and abjection. In effect prohibition dissolves borders between the subjects production of filth and the subjects production of cleanliness, causing a rupture in identity. In her essay "The Power of Horror", Kristeva points out that pollution is not likely to occur unless and except where lines are clearly defined (such as the inside and outside of the body) and thus the danger of pollution is possible.

### **Bataille's Philosophical abject**

The philosophical abject was discussed by Bataille in unpublished work after the Second World War. Kristeva and Bataille are often discussed together and their two theories of the abject (Bataille is concerned with the formal qualities and Kristeva with the psychoanalytic) are often misleadingly intertwined. Both of these theoreticians work was published in English in the Eighties; Kristeva in 1982 and Bataille in 1988. Batailles work though a forerunner to Kristeva's is often forced into an alliance with her work, causing an over general approach to both<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>The conflation of these two theories is discussed in Foster's idea of a continuing assault on the hegemony of verticality and the cerebral over the haptic in modern art. They meet in the term "scatological". The scatological impulse in art is essentially a way of describing the recent currency of excremental art work. Here Bataille's formlessness and Kristeva's abjection. 'Scatter' suggests structure and points to Bataille and 'scatological' points to the subject's fascination with excrement and excremental processes and points to Kristeva.





Bataille began to use the term abject in his writing after the Second World War. He defined the abject state as the inability to assume with sufficient strength the act of excluding. Therefore the production of the abject is linked to the "weakness of the prohibition". This prohibition or taboo is what constitutes a social order. Abjection is the inability to keep filth outside of the self, or to maintain the prohibition. Transgression is linked to the strength of the prohibition as it requires a crossing rather than a dissolving of the borders.<sup>4</sup>

For Kristeva the significance of Bataille's writing of the abject was the situation of the abject in the plane of collective existence, of social order. "The act of exclusion...is precisely located in the domain of things and not...in the domain of persons." (Bataille in Kristeva 1982, pg65)

Here Bataille sees the abject working on the plane of the subject/object relationship, this is opposed to the subject/subject relationship. For Kristeva the importance of Batailles' emphasis on prohibition is primary. The ability to exclude these things is necessary for a collective existence, a social order. Exclusion means the completion of differentiation. The abject (action) is a regulatory operation. Thus it is the desire of the subject to remain differentiated and its awareness of the precariousness of this situation that causes the possibility of abjection.

Kristeva conflates these two theories of the abject to form her psychoanalytic abjection. Kristeva takes the instability of individuality as the point of departure and privileges certain

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<sup>4</sup>To this extent the transgressive is a regulatory act, which guarantees the social order. This is another difficulty when producing art that attempts to break down orders and hierarchies.



kinds of dirt and their constitutive effects on subjective relations to the symbolic order. Kristeva is interested in those forms of dirt which simultaneously fascinate and disgust us, causing a fracture in subjectivity which collapses the social integrity of the body and the border between the inside and the outside. These substances blur the distinction between the subject and the object. Through the infant's enrolment into the order of language it must learn to delimit and control the body: the first step of which is the separation from the mother. This becomes the prototype of all subject/object separations.<sup>5</sup>

Briefly the abject is the subject's convulsed response to filth. The social and symbolic orders are supposed to keep the subject differentiated. Abjection shows me the perviousness of borders, making it difficult to sustain differentiation and to find dirt out of my existence.

For Kristeva the most significant border is that between the subject and the object, the distinction between the inside and the outside of the body. Subjectivity is organised around an awareness of this distinction and the sense of the body as a unified whole, defining the form and limits of the corporeal identity. Kristeva is concerned with the ways in which subjectivity and sociality are based on the expulsion of that which is considered unclean or impure. This involves a rejection of the subject's corporeal functioning. However this process can never be final, and remains always at the border of the subject's identity. It is the individual's recognition of the impossibility of a fixed and stable identity that provokes the abject state. Objects that produce the abject are those that traverse the borders

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<sup>5</sup>The subject/object relationship is based on the subject/mother relationship. The mother rejected or abjected by the child. Because of this the abject potential is the abject potential of the feminine.





between the inside and the outside of the body. The abject then is the space between the subject and object.

For Kristeva not all those that cross bodily borders are abject. Certain materials are privileged in her reference to the abject. Sperm and tears for instance are considered not to induce an abject experience and the excremental and the menstrual are those which do induce an abject response. (The excremental is that which endangers the ego by the non - ego from without identity and the menstrual is that which endangers it from within). It could be argued that post HIV- sperm can induce an abject state, since there has been a heightened sense of bodily borders and the imperative of their control, and that sperm and all blood refers to concepts of danger and pollution on a very real level.

Relevant to the discussion of contemporary art and closely tied to the abject, is the theory of the sublime. The sublime situates the discussion of the abject in an art historical background. The referencing of the sublime in the Eighties would seem now to have developed into an increasing interest in the abject. Writing in 1992, Nead points to the sublime as a buzzword for postmodernity, it would seem to have been taken over by the abject in contemporary art production.<sup>6</sup>

In Neads discussion on the obscene and the sublime she defines the obscene as the limit between art and non art. Through specific references and quotes Neads proves that art is somehow contemplative, elevative and thus beautiful, with non art forms, pornography in this case, promoting titillation, that

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<sup>6</sup>The connection with the sublime places the abject within a political space, because the sublime was concerned with the devaluing of the formal qualities held dear by modernism.



is it does not enhance contemplation but rather is a move to action. Obscene comes from the Latin meaning off stage, this literally means that which is unrepresentable, beyond representation.

The art/obscenity distinction can be mapped onto Kants discussion of the beautiful and the sublime. It is here we see the relevance to the previous discussion of the abject.

"The beautiful in nature is a question in form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes a representation of limitlessness". (Nead, 1992, pg 46)

Kant differentiates between the beautiful as that which is tied to form and the sublime which is the representation of unlimitedness, excess or infinite. In this definition Nead refers to form as a frame in which the beautiful can be regarded and merited. Beauty then is not simply pleasure at viewing but also involves rationality. On the other hand the sublime cannot induce measurement and therefore merit, since it has no form. Here then the sublime engenders pleasure but also pain and terror. Sublimity is defined in terms of framing, the beautiful is framed in formal contours as a contained unit characterised by finitude. The sublime is infinite and without a frame and thus unrepresentable - literally the obscene.

Neads suggests that the difference between pornography and art is not simply one of titillation. The aesthetic experience is a consolidation of subjectivity, it frames the subject where pornography is described as disturbance; it presents the possibility of undoing identity. Nead gives the sublime much the same function as Kristeva allots to the abject. It acts as a





reminder that identity is socially constructed and the subjects grasp of identity is precarious.

Lyotard defines the sublime in terms of the gaps between the subjects faculties of representation and judgement and the idea of the object of knowledge; the sublime is the appreciation of the unrepresentable (thus the unassimable). Lyotard defines the concern of postmodernity based on this aesthetic as the concern with presenting the unrepresentable.

Hal Foster refers to the sublime as an art historical precedent for the abject, and links the two as merging in a concern with the traumatic. He discusses what he refers to as the change in contemporary art in the conception of the real, "from the real as an effect of representation to the real understood as event of trauma".(Foster, 1996, pg 107)

He situates this change in reference to the work of Lacan on the gaze. Foster suggests that the aim in modernist art was to arrest or subvert the gaze, before it can arrest us, thus relaxing the viewer from the gazes grip. He supposes that the overriding development in postmodern art is the lack of an attempt to pacify the gaze, to unite the symbolic (language of the father) and the imaginary against the real.

Foster suggests that after Kristeva the use of the abject in contemporary art "in a world where the other has collapsed" has a relevance to the power of the image/screen to protect the subject from the gaze. If borders are collapsed, other is no longer differentiated, and the paternal law that underwrites it also collapses. The implication is the collapse of the image/screen as well. Here the real cannot be protected against. A wish to represent the real in contemporary art then can be mapped onto a desire to tear down the image/screen and



therefore, is an attack on the borders that allow subjectivity. These are also the boundaries which maintain patriarchal law. Here then the attack on the image/screen is a political act. For Foster the traumatic exposes the crisis, but does not evoke or cause it.

Foster looks on this attack on the subject, the reinstatement of the real, not in terms of a move from the sublime to the abject, (though he references them both), but as a continued interest in the traumatic, a continued attack on the "scene" which protects the subject from the real. Though Foster does not define the traumatic, it can be seen in terms of visibility as the state or experience induced as the image/screen (the protection from the real) is destroyed and the viewer is exposed to the real.

Foster divides this development into two strands in mid and late postmodernism respectively. The 1980's was concerned with a concentration on the image/ screen (making it visible), and questioning its authority and the 1990's with a tearing down of the screen to show the real.

