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**NATIONAL COLLEGE of ART and DESIGN**

Fine Art: Painting

**THE YBA PHENOMENON**

by

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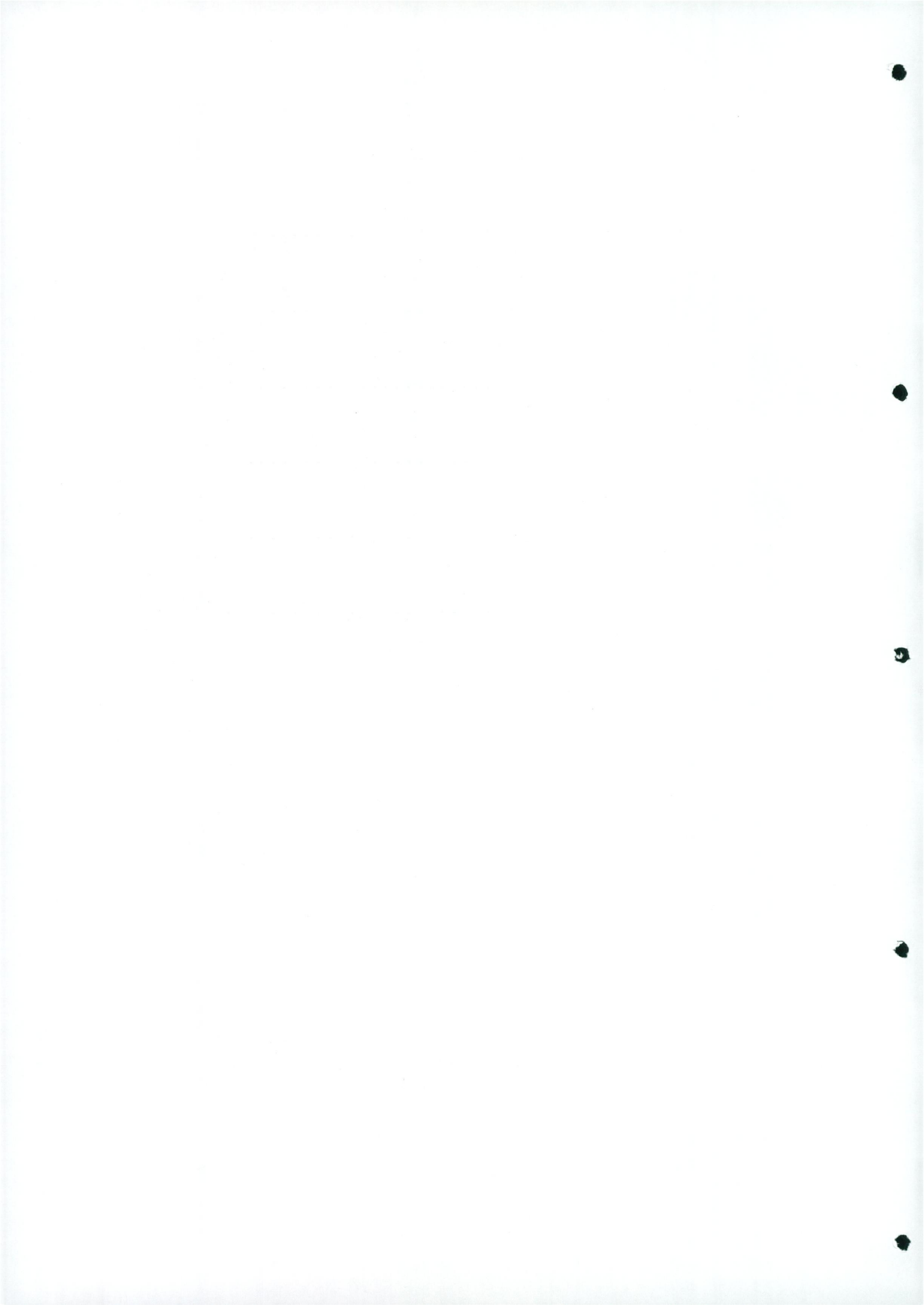
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**INTRODUCTION.**

September 18th 1997, witnesses the occasion of the exhibition, '"Sensation": Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection', held at the Royal Academy of Arts, London. The exhibition and its artists received enormous media coverage. A lavish catalogue was produced to mark the occasion. Critics differed in their opinion of the work presented. However, whether or not this work had anything radical to offer in terms of form and content, it was undeniably well informed, witty and well made. Even by international standards, the presentation of this work was very expensive. Although many of the exhibitors are recent college graduates, all have developed enviable exhibition histories in London and across Europe: for example, Gillian Wearing's C.V., page 72.