There are two forms of abject art, one which identifies with it, to touch the trauma and another which is invested in the representation of the abject, to show crisis without inducing it. Both of these avenues are problematic. Foster suggests that this bipolar strategy in contemporary art is forcing a qualitative change, with some artists appearing on one hand to be driven to produce work of total effect and on the other to occupy the radical nihility of the corpse.

In this chapter I have mapped out the dominant theories of abjection and pointed to their closeness to the sublime/obscene dichotomy. The relevance of these theories is in the currency of





the traumatic, both in art and in everyday culture. There can be little doubt that reality has become the remembrance of trauma. Popular media is full of victim culture, sensational talk shows discuss issues that supposedly effect everyones lives, though this is without fail an event of trauma or tradgedy.

The production of abject art has come to the stage at the end of the Nineties where it is in danger of becoming a mere formalism<sup>7</sup>. The conflation of what is actually three different considerations in the abject, the social, the formal and the psychoanalytical have been amalgamated into one general 'abjection-ism'. The formal concerns of the sublime and the obscene have been referenced in terms of a political opposition to the hegemony of modernism's visuality and beauty through form. These two very different considerations have overlapped in a concern with the representation of trauma. An aesthetic of trauma though may not need to reference the sensational or the spectacular. It can also be placed in popular culture without becoming a-political. The discussion of trauma is relevant in society and would argue that the abject artist is not working outside the popular at all but firmly situated in it while remaining political.

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<sup>7</sup>A formalism can be defined here as a form of art production which disregards the complexities in the representation of a specific ideal or concern, for a recognisable style, leaving this to carry the weight of the argument.



## Chapter Two

### Art & the Abject

This chapter aims to map the recent histories of these particular theories in art production, and to discuss the possibilities they throw up. This includes the difficulties inherent in art referencing the abject. The success or failure of exhibitions that deal specifically with abject art (the 1996 *Informe* exhibition in the Centre De George Pompidou and the Whitney Museum of Modern Arts' 1993 exhibition, *Abject Art in America*) can be used to discuss the possibilities and problems of contextualising and staging the abject.

In this context, the discussion of John Robert's essay "Mad For It" is vital. Here Roberts discusses recent British art and the trends towards anti-intellectualism. Two apparently very different strategies and ends in contemporary art- a preoccupation with the abject and a concern with the removal of a referencing of theory- are converging in a single form of art production. This work is epitomised by the work in the *Sensation* exhibition. The coupling of anti-theory and the abject or traumatic in art leaves no reference as to how this work is to be contextualised and read.

It is this trend towards anti intellectualism which is a symptom of a deeper problem of recent art refusing to engage with a politically subversive practice beyond the desire to shock. This can be seen in terms of an abdication of political responsibility or of a historical/political context. Feminist art work of the 70s used the abject for its shock value as a tactic to open a debate on what could and could not be seen in the context of art. Without the question of real political ground at stake all that is left is the shock in the minds of popular opinion. The debate between the





political Left and Right degenerates into, 'it shocks its good, it shocks its bad'. This leads to an art form which merely goes through the motions of a debate between left and right ideologies of identity. This is shown to be clearly the case in the United States where groups vie for the same political popular mind. Without a political and theoretical context this work becomes a polarisation on the acceptability or not of certain specific materials in art, rather than a discourse on the mechanism of identity production in the late twentieth century. I hope to show that the abject divorced from the political leads to a meaningless use of the traumatic.

There are several inherent difficulties in the representation of the abject even in terms of the political. All of the writers and critics dealt with in this chapter (with the exception of John Roberts) put a heavy significance on the contextualising of the abject in terms of theory and the political. Thus the strength or weakness of this art is considered in relation to its performance as a political agent.

The notion of the abject is rich in ambiguities and the cultural/political valance of abject art is dependant on a subtlety of reading. A crucial ambiguity in Kristeva is the slippage between the operation to 'abject' and the condition to 'be abjected'. For Kristeva the operation to abject is fundamental to the maintenance of subjectivity, while the condition to be abject is subversive of it. Foster suggests that the abject can be seen in terms of regulation -as transgression is to taboo- a completion by excess. As Bataille points out in "Eroticism: Death and Sensuality" - "Transgression does not deny taboo, but transcends and completes it"

This suggests that the abject is completion of a normative subjectivity, guaranteeing social structures rather than



attacking them. Kristevan abjection then is not the abjection of a radical social process.

The difficulties in representing Kristevas theory visually are obvious. Can the abject be represented at all? The abject state is outside the ability of humans to assimilate. It is literally the obscene, beyond understanding. This must mean it is beyond representation, consciously at least. The political function of the abject is to produce the abject state in the viewer. That is the viewer must be simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by the image, revealing the mechanism of the subject's precarious establishment and the continuation of subjectivity.

One of the other considerations when discussing the abject is the relevance of perspective. Kristeva naturalises the abject action. The abject is a condition of subjectivity, where the original state is disgust. For the normative subjectivity, the abject is what I need to eject to keep this normative state. The problem of perspective is illustrated by the use of the abject by an artist (for instance), who is not the norm - if you are black, queer, or a woman - you are already abject.

If the abject is formative of a normal subjectivity how can it be used to highlight the construction of this subjectivity? Can it be used subversively to contest present modes of identity-construction? The use of the abject by those who are considered to be outside this normative definition is problematic since they cannot transgress the social norm if they are already outside it. In this case the abject works to confirm the abject state of the artist. There is no risk for the viewer who does not wish to map this onto his own subjectivity; this is the state of the other not "I".





If there is no risk for the viewer, then those who are offended are so without being abjected. This leads to a game of authoritative disapproval without a debate on the relevance to ideologies of identity. When the religious Right of America saw John Miller's *Untitled 1988* (Plate.1), there was an outcry. The work was a small mound of excremental type material placed in the middle of the gallery floor. At the top was a model of primitive dwellings. The work was not made out of excrement though it did reference it. This work is held up by critiques and supporters alike as an archetypal abject artwork. This is the difficulty. In his discussion of the piece Ward questions whether or not the work does engender the abject state and points to the lack of evidence of the fascination needed along with repulsion to render the abject state being involved. If the avant-garde Left and the religious Right can both agree that Millers' work is a piece of shit, - where is the slippage needed to make this work oppositionary. We are left with a polarised debate, where the only question is should or should not this work be displayed using government funds. There is no discussion of what is really at stake in the mobilisation of the abject.

In his essay on abject art, "Abject Lessons" Frazer Ward points to the need for convulsion in the viewer as a heavy burden on the artist and sees little evidence of this in the viewing of the work. What looks like puke is not puke. The viewer does not experience the abject state as this plastic substitution is easily assimilated as just that, a substitution.

This is the problem of the privileging of specific materials in the work of Kristeva, and has led to a form of art production which is often extremely literal. These interpretations confuse the abject and its representation, ignoring questions about its' representability. The reification of certain materials as abject, cancels out the necessary slippage. This project of materiality in







**Plate 1**

John Miller "Untitled" 1988





art, is obvious in the work in Sensation. The end product works to deny the very complexities of representation and allows for the flippant 'quoting' of the abject, (or the traumatic) without the crucial effect. This resurgent referentiality can be seen as symptomatic of the conflation of Batailles' project with that of Kristeva, within a genealogy of 'anti-vision'(see footnote 3).

One of the exhibitions to contextualise the abject in terms of an art movement was the Whitney's "Abject Art in America" held in 1993. The usual referencing of Kristeva, Bataille and Douglas can be found in the opening catalogue. In his essay on the abject in the catalogue, *The Phobic Object*, Simon Taylor places this recent art production firmly in the context of representing an oppositional practice.

"this insurgent materialism in art asserts the claims of the body, sensuality and difference over and against societal repression and its institutional architecture" (Taylor, 1993, pg59)

Taylor sees this work as involving a realignment of borders, orders and hierarchies through questioning. It is an assault on the homogenising and totalising notions of identity<sup>8</sup>. He also situates it in terms of recent social history in the United States, the A.I.D.S. crisis etc. seeing this work as concerning it self with visibility. This is a politics then of other, situated firmly in a contemporary field.

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<sup>8</sup>Taylor places this work not only theoretically but art historically in the work of the NO! artists (the "NO! Sculpture Show" at the Gertrude Stein Gallery by Sam Goodman and Boris Laurie displayed fake piles of shit in various sizes, leading to a debate on the increased permissiveness of society.)





This is important when considering the difficulties that many of the Sensation artists are causing for themselves by inadvertently referencing this material and these strategies without due consideration to their investment in these areas of concern. The means seem to be the same while the ends are very different. Though the artists in the Sensation exhibition see themselves as political, it is in a simple opposition to the establishment, rather than a concern with social hardships or difficulties.

This Whitney's exhibition's political content has caused a genuine outrage in the United States. The exhibition has the dubious fame of being quoted by the right wing Christian Network in a debate on the public funding of art, causing a 6% decrease in funding to the NEA. Here there can be little doubt of the political situation of abject art. There is definitely something at stake in the debate in this work.