How did all this come about? How did these young artists come to form such a cohesive group as to have coined their own name: Young British Artists, latterly known as the yBa's, which became a by-word in the international art-world? How did such a new group of artists achieve so much in such a short period of time? Could it be that, in the words of dealer Karsten Schubert, that "We had, by chance, a group of incredibly brilliant people emerging



simultaneously and influencing each other" (Schubert, 1991, p. 21.), or, could it be as critic Liam Gillick suggests in Art and Design (1995), that: "He who pays the printer sets the colophon ... ", meaning that the phenomenon of the yBa is a media creation, benefiting dealers, critics, collectors and artists alike.

One strategy for addressing the problem would be to look at the relationship between the artists themselves - the times they live in; the current art climate; their association with Goldsmiths' College; their common base, South East London to see if these are common factors that have developed and produced this group of 'incredibly brilliant people'. Another strategy would be to look at the relationship between the critics, dealers and collectors involved with this group, and see if it is merely a question of "he who pays the printer sets the colophon."



**CHAPTER 1.**

## WHAT IS A YBA?

What is a yBa? Who are these brilliant People?

YBa is an acronym for young British artist. Here, all reality seems to end, and myth begins. Which young artist from Britain is, or is not a yBa, is not at all clear. Neither is it clear, when looking at it, whether the art of a yBa is a distinctive style or carries any kind of unified message. A very general perception of a yBa, would be an individual, who has graduated from art college, sometime within the last twenty years or so; many of them from Goldsmiths' College, London. Their discipline is Fine Art. All have developed enviable exhibition histories in London and across Europe. Their style is generally described as 'neo-Conceptual'- meaning, loosely, a multi-media, idea-based art. Their work presents itself in the form of discreet art object, particularly suited to the museum or gallery space. It is not, generally site-specific performance, editioned, collaborative or temporal. Although their art is generally described as non-political, much of it deals with 'body-politics'. For Simon Ford, (curator at the National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum), "the myth of the young British artist (yBa) contains both mythical and ideological characteristics: it is mythical in that it is narrative in nature and ideological in its





specific function within contemporary culture ... Because of its narrative form every myth requires its 'creation myth', the point of origin from which everything followed. 'Freeze' is deemed important because it was an exhibition, organised by art students, in a soon to be redeveloped industrial space in Docklands, London." (Ford, '96, p.3).

In 1988, while still a student at Goldsmiths' College, Damien Hirst organised 'Freeze'. Conceived and curated by Hirst, he gathered together an enthusiastic group of fellow students from Goldsmiths' College. The venue was the vacated Port of London Docklands Development Corporation, which also funded 'Freeze'. That the 'Freeze' shows, of which there were actually three ('Freeze', 'Modern Medicine' and 'Gambler'), have become mythologised as the take-off point for the first generation of 'yBa' "is representative of much of their mediated history." (Gaywood, '97, p.3). 'Freeze' was praised for its professionalism "Thatcherite enterprise and slick marketing" (Shone, '97, p.17), over the form and content of the artworks produced by the participants. Hirst's enthusiasm was infectious, and sparked a ripple of curiosity amongst dealers. For example, an English dealer living in New York, Clarissa Dalrymple, "was excited by the show and took that excitement back to New York;" (ibid, p.18). The following year, Dalrymple curated a group show at the Lorence Monk Gallery (which included 'Freeze' exhibitor, Gary Hume), and in 1992, 'British Art', held at the prestigious New York Gallery of Barbara Gladstone.



Dealer, Karsten Schubert, took an interest in the 'Freeze' generation, and exhibited Gary Hume in 1989, Mat Collishaw, Angus Fairhurst, Michael Landy and Rachel Whiteread in 1990, gave Anya Gallaccio and Whiteread and Abigail Lane their first solo shows. Schubert "swiftly built up a high profile for new British art abroad." (ibid, p.21). The Karsten Schubert Gallery acted as a social meeting place, hosting lavish parties and celebratory parties. "Increasingly, the artists - and the surrounding world of dealers, gallerists, hangers-on, parties - have become more interesting than their art." (Anthony, 1998).

"Technique Anglaise", first published in Great Britain, in 1991, is a discussion between artists, critics, dealers, and curators, in which current trends in British art of that time, are addressed. The participants in this discussion include, Andrew Renton (critic and curator), Liam Gillick (artist and critic), Lynne Cooke (art critic and curator), William Furlong (artist and lecturer), Maureen Paley (dealer, Interim Art), and Karsten Schubert (dealer, Karsten Schubert Ltd.). They cite 'Freeze' and Goldsmiths, College as being of paradigmatic importance in the creation of a new phenomenon in British art. The epithet 'yBa' is not used in this discussion, but, many of the artists included in the "Technique Anglaise" listing, are those who participated in the 'Freeze' shows (Hume, Landy, Collishaw, Whiteread, Lane, Gallaccio, etc.). Although Gillick is one of the artists



listed (in collaboration with Henry Bond), his name does not appear in any subsequent listings, to which the yBa epithet is applied. The discussion centres around an undisputed assumption that London is now the 'world centre' for art, and that this phenomenon can be explained by another assumption that "We had, by chance, a group of incredibly brilliant people emerging simultaneously and influencing each other ... we are trying to suggest that there is something that emerges of its own accord." (Schubert, '91, p.21) or what Maureen Paley describes as "a kind of genetic accident."

Here, we see a return to the long debunked notion of the artist as a natural genius, used for the purposes of explaining an assumption that London, under the influence of this eruption of natural genius, had in the three short years since 'Freeze', become the art capital of the world. But as Simon Ford tells us: Extreme 'naturalism' which transforms history into nature is a fundamental principle of myth." Who would benefit from the creation of such a myth? Perhaps the artists. Yet, according to Andrew Anthony, in The Observer Review, 22 November 1998, : " ... no self-respecting young British artist is prepared, at least when sober, to wear the epithet YBA." If the artists resist the title, could it be then, that the dealers, critics and collectors who created the myth around the artists benefit from having 'discovered' the work of 'geniuses', for which they are able to command inappropriately high prices. In an



interview with Alison Sarah Jacques, Flash Art News, Nov./Dec. 1993, dealer Maureen Paley declares that the function of the dealer is to "continue the debate." Others are of a different opinion however.

DEALERS, CRITICS AND COLLECTORS:

"Dealers now set up shop with little more than a mobile phone, a sharp suit, owlish Mondrian spectacles ... a knowledge of three or four degree shows, Charles Saatchi's personal number and an effrontery the size of the Hayward Gallery. Ignorance is not a drawback for such operators for whom belief is all. They must have absolute faith that the two or three 24-year-olds whose reputations they are trying to establish with instant effect are already fully fledged geniuses. And even if they don't believe it, providing they can sound convincing to credulous wealthy collectors, the omens are good, The main criteria for the new dealers are: sell it now and price it expensive." (Juda, '93, p.20). An art dealer for many years, Anneli Juda advises young artists to look for long term success. She believes that this flash-in-the-pan mentality infecting the contemporary art-market is a "grave error". Of the artists she says: "They get exhibitions far too quickly, well before they are ready for them. And because they saw this happening in the 1980's they expect to be treated immediately as serious artists." (ibid). This echoes the sentiments of Damien Hirst, who, in interview with Liam Gillick in 1990 says: " can't wait to get into a position to make really bad art and





get away with it. At the moment if I did certain things people would look at it, consider it and then say "fuck off". But after a while you can get away with things." (Gillick, 11/'90, p.26). Hirst's celebrity mentality, is, by his own admission, preventing him from experimenting with his own work. This is hardly a healthy climate in which to "continue the debate". The myth of Hirst, the artist 'genius', is subsumed by his child-like desire to please his critics, real and imagined. At this point, it is pertinent to look at the role of the critic in the phenomenon of the yBa.