The significance of this work's need for completion by disapproval, and the consequence of this fulfilment can be seen in the show, "Brilliant: New Art from London " held at the Walker Art Centre, in Minneapolis in the states in October 1995.

Brilliant was curated by Robert Flood. Familiar with a group of London based artists, he drew his exhibition from a group which he saw as representative of a homogenised London Art Scene. Like Sensation this show was billed as being representative of a specific vibe or mood. Brilliant, like Sensation is the vision of one man restricted to a specific art scene rather than a concern with a new formal strategy or content. This was the first attempt to show these as some sort of a cohesive collection. It is worth noting that this first attempt came from outside Britain and from the States where there is



an inherent interest in seeing and portraying Britain and especially London as a cultural hotspot, a hip town.

The difficulties in engaging with this art on a curatorial level can be seen at once. The exhibition came only two years after the outcry from the Whitney's Abject Art exhibition. The work was shown in an environment of a campaigning religious Right. As such most of the work was toned down considerably. Hirst, who was one of the main exhibitors did not show any of his Natural History Series and was instead represented by "*The Acquired Inability To Escape, Inverted*". The Chapmans too were at their quietest, showing without their *Zygote* sculpture, producing instead "*Urbemensch1995*" (Plate 2) specifically for the show.

Ward suggests the need for a re-contextualising of the abject. A less literal reading of the work may indeed engage with a truly revolutionary contestatory practice. The claiming of your abject status may reveal assumptions about the way identity is constituted, but there is little evidence that this has actually destabilised these assumptions. A contestatory art where the Right and Left can so easily agree on the work before them, may provide a public display of disgust where each agree on the social representations of the abject. The work's main difficulty is its quest for scandal and its' easy attaining of it in the reaction of others .

One of the great gains of postmodernity has been to make us face art objects afresh in all their complexities. The understanding of meaning through the relationship between objects and texts, within contexts is the postmodern thesis.

This is also the project of Krauss and Bois, the curators of "L'Informe Mode Emploi", in Centre De George Pompidou,







PLATE 2  
Jake and Dino Chapman "Ubergewicht" 1995





Paris, June 1996. They gathered a collection of relevant work of artists from across the Twentieth century. While refusing a linear display which may encourage their reading in terms of meta-narratives, they gave a set of tools with which to investigate the issues.

The re-evaluation includes work by Duchamp, Picasso, Warhol, Rauschenberg, Hesse and many others to consider what Foster refers to as the twentieth centuries obsession with the nemesis of regression<sup>1</sup>. Foster defines this as the double defiance of visual sublimation and the integrity of vertical form.

It is exactly this recontextualising as called for by Ward that is prevalent in this exhibition. This overview of a century's work is a helpful way to illustrate the need to see this work within an historical framework. The historical precedent has often been used as a way of validating an art form. This show however serves to evaluate a growing concern in recent art and to place this concern within a larger dialogue, both theoretically and historically.

John Roberts is the only commentator to call for the removal of these constricting categorises in his article, "Mad For It", written prior to the staging of the Sensation Exhibition. Robert's maps out the recent history of some of the Y.B.A.'s (Young British Artists) pointing to what he sees as a change in the intellectual aim or the theoretical aim of the postmodern thesis, and hence a change in its production as well as in its staging. He points to this work as embodying a loss of guilt in the face of popular culture, and as existing within a long tradition of "reclaiming the real". The difference between this work and Pop. Art of the Sixties however, is

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<sup>1</sup>Foster defines this in terms of perversion or pere-version, a turning from the father and a twisting of his law. This refers to Freud's explanation of the visual over the haptic, through the erection of man from all fours to two. Here the visual is privileged in civilisation and the other senses, smell especially, are degraded.





the notion of the philistine. That is, the artist is not so much commenting on popular culture, but merely situated in it, the same as everyone else.

Roberts points to a move away from what he sees as the straight jacket of postmodernist theory. He quotes the proliferation of the anti- or con-exhibition title, a title that mocks theory led curatorship, the authoritative, the vaguely poetic. These titles hint at crudeness, street slang, "Sick", "Minky Man", and "Zombie Golf".

However Roberts claims that the proliferation of the anti-intellectualisation in art production is not the same as the abandonment of the political in art practice. He suggests that what is often the common denominator of drug references, tabloid press and what has been referred to in the late Nineties as laddism (as a popular cultural movement), is not he suggests the careless assimilation of popular culture references but rather the introduction of despised categories, the sleazy, the pornographic and the abject, to 'intellectual art'. John Robert's refers to these categories as "commonplace" and "mutually defining of subjectivity"

There is a difficulty with this argument however, since neither the pornographic nor the abject need an introduction to art practice. Both have a long history. The abject has become highly theorised in the twentieth century and forms a long relationship with both modernism and postmodernisms' deconstruction of identity. The abject could never really be said to be apolitical and certainly never commonplace, as it deals specifically with the rupturing of social borders and the causing of dis-ease. Roberts positions art, culture and popular culture as a shared space, one in which there is a constant flow. Robert's suggests this theorisation of 'new British Art', is situated in popular culture, embracing its forms and values rather than producing a distancing critique on them.

Roberts claims the difference between this and the work done by artists such as Warhol in Sixties is the position of art as a shared space with popular culture, not its appropriation as art but its value as situated as part of popular culture. He refers to the philistinism in art as the political edge to this positioning. The philistine sees the rejection of the dominant





discourse of art as a matter of ethical positioning. Roberts sees cheesiness and dumb routines as unsettling of buerecratical postmoderinsm, now the dominant ideology .

This claims to make visible what is missing in contemporary art practice, the position of the non-specific spectator. The references are far more likely to be from adverts, films or popular music than high art. This is again evidence that these artists are not so much as borrowing from popular culture but situated firmly in it. The currency of the pornographic is high though the truly abject is not often found in this work. Roberts claims this assimilation is fundamentally political, the engaging with the everyday through the abject,

"not only a new sensitivity to capitalist brutalising rituals and troupes of everyday late capitalism, but also a greater tolerance for the profane and vulgar as forms of working class dissidence" (Roberts ,1997,pg2)

Roberts suggests (rightly I think) that art is becoming increasingly enculturised in popular media. That is art is no longer being consumed by an academic or professional audience alone, by the "specialist" spectator. This would seem to be justified by the large turnout at the Sensation exhibition. In my experience of the show the numbers were not only impressive but the attending audience were largely under 25 . Roberts suggests that this is significant, and points to the hip vibe of the London art scene as a reason for this new accessibility. He suggests that art production has made the full transition from the struggling artist of modernism, separate and visionary to art production as interaction with a given (now predominantly capitalist) social environment.

The sublime and the obscene, the abject and the traumatic are fundamentally political. The mobilisation of these strategies cannot be removed from their historical and theoretical contexts. Nead suggests, given the complex structures of state and capitalism, there can be a pure sphere in which to discuss these issues. The difficulty of the production of art without an acknowledgement of the political can be seen here. The full



embracing of media capitalism seems even more problematic in this context. Yet this is what Roberts is suggesting.





## Chapter Three

### Abjection & Trauma in the Sensation Exhibition

Sensation marks the full assimilation of the abject into mainstream cultural production. Here the traumatic can be seen in all its glory.

The problems inherent in the political use of the abject can be found in this work too. We can see how the issue of perspective which affected those using the abject does the same in the use of the traumatic, when considering its use by such different artists as Sarah Lucas, MichealLandy, and Richard Billingham. Here, despite very different formal and ideological strategies, there is a referencing of both the traumatic and the abject, each artist situating this in considerations of class.

Lucas addresses questions of class and uses 'refunctioning' of popular culture to do so. Lucas also references the abject in her work. In *"Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab"*, (Plate 3) Lucas reworks male street slang, coupling it with the abject. The smell of this work induces convulsing in the viewer confronting them with their position as a gallery goer and the awareness that the good clean public self is on show here. It is also the attack on the bourgeois sensibility, the class dissidence of Kipnis' "Hustler", the privileging of the low (the sense of smell) over the high. This work would seem to be a successful use of the abject. But it suffers from the glibness of the street reference and after being momentarily amusing, even enlightening, it is forgotten. This work stays in the realms of the art object, it cannot break out of the gallery strangle hold to make a wider claim for itself as politically relevant. This is Brechtian 'refunctioning'. Here abject formalism marries conceptual formalism in the offensive





found object art. This is working class identity as a raw material to be appropriated, firmly situating the work as middle class art. Lucas does the same thing with her other work too, "*Au Naturel*" and "*Sod You Gits*", (Plates 4 and 5 respectively) a blow up of a tabloid on the sex life of a dwarf, (who is abject by Kristeva's definition). Usually however this the emphasis in this work is the hip street slang not the abject content, which often limits its range.

The is also true in the case of Micheal Landy. Though he does not reference the abject, he uses found objects to comment on the working class, "*Costermongers Stall* " 1992-97". (Plate6) But this also falls into the mode of refunctioning as this work is situated outside of the working class area, in the gallery space (which is always sacred even when soiled by the most determined artists). This is art as conspicuous selling.

The emphasis on the street element in both of these artists has been used by critiques such as Roberts to suggest that it is the new innovation of this work. This is problematic since it denies the complexities of the appropriation of working class language and stance and refuses it a context in which its political possibilities could be investigated.

When compared to Billingham's portrayal of working class lifes highs and lows, the dryness of the use of refunctioning becomes obvious. Here is Hal Foster's remembered reality as trauma. The issue of perspective is made clear, Landy and Lucas work from outside their theme and Billingham is situated in it. Here the abject is referenced in the puke on the side of the toilet bowl as Ray, Billingham's father, lies over it, passed out "*Untitled 1993-1995*" (Plates 7,8 and 9). But the abject is not experienced by the viewer, neither is it the point of the work. Here is the illustration of the tearing down of the image screen which





Plate 3  
Lucas "Two Fried Eggs"











PLATE 4  
Lucas "Au Naturel" 1994















PLATE 6  
Landy "Costermongers Stall" 1992-97

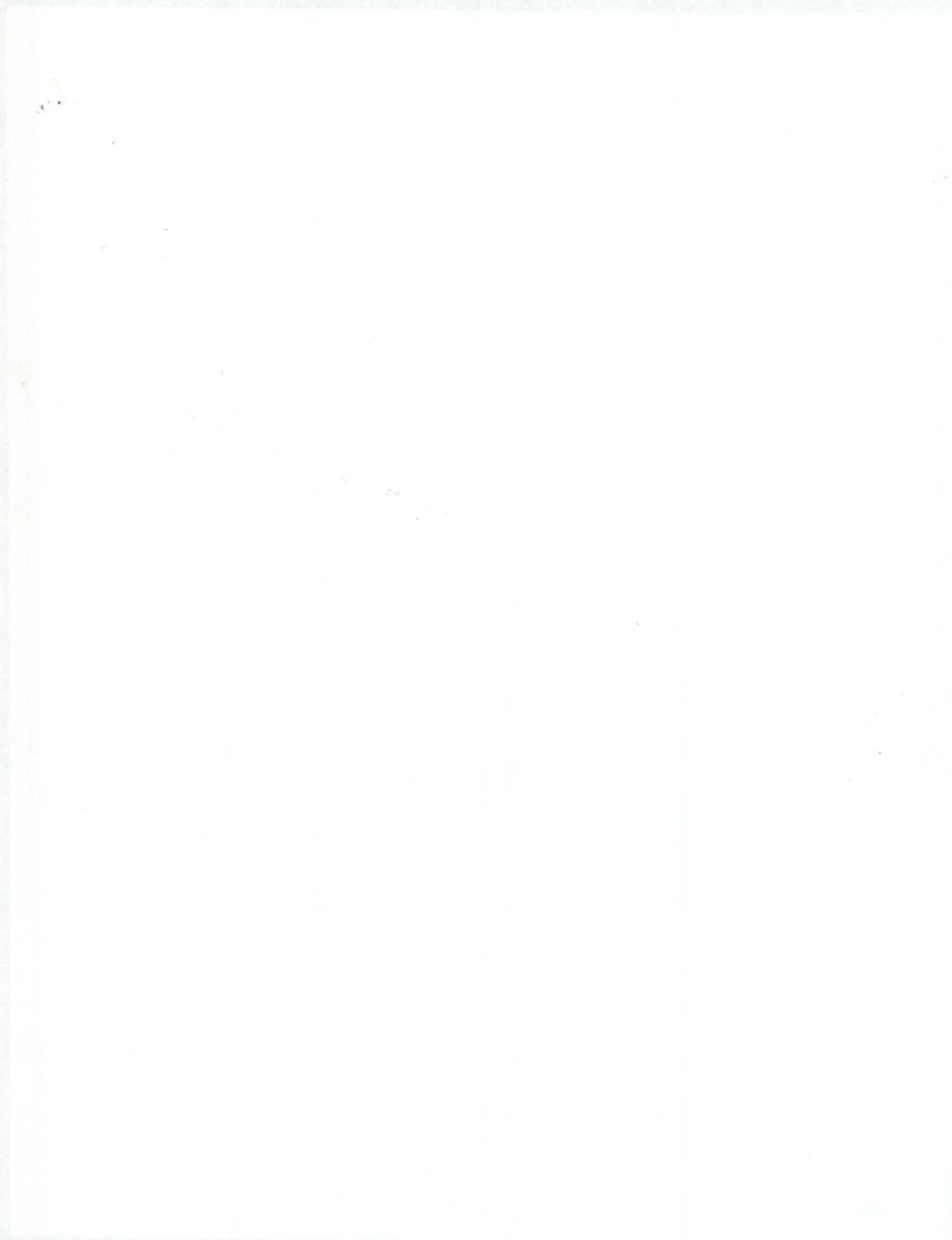






**PLATE 7**  
**Billingham "Untitled" 1993-5**









**PLATE 8**  
**Billingham "Untitled" 1993-5**







**PLATE 9**  
**Billingham "Untitled" 1993-5**





protects the viewer from the undiluted reality and it is this that is the difference between what Foster calls late postmodernism's project and Lucas and Landy's non-engagement with it.

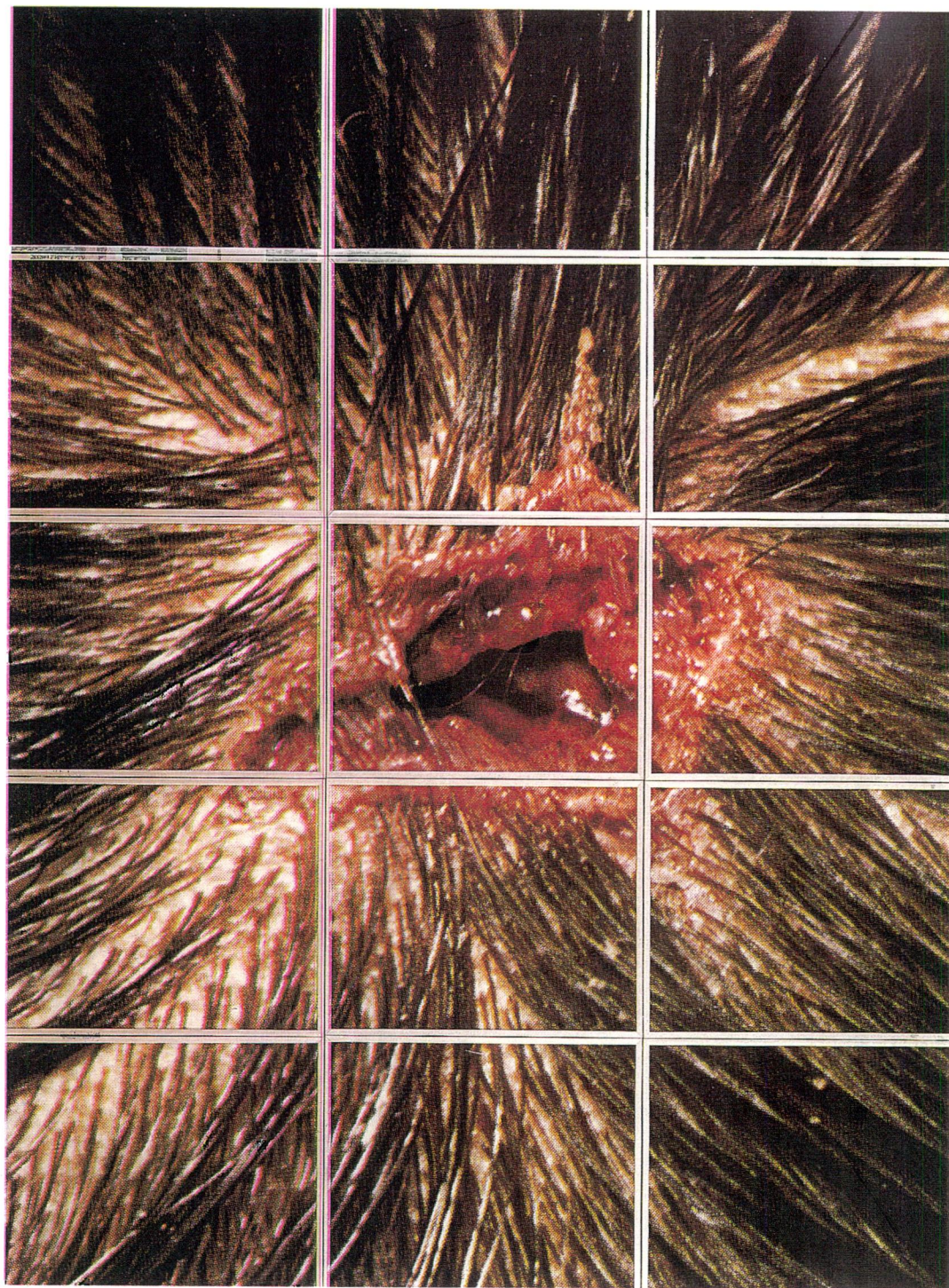
This is not Brechtian refunctioning, nor is it the unproblematic situating of art in popular culture. Here the art object denies the ease and humour of Lucas puns, or the fetishisation of the art object found in other work by these artists. The discussion of the art object as commodification, found in the work of Landy is not a possibility.