"What we saw in the eighties was that the critics lost their voice, because they were trying to stand on a narrow band, and the market just said, well you know, that's just too bad, we'll do it anyway, What we saw was that the market in the Eighties totally undermined critical judgment ... " (Schubert, '91, p.15). This is a problem. Because the work of the yBa generation is so consumer friendly, it tends to defy criticism. Whether it arrives directly at exhibition spaces from the studios of second and third year students at Goldsmiths' College - as with the 'Freeze exhibition, or is snapped up by dealers eager to find something fresh and new (regardless of whether or not such work has been the subject of any critical debate), the extraordinary fact remains, that the work of students and emerging artists is 'up there' with the recognised and famous of the art world. It used to be the function of the critic to cut through the glut, in



order to inform the public and guide the collector. Now it is guidance by collector. In 1985, American critic, Kenneth Baker wrote: "Since collectors such as the Saatchis' hasten the transformation of the art work into a cultural bauble, the private collector is, in the scheme of things, an accomplice in the ongoing repression of a critical view ... " (Baker, '85, p. 27).

Of what possible benefit could a collection of "cultural baubles" be, to any collector? Perhaps, it is here, that we can see the advantage of the myth of the yBa 'artist/genius'.

Could the myth benefit astute collectors, who buy up whole shows at reasonable prices, hoping that the mediated hype surrounding the artists, will increase the value of work they have already bought. Global advertising tycoon, Charles Saatchi, is one collector accused of such sharp practice.

As far back as 1987 (pre-'Freeze'), the role of Saatchi in the contemporary art-market, was under scrutiny. "Everyone agrees that ad tycoon Charles Saatchi is a major player in the contemporary-art-marketplace. But is he the ultimate advertisement for the latest artist or trend?" asks Richard W. Walker (Editor of the ARTnewsletter and staff writer for ARTnews; [1/'87, p.117]).

Charles Saatchi had been collecting 'yBa' work and bought Hirsts' first major piece, 'A Thousand Years', 1990,



[Fig.1,(a rotting cow's head with live maggots that evolve into flies, and are subsequently killed by insect-o-cuter)]. In 1991, Saatchi commissioned Hirst's grandly titled "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living", (Fig.2), a 14 ft. tiger shark, floating in formaldehyde, set in a glass and steel cabinet.

These pieces attracted enormous media attention. "From then on, each time he showed a new work it was as if some art world Jack the Ripper had perpetrated one more outrageous crime." (Shone, '96). For critic Charles Hall, Hirst was (in 1992), "the most exciting artist to have emerged in this country (Great Britain) since Richard Long." (Hall, 3.'92. p.54). On the other hand, critic Brian Sewell declared: "We have long witnessed the shrill self-declaration of artists who cannot paint, draw or sculpt, who have no skills of any kind with which to give form to their mysterious and hidden talent, ... " (Sewell, 12.'92, p.20).

It was Saatchi, however, with his six Young British Artists shows, held at the Saatchi Gallery, who coined the phrase, Young British Artist, which became the acronym yBa, which became a byword for everything that is happening in art in Britain today.

In Britain, the Saatchi name is well known even to people who have no interest in the art world because the company (Saatchi & Saatchi) had twice managed the media components of Margaret Thatcher's electoral campaign, with the slogan



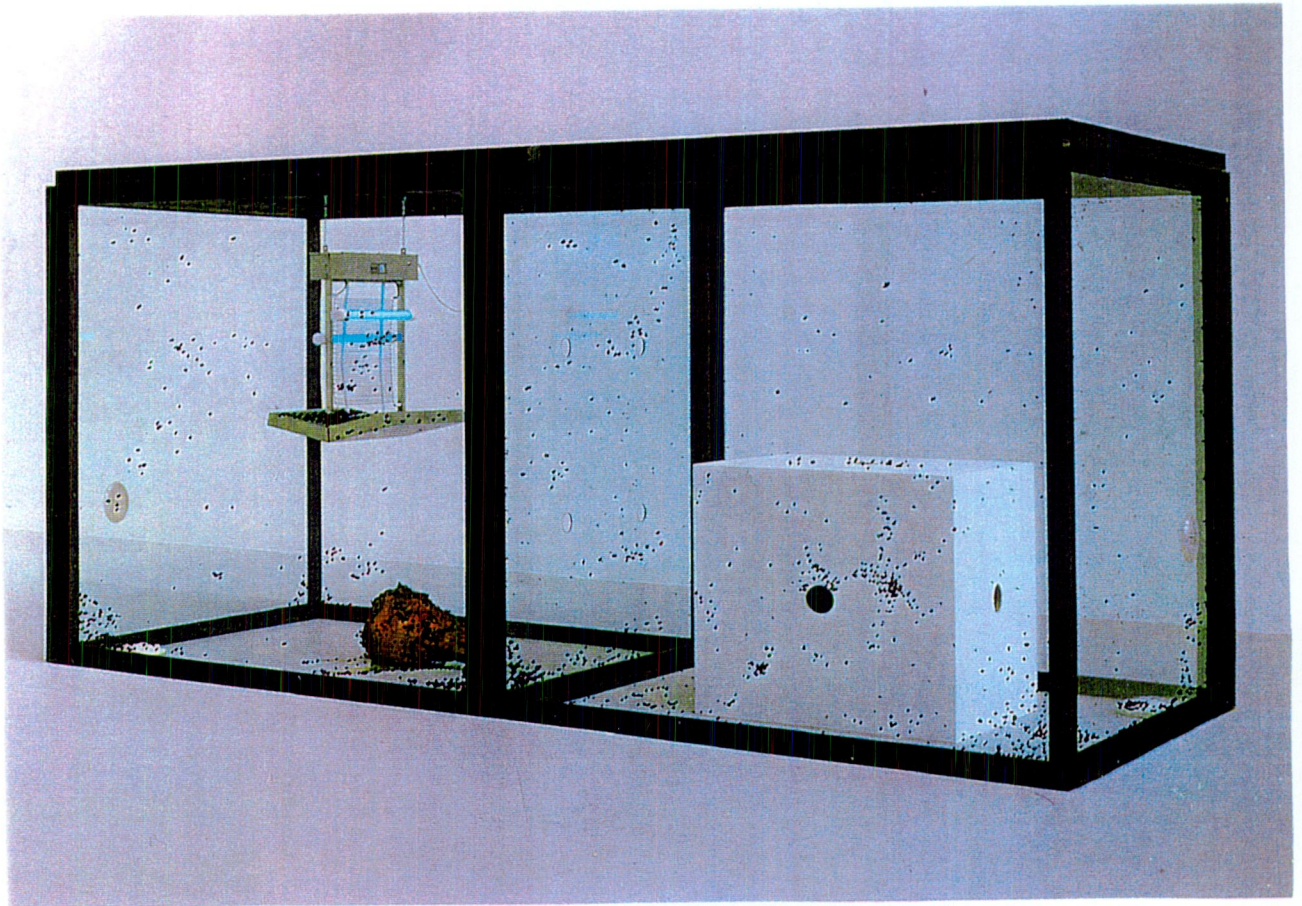


Fig. 1. **A Thousand Years**, 1990, glass, steel, MDF, cow's head, flies, maggots, insect-o-cuter, sugar, water, 213x427x213/84x168x84", by **Damien Hirst**.