In the work of Collishaw we see the difficulty of the coupling of the traumatic with the refusal to put it in a context. *"Bullet Hole 1988-93"* (Plate 10) consists of a cibachrome of a clean bullet wound to the head on 15 light boxes. Here is trauma as commodity, not as reality. There is no attempt to break down the screen which allows for disturbance. The piece does not disturb our idea of the body as a classical integral whole. The display of the work encourages it as spectacle, it is the fetishisation of the traumatic image.

Collishaw's wound is clean, not leaking, oozing or gushing uncontrollably. This is an orifice easily assimilated. So too is the work by the Chapman brothers. They showed four pieces at the show, all images of the traumatic. Their mannequins of prepubescent girls, *"Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, De-sublimated Libidinal Model (enlarged x1000) 1995"* (Plate 11) endowed with penises for noses and vaginas for mouths, all mutants attached to each other as siamese twins sporting clean anal orifices at their sides and on their foreheads. This work is particularly shocking. They are not shocking because of their content but rather the lack of it in such loaded imagery. This is not the revolution of the uncontrollable sexual body, the







**PLATE 10**  
**Collishaw, "Bullet Hole" 1988-93**







**PLATE 11**  
**Jake and Dino Chapman "Zygotic acceleration, biogenetic, de-**  
**sublimated libidinal model (enlarged x 1000) 1995**







freedom in excess of Bataille. Neither is it the attack on bourgeois sensibilities by the display of the actual unclean body, all orifices are clean all blood cleaned up after the atrocity, this is laminated trauma. This work has more in common with Collishaws piece than Billingham's. Here too the spectacle becomes commodity<sup>10</sup>

Harvey also uses the pornographic in his work "*Julie From Hull 1994*" (Plate12) as does Ofili. Here the pornographic is decoration, unashamedly so as Roberts would point out. But this is not the introduction of the obscene. In both these cases as well as in the Chapmans work, the necessary disturbance is absent.(Nead pg112, Kipnis pg 224).There is no danger of disturbance<sup>11</sup>. The images and their content are easily assimilated, allowing the fetishisation of the pornographic, or its re-use as decoration. Harvey supposedly references the type of magazine that Kipnis discusses, where working class anger and dissidence are the staple content. Harveys appropriation of this stance is cancelled by the use of abstract expressionist painting methods. The conflation of these two supposed oppositions makes the viewer aware of the gallery situation, of your position of a viewer of art. But to move beyond appropriation there must be larger significance than a discourse on art practice. This is middle-class voyeurship. There is nothing risked in the making or viewing of this work.

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<sup>10</sup> The Chapmans nod to this, all their girls are wearing branded running shoes.

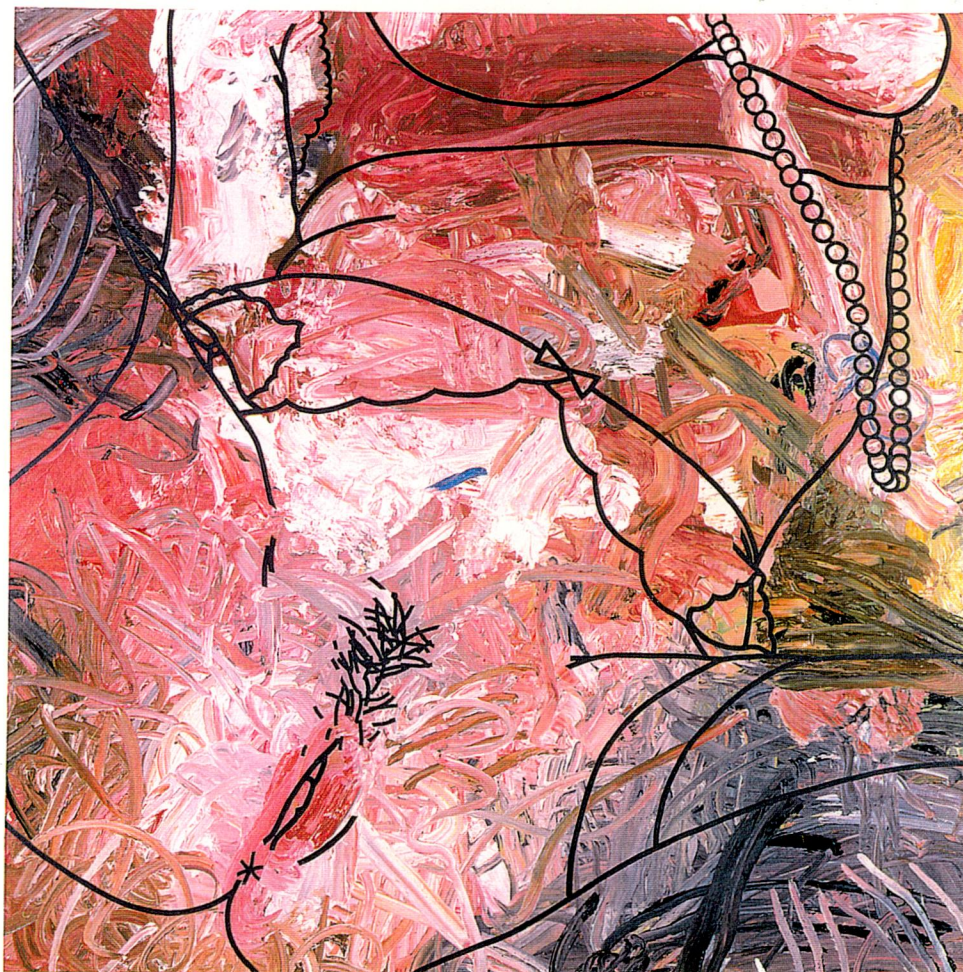
<sup>11</sup> This danger can be seen in terms of the use of the sublime in the eighties - the pornographic is the continuation of an interest in the sublime. But the decorative form is not disruptive and therefore cannot be discussed in terms of the abject or the sublime, leaving it entirely in the realm of the traumatic.



The unemotional, impersonal tone supposes a non-direct familiarity with the source material. The tone is "we know