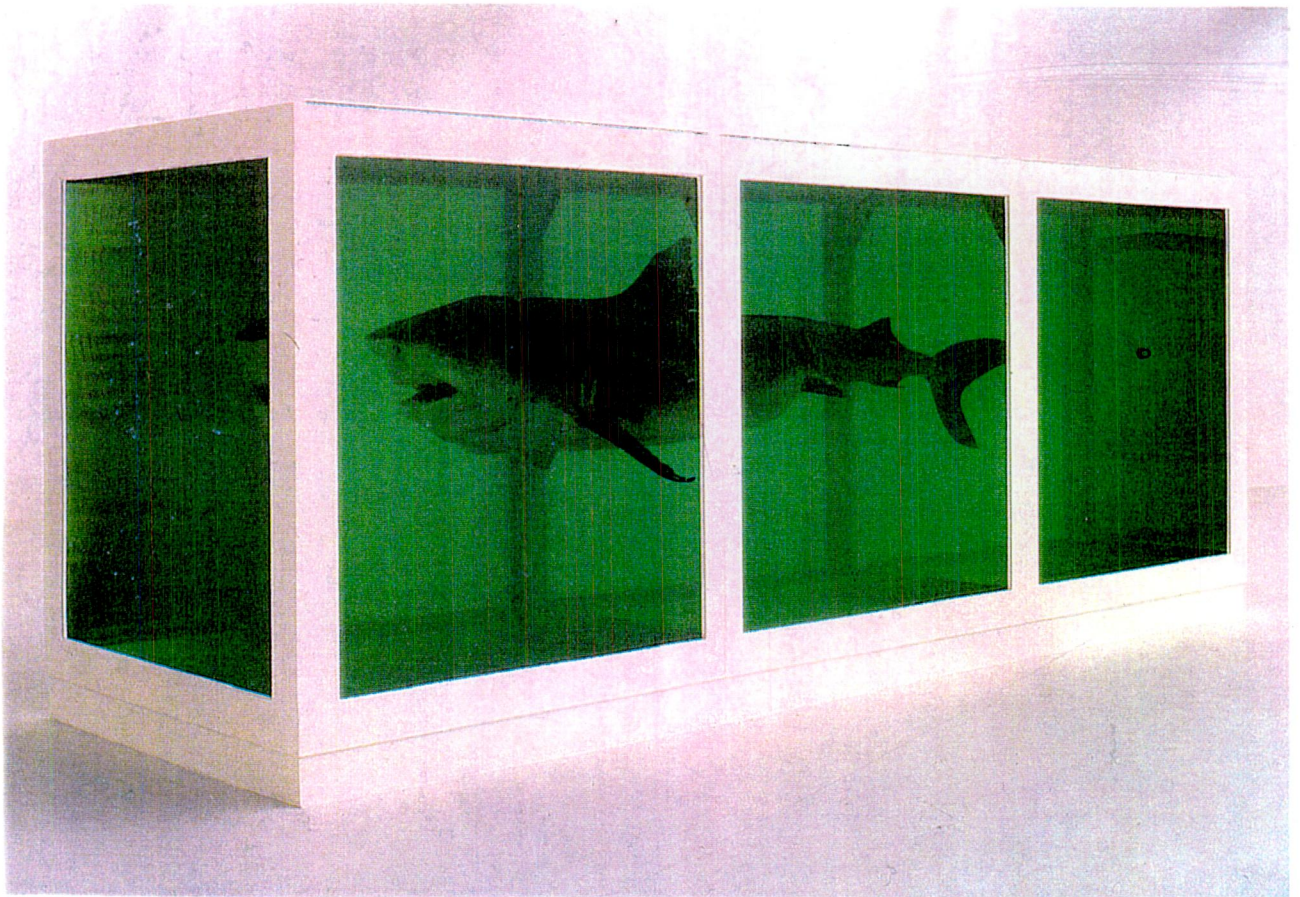


Fig. 2. **The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living**, 1991, tiger shark, glass, steel, formaldehyde solution, 213x518x213/84x204x84", by **Damien Hirst**.



"LABOUR ISN'T WORKING". 1985, marked the founding of the Saatchi Gallery in Boundary Road. During the first five years of its existence, the Saatchi Gallery failed to show a single British artist. - the eight exhibitions mounted there from 1985 - 89, consisted entirely of continental European and American art, It became a magnet for students, among them the young Damien Hirst, who was particularly impressed with Jeff Koons. In 1990, company reports from Saatchi & Saatchi Co. PLC, showed \$20,000,000 worth of art sales. "Among them were eleven Sean Scullys that had been purchased for \$250,000 and which, in a stunning coup, were sold to the Swedish dealer Bo Alveryydd for \$3 million." (Bickers, 11.'97,p.4).

Scully was none too pleased with this. In an article in Art in America, (11. '90, p.65), Scully tells its author, Tony Godfrey that: "He (Saatchi) definitely gave me the impression, that he was involved in art on the highest level and was interested in affecting its course. Now it turns out that he is a dealer like everyone else. He has betrayed us and I think he is a little creep." In the Mail on Sunday, Scully complained that he had been assured that his own works in the Saatchi Collection would be eventually bequethed to the Tate Gallery.

We have seen, that various attempts to define what constitutes a yBa have failed; that at best, the answer would seem to be that the "list wrote itself", or that a yBa



is an artist whose work is collected by Saatchi, or that the energy and entrepreneurial nature of one of their number, Damien Hirst, works, even if "LABOUR ISN'T WORKING".

With Britain in recession, perhaps another method of clarifying what constitutes a yBa, would be to provide social and financial information about the relationships between the artists, editors, dealers and collectors involved with the yBa. Who pays for their education? Who finances the young artist when he/she leaves college? "This project was offered and ultimately dismissed by Liam Gillick in Art and Design Magazine in 1995 (Vol 10 no 3/4): "It is tempting to stick to precisely remembered details.... But who cares? He who pays the printer sets the colophon... The point is that a strange mix of self-determination and generalised commentary has provided a peculiar situation here, one that affects the way that the work is made and the way in which it is read." (ibid). Here we see that the manufacture of some kind of mythological, brilliant, entrepreneurial 'group' is more productive than details of facts, figures and social relationships. For Simon Ford, however, "The myth of the independence of the yBa from state funding is vitally important for those wishing to promote a privatised culture run as a 'free' market." (Ford, '96,p.6).

Despite cuts in public funding introduced by successive Conservative governments, the State, however, is very much



behind the yBa and although public funding for the arts continues to be cut the yBa economy is still based on state education, public arts funding and the introduction of the enterprise allowance in 1983, "which was underwriting 10,000 artists a year, before it was scrapped. The myth of the independence of the yBa from state funding is vitally important for those wishing to promote a privatised culture run as a 'free' market....This group has been utilised as cultural ambassadors representing and defining 'British' culture abroad. It is promoted as entrepreneurial, opportunistic, confident, resourceful, independent and non-political, representing Britain in full 'enterprise culture' bloom." (ibid. p.5). Perhaps in this sense, we can begin to see yBa (the acronym, or tag, if not actual artists or art) as the 'bearer of meaning'. The artworks of Hirst, for example, are subsumed by his exemplary marketing skills. Although his work is aggressively intellectual, "one rarely hears his discussed except in terms of his personality and his marketing - not of his work, but himself." (Hall, 3.'92, p.54). On a more pedantic note, Maureen Paley, of Interim Art (member of the Technique Anglaise discussion group and dealer to artist Gillian Wearing), is an example of a private gallery being subsidised by public funds. David Lee tells us that "Paley admits that the gallery was indeed funded annually during the 1980's by Greater London Arts, a regional arts board which receives the lion's share of its funding from the Arts Council of England." (Lee, '96) Interim Art received £9,000





in 1986/87; £5,000 in 1982, and Paley herself received two travel grants of £300 and £500 in 1992/93). If, as Simon Ford suggests, that: "The yBa is called upon to justify increasing social division and disempowerment through recourse to the values of self-reliance and a rejuvenated entrepreneurialism." (Ford, '96,p.6) can we conclude then, from the above, that a yBa is a tag, not an artist or a group of artists, or an art movement. That this tag is used to promote Britain (both abroad and to itself) as a nation, whose people have the strength and confidence to fight economic recession with their own, independent resources.

It is true, however, that British art is doing better than before, and there are some real reasons why this is happening.

#### MARKET VISIBILITY:

Looking at the art climate of the eighties and early nineties in terms of visibility, certain conditions can be observed which differ greatly from the situation in the previous decade. "The mood of the Western art community toward the end of the 1970's can be described as one of confusion." (Taylor, '95, p.16).