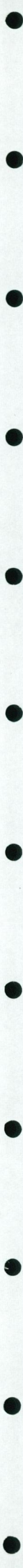






**PLATE 12**  
**Harvey, "Julie From Hull" 1994**







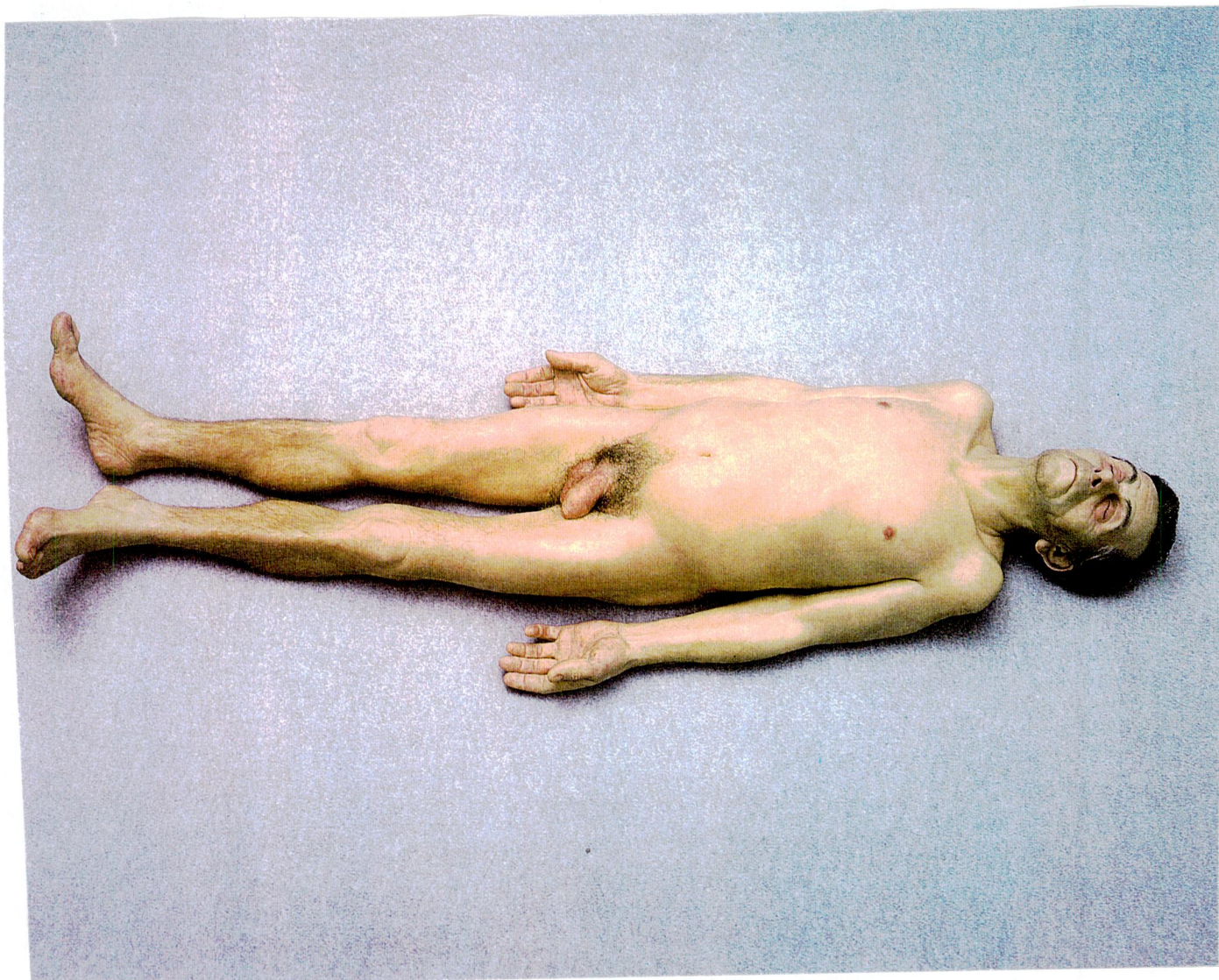
some people do this but we don't", and now we are supposed to be affronted or offended. The work is built around the premise that the viewer will be jarred by shock and disdain while recognising the abstract expressionist signature. If the work did not plan to affront then how is it subversive or radical?

While Roberts points to the emphasis on appropriating working-class language as being fundamentally new or even political, it seems to me that this is not the case. This is not the introduction of despised categories into high art, nor is it the working class dissidence through exposure of "offensive material" to our bourgeoisie taste. There is no exposure here. This is working class language with a middle class voice.

The easy assimilation of even the more graphic work is problematic. Hirst in particular is relevant here. Although the subject matter is death he manages to display this in a very easily assimilable way. Comparing Hirst's work to that of Mueck and Saatchi, it becomes clear what is at stake in this work. It becomes clear to exactly what extent Hirst's work displays the abject as commodified art object. Mueck's two to one replica of his dead father "*Dead Dad 1996*" (Plate13) is both powerful and moving. The size allows the viewer to recognise their own power in viewing this tiny vulnerable effigy. This is the illustration of the inability to recognise death in our own life, in the living. By contrast Hirst's dead fish, "*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, 1991*" (Plate14) although impressively large smacks of commodity, even fetishism. Dwarfing the viewer, the piece is somehow innocuous in its affect. The tank is similar to any number of exhibits one sees in museums. This is the problem, the display cancels the slippage that true abjection needs. This is the literal quoting of the abject material, carcasses, with a hope that this literalness will carry the force needed. The similarity to



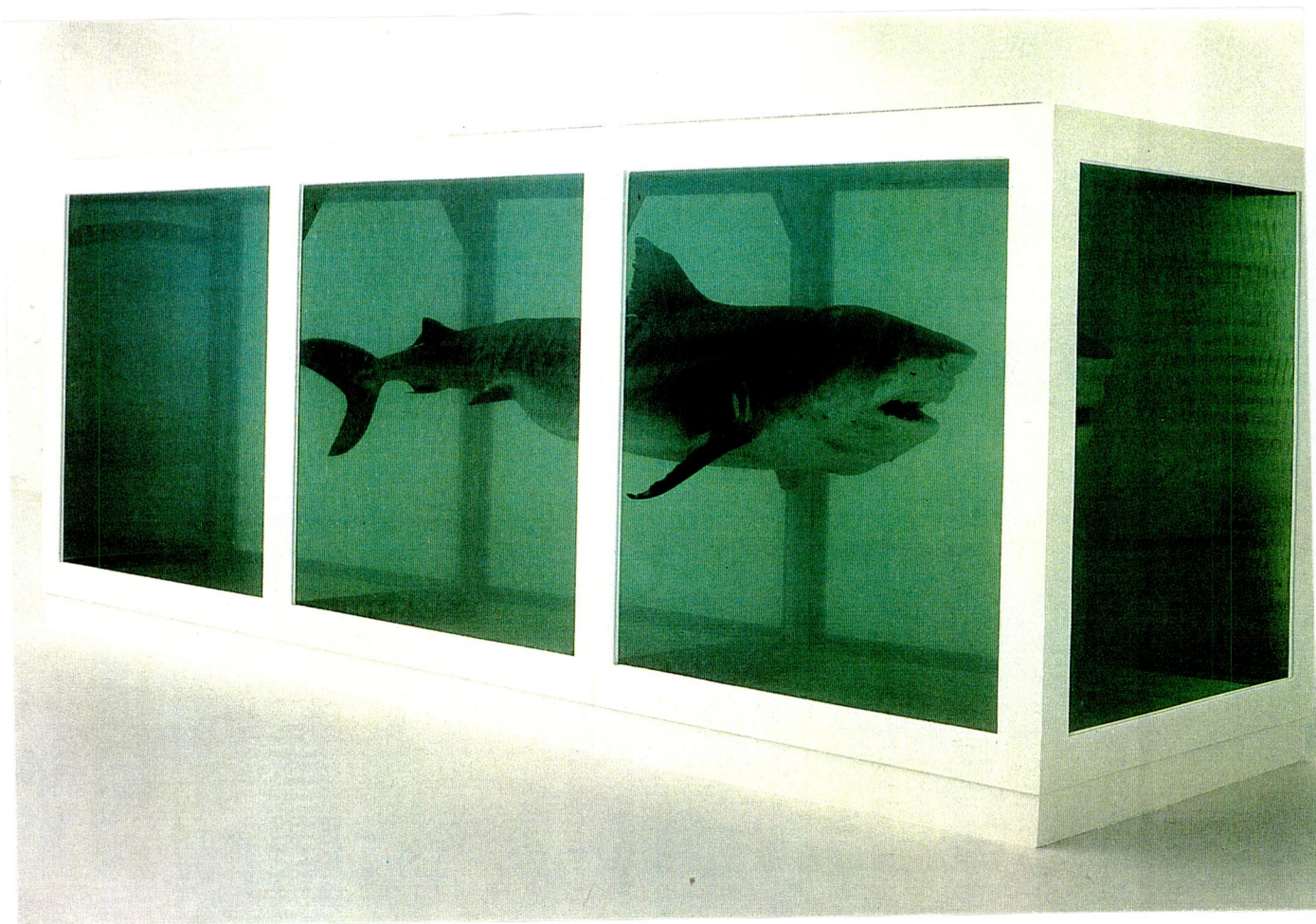




**PLATE 13**  
**Ron Mueck, Dead Dad, 1996-1997**





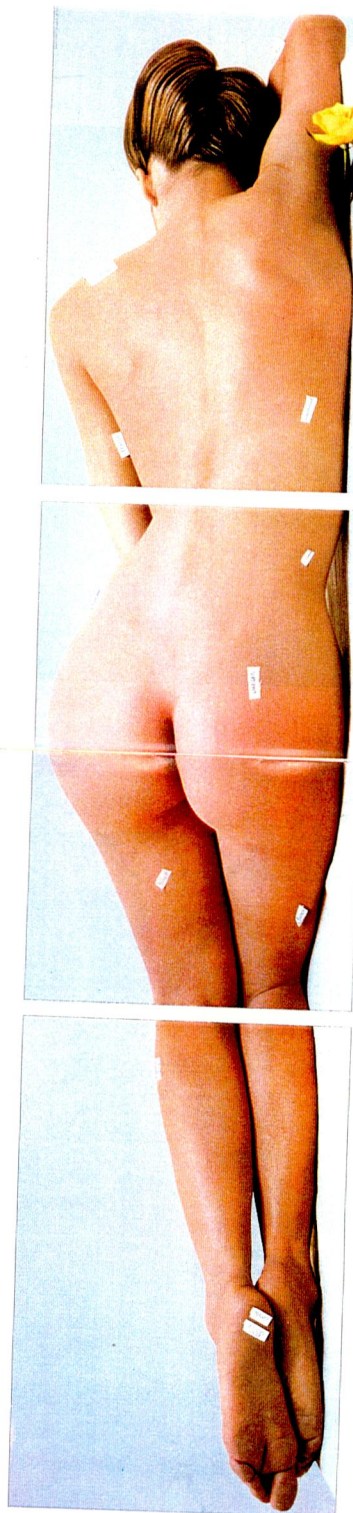


**PLATE 14**  
**Damien Hirst, The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind**  
**of Someone Living**









**PLATE 15**  
**Saatchi & Saatchi, Advertisement**





Saatchi's triptych for an exclusive London clothes shop (Plate 15) is obvious. Here commodity is unashamedly the point, and display the means. Hirst's work is horribly close to this advertisement, with similar overtones of trendy provocation, the 'pushing it a bit farther' attitude. But actually nothing is risked in this work, not by the advertising company, not by the artist and certainly not the viewer.

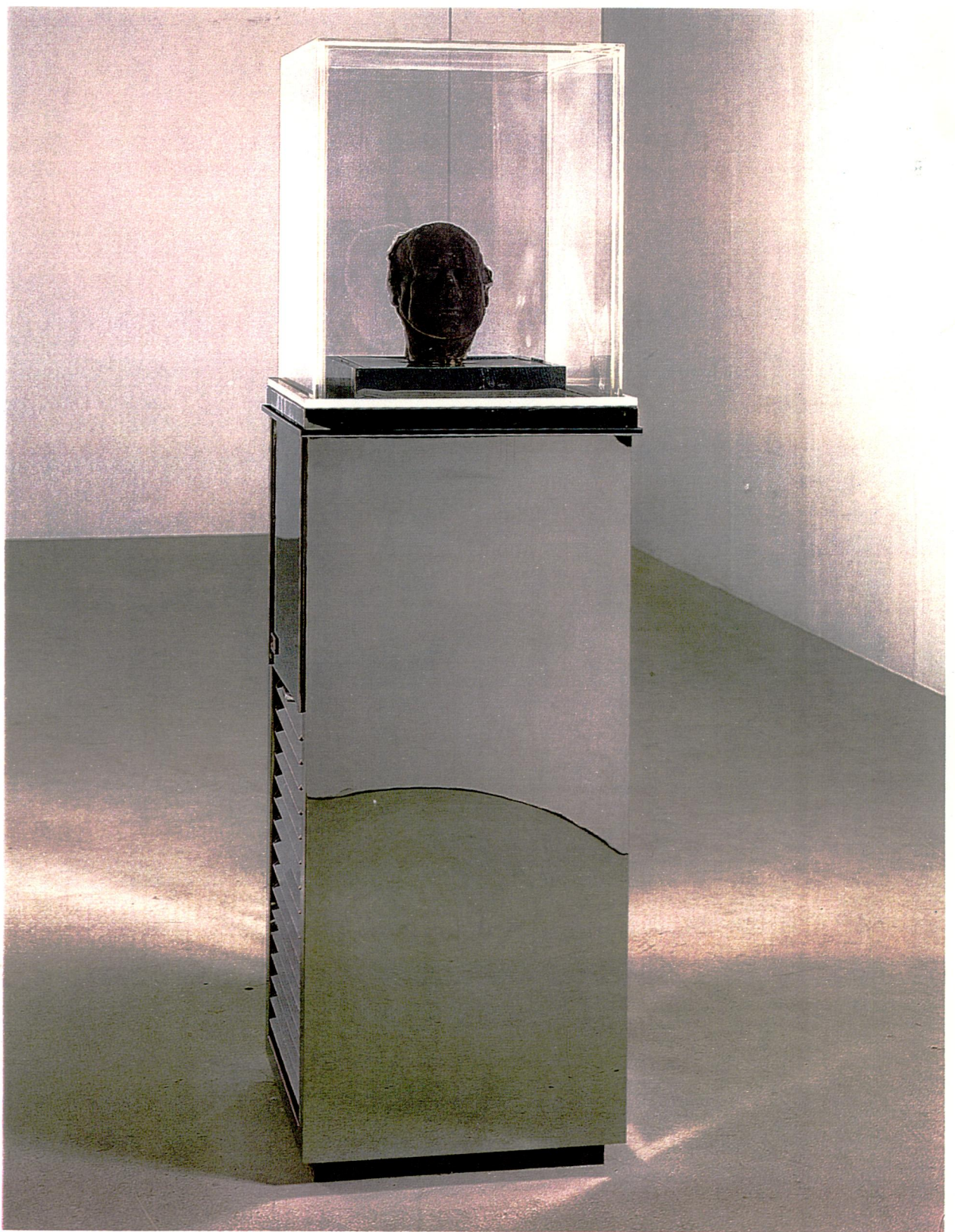
Quinn too wallows in the art object as fetishistic commodity. The bust of himself, "*Self1991*" (Plate 16) though really quite beautiful invites admiration for its delicacy before it invites disgust. The is so close to ideas of the precarious construction of identity while falling flat of a committed statement. Referencing one of the most abject materials post H.I.V., this work does not discuss the possibilities of danger and pollution. Quinn too has relied on the display as fetishism. The clear cabinet reminds the viewer of the clean medical precision, no leaks, no contamination.

This work disallows the complexities of representation thus allowing for clichéd viewing of the work, which is the antithesis of political progression. This work reinforces our notions of class, sex, death and our position in these orders. There is no move forward here, just simple side stepping. Nothing is asked of the viewer and nothing is gained by them either. The abject meets display here and is overshadowed by it. The function of capitalism is to make even the most contestatory object assimilable. It does this by inverting it, removing its political power and selling it back to us as a desirable (or interesting, or new) commodity this can not be political.

"'These things are done in gangs', wrote Walter Sickert, 'not by individuals'. He was referring to the way groups not only







**PLATE 16**  
**Marc Quinn, Self, 1991**









**PLATE 17**  
**Marc Quinn, Self (Detail), 1991**





evolve a particular style or hit one similarity of context but also how they introduce their work to their public."  
(Shone, 1997,pg 12)

Through the amalgamation of internationally recognisable artistic styles with a new youth orientated content, an element of British culture grabbed the attention of the world. The voice of youth was heard in its many forms staging anger indifference boredom and laziness" (Maloney, 1997, pg 26)

The artists do not form a cohesive group with a discernible agenda. They are overwhelmingly from Goldsmiths College. This has been significant in the development of this new formalism. Michael Craig Martin the Department Head, himself a conceptual artist, abolished the department divisions in the late 80's and increased the emphasis on the verbal articulation of ideas.

The hipness of London is used to place these artists in a new Britain, often with parallels to the 60's swinging scene, London's hip image, general prosperity, celebrity artists (Shone,1997pg 15)<sup>12</sup>.In his essay for the catalogue Shone describes the changes in the art world which governs this art production. The increase in corporate involvement, the institutionalisation of art education is also referenced (Robert's), and the pressure of attention on very young artists, in the end of year B.A. Shows, forces the artists to reach a conclusion their work (especially formally) at a very early stage.

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<sup>12</sup>The 'Brilliant' Exhibition in the Walker Art Center was held exactly thirty years after it hosted the 'London: The New Scene' exhibition. There was a specific desire to bill this exhibition as an up-to-date re incarnation of this earlier renaissance in British art.





For many, these events have led to an art production which is formally 'cool', remaining unemotional. While Robert's claims that this work is a reaction against a dependence on distancing theory, it too has been called distant with its emphasis on hip, ironic, street style stance.(Shone, 1997, pg 20)

So if these artists are not a cohesive group formally or in content, then why is there so much energy invested in them? Claims for this work usually rely on its ability to refer to and engage with the non specialist spectator. The new audience for this work is obvious. Robert's claims that this is due to works the anti theory stance, the reliance on street slang and rejection of simple art quoting, in fact any reference to anything beyond the ordinary and everyday makes this art accessible as well as democratic and non-elitist. This work is lively not didactic or dogmatic, using humour and slang to get its meaning across. The non specialist spectator was out in force at the RA. This marked a major success for both the RA and Saatchi, with his new audience in the centre of town.

The work is also formally less than revolutionary.

"not new, abject recycling of recent fashionable practice to no particular end"(Shone,1997, pg 13)

Formally the work is situated in a reworking of conceptualism with a new concern with the possibilities of the visual. Maloney, himself a defendant of the work in Sensation, claims the radicality is in the content not the formal considerations. There is no doubt that the formal qualities of the conceptualists are heavily referenced (Whitread, Hirst, Francis Hatoum Lucas, Martin, Turk). I would argue that this is work not radical in content either but uses another recent trend, the abject to give it the gloss of opposition. The meeting of the





conceptual and the visual in the abject has led to a new formalism and if this work was politically, theoretically or formally radical it would be hard to see through all of the "isms".

This has led to a difficulty in discerning intention in the work. The difficulty with the referencing of conceptualism is the betrayal of its *cause celebre*, the decommodification of the art object. As I have already pointed out this work enhances the aspect of the spectacle. Neoconceptualism merely adds to this rather than dismantling it. As Green points out in his essay, neoconceptualism is defined by its difference (and therefore its similarity) to other products competing in the market-place. This brand style works in three ways. Firstly by hiding the spectacle, secondly adding the gloss of art historical legitimacy, and thirdly makes for easy curating and selling, matching the economic climate perfectly (again firmly situated in the popular). Often the discursive nature of the conceptual is underplayed in favour of a reworking of the conceptual which relies heavily on the visual. The reworking of past formal considerations does not need to be a bad thing for art, it can be contestatory. As Foster points out there are two kinds of reworking; that which bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and that which is a return to a lost model of art made to displace customary ways of working. The reworking of conceptualism seems to be the first rather than the second. But most importantly, when the conceptual is coupled with abject in a climate of the sensational, the art produced often commodifies the abject, transforming it into the spectacle.

The interest with bringing working class sensibilities into the gallery space has been claimed as radical. The relevance of the working class voice in a continuing attack on modernist ideals of beauty and a desire to be engaging with a non-specialist can



be seen in Kipnis' discussion of "Hustler" magazine. The working class anger claimed to be referenced in the work of some of these artists is powerfully evident in publications such as "Viz" and "Hustler". Here everyone is a target for humour. Kipnis places this humour in terms not only of class difference but also class dissidence. Here the attack is on the bourgeois ideal (classical) body. Hustler magazine offers a critique of the body politic much as the work in Sensation claims to do. Hustler's humour is not only geared towards the sexual, but is a discourse of the polite body and the uncontrollable flatulating body, the body with no respect for middle class norms.<sup>13</sup>

Hustler shows a dissident working class, one in which power is seen to be beyond reach. Here humour is the leveller. The problem for the artists use of this humour or anger or pornographic preoccupation is that it is basically appropriated.

"Landy made clear the working class street trader without presuming to explain his world or patronise him. His street wise stance asserted a political dimension to the ready-made and kick started sculpture to embrace the art of visibility"(Maloney, 1997, pg31)

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<sup>13</sup>Kipnis situates the inception of the polite body in the Sixteenth century rise of individualism and the consolidation of bourgeoisie hegemony.

This can be mapped onto Freud's illustration of the erection of man from all fours to two. In Freud as in Kipnis the lower bodily functions are despised and the visual is the privileged sense. This is also similar to Bataille's idea of the excremental body as revolution. In these thesis, bodily grossness operates as a critique of dominant ideology, the power of grossness is predicated on its opposition to and from high discourse. Here the abject project of ejection and exclusion is not purely psychoanalytic but social, the upper classes excluding that which is low.





In September 1990 The New York Times claimed that Postmodernism was dead (Kipnis,1993pg14). In her essay "Repossessing Popular Culture", Laura Kipnis suggests that it is not dead but flourishing in media capitalism. In Brechtian terms,

"'Hacks' and 'revolutionary hacks'[are] those artists who maintain an unwitting complicity with the political forms they aspire to transform by continuing to supply 'new affects or sensations' for public consumption and entertainment".

These innovations are immediately lapped up by dominant culture in a feeding frenzy of the new. The question in terms of Sensation is, Is there any aspiration any way? The work generally is not political and certainly not revolutionary, in fact noted for its apathy and lack of any engagement with any ideology outside consumerism and media materiality. Kipnis suggests that what is typically post modern (the engagement with media derived experience) can be seen as engagement with the dominant culture. It is the visual that is privileged in this project.

Following Guy Debord's discussion of the spectacle, postmodernism has been referred to as the complete commodification of the image. Spectacle is the commodified form of the image, disguising itself as the neutral. The spectacle is the capitalist colonisation of the image forming a monopoly of appearance; that which appears is good, that which is good appears. This is the difficulty in introducing the political to the sensational as it presumes that visuality is neutral. The spectacle is "existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself, it's laudatory monologue", (Kipnis,1993, pg21-22)





Maloney obviously sees this work in terms of the political. But if Landy refuses to situate this work politically himself, it leaves the work wide open to counter claims of a-political appropriation at best, laddist posturing at worst. Bringing working class 'visibility' into the gallery while refusing to contextualise it (which is a refusal to recognise its usual absence) is patronising. At the moment its cool to be anything but middle-class and these artists are doing their best to remove themselves from it. This is a similar but opposite problem to that of the artists who wish to expose the abject, but end up merely enforcing their own identification with it. By a refusal to contextualise (seen to be a form of theorising) coupled with an over-literal portrayal of the abject this work refuses the complexities of class difference.

The difficulty is whether the people attending "Sensation" were there to see the work or the spectacle. In his review of the exhibition Jed Perl notices this audience prides itself on not being sucked in, not falling for the slick jokes. Here the audience armours itself against the work. This is a huge problem for artists, especially those concerned with depiction of the abject, where a personnel response is the only valid one. The Chapmans "Zygote" sculpture demonstrates this clearly. What is a rather disturbing piece seems to engender very little disturbance in the viewers, the only piece to cause a reaction was the "Myra" piece by Quinn which was itself a target of a sensationalist attack as a member of the public tried to deface it (guaranteeing its place in the hall of fame). This also means the viewer to becomes a bystander in the art process, a mere voyeur increasing this quality in the work, encouraging the work as an art fetish object. This also makes it more difficult for the less sensational works, where the piece may need a little more consideration to be viewed when they are swamped by the



spectacle surrounding them. This is particularly true of Humes work. Although highly regarded as a painter the work fights with those surrounding it (Lucas' "Rabbit", The Chapmans "Deeds done to the dead") and was largely ignored by the public. It also means that this art can come across as unemotional, or even coy, refusing to let it all out.





## Conclusion

The abject and traumatic images in Sensation act in a non-political context. The traumatic is used regardless of means or ends, establishing them as images of a new formalism.

The Sensation exhibition is not representative of the divergent art production in Britain, as is claimed. The work all comes from the Saatchi collection. This is not incidental to their public success, or to the type of work that is chosen to be sanctioned as radical new art. Saatchi has spent his professional life using images for their immediate impact. The message comes second, after product recognition. The traumatic is the starting point for a considerable number of these artists and it has become an easily recognisable brand style.

This art is described as avant garde, 'anarchic' or in some way disturbing of the normal social codes, thus exposing them and being political or at least contestatory. In his essay on the 'arts industry', George Walden discusses how this work has become part of a "discourse of officialdom". Both of the last two governments in Britain (including the Conservatives) have come out in support of this work, often invoking it as tourist attraction and export earner. This marks a crucial shift in the position of the government in validating avant-garde art production from the sidelines to the centre. Could this work be an 'export earner' if it wasn't a commodity? Here is the discourse of mimetic opposition, with no real gains or losses at stake. Governmental subsidy of 'oppositionary art', can be seen as the obvious progression in advanced democracy. But this reduces the role of artist to that of court jester. It also enroles a synthetic polarisation between art and state, constraint and liberation, old and new. Disputes and controversies are





dramatised to the level of opposition, thus validating the art as avant-garde. This is the ultimate regulatory role of the abject. Here it disallows the possibility of been seen as anything but radical, beyond its claimed radicality there is nothing of importance, nothing to discuss. The vital thing is to provoke an argument, once done, there is no need to enter into an actual debate. The discursive element is missing in this work, provocation is all that's needed. In forcing an out cry this work also enforces the status-quo.

My experience of the show as a gallery goer was both enjoyable and effortless. This is the main difficulty with the show. The work was generally highly visual, with each room showcasing a different clique of artists, all arranged for maximum pleasure experience, the full assimilation of the abject as spectacle.

The problem with this particular work and its consumption, is that if the work is dealing with issues of identity and exploring them through the disruption of it, the easy assimilation of these images does not sit well. Although there was shock at some pieces (Quinns' "Myra" and the Chapmans "Zygote.."in particular), the overall experience was undeniably pleasurable for most attending. The only explanation is that this work does not question at all. It simply fulfils a niche in the market, for those who wish to seem to be open to new oppositional art practices without giving up the comfort of safety. This is the position not of those attending the show, but those hosting it and paying for the education of the artists and those buying the work. The last bastion of Modernism has fallen to the 'new order'.

The full assimilation then of the abject, or the traumatic by capitalism in the Sensation exhibition, means there is no room



for a claim of the avant garde. There would seem to be no space outside of a capitalist commodification of the image to produce this kind of work. The ability to produce work that has impact without reifying the spectacle is what is at stake here.

It is more than anything else the realisation of the lack of new avenues of possible lives, of possible contestatory artistic experience in the Sensation exhibition that makes it so depressing. The engagement with media derived experience comes at the expense of an interest in the historical basis, and thus suggesting no possible avenues for the future. The marriage between the media mogul and art seems to have spin us to a stop.





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