In the seventies, the market-place was narrow, with a lot of attention being given to art with a social purpose. Much of this work was site-specific or performance art; the kind of



work that is resistant to a commodity market. Women artists, allied to feminism, challenged traditional male hegemony over the production of Western art. Feminists on both sides of the atlantic, called for the abandonment of "a politics of class and power for one of gender and power, even a politics of place and identity." (Taylor, 1995, p.32), successfully throwing a spanner-in-the-works of the philosophy of much avant-garde work. Using their own bodies as the site of their art, the performances of Gina Pane and Carolle Schneemann, for example, address the body with all its limitations, vulnerability and decay. In their performances, male artists, Cris Burden and Stuart Brisley take the body to the limits of endurance. Kicked, cut or starved, these performers/performances, render the viewer, a helpless, passive voyeur. The disquieting effect of such performances, combined with their unmarketability, meant that on the whole, this kind of work did not fit well into the commercial gallery space. It was seen in public spaces, alternative spaces, and was passed over by the commercial galleries and private collectors. Eventually, Conceptualism lost much of its power of dissent, with a "new willingness on the part of galleries and museums, to accommodate radical art." (ibid).

By the late 1970's, weary of the restrictions of Conceptualism, the art community embraces a new 'return' to painting. It used to be very rare for British art to put its money on going international. This applies to the



individual big names like Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, David Hockney, Malcolm Morley, Frank Auerbach, Richard Hamilton, etc., the figurative painters of the so called School of London.

This revived interest in painting, meant that the London painters were poised and ready to enter a new, international market, when, in 1981, Norman Roenthal, Christos Joachimides and Nicholas Serota organised A New Spirit in Painting, at the Royal Academy, London. A New Spirit in Painting was an international exhibition which included the work of British artists, Frank Auerbach and Francis Bacon; Italian artists, Sandro Chia and Pier Paolo Calzolari, German artists, Georg Baselitz and Sigmar Polke, alongside Americans, de Kooning, and Stella. It was an exhibition that crossed not only the continents, but also, generations. It included Schnabel, a relative newcomer, alongside Picasso, arguably the 'Grand Master' of the twentieth century.

This was followed a year later with 'Zeitgeist', held in Berlin, and also organised by (among others) Norman Rosenthal and Christos Joachimides. This exhibition was equally cross-cultural and cross generational. Both these exhibitions seem to have set the stage for a broader visibility for artists from all over the (Western) world.

"Suddenly you had an international situation. I remember that there were German painters at the time who nobody with a brain in Germany could argue would ever become



international, because the Americans weren't looking at their work. And then in 1981, the floodgates broke, all that stuff arrived in New York. Within six months every major European artist had his or her first show in New York. In 1982, Polke's first show, Baselitz's first show, Lupertz's first show, all the Italians were having first shows - the list goes on endlessly."

(Schubert, Tech. Ang.'91, p.15.)

Did this have an effect on artists of the yBa generation? According to Lynne Cooke, art critic and curator, "The level of ambition of one of two artists who were then being seen abroad, too: Richard Deacon would be one, Tony Cragg and Gilbert & George would be others, contributed to the broadening of horizons for students. This was a very different situation from the seventies." Gillick concurs: "You can never underestimate the strength of recent examples." (Renton and Gillick, Tech. Ang.'91, p.11).

This underlines the importance of visibility, and shows a link between market visibility and the market success of the yBa generation. The increase in international exhibitions throughout the eighties and nineties, meant that artists could sustain visibility on an international level much more easily than they could in previous decades. Another contributing factor to this increased visibility, was the sudden increase in the number of art magazines being published in the eighties. According to Schubert, "There's





probably twenty times as much printed matter now on contemporary art than there was a couple of decades ago". (ibid.p.15). A new context was being provided for this new work in the form of publications, as well as international exhibitions.

As much of this work employed photographs and/or text, it was especially suited for publication, providing portable, relatively cheap and if not entirely international, at least trans-atlantic exhibition spaces for emerging artists. This new context influenced artists in another way. One no longer needed to travel to New York or Berlin to find out about current market trends. The yBa seem to have "absorbed an entire oeuvre, through magazines, books and publications." (Gillick, ibid., p.9).

Students of the yBa generation were alert to this form of exposure and this new context for their art. Encouraged by the international success of their near contemporaries they no doubt resolved to follow in their footsteps. Unlike their predecessors of this century, it was no longer necessary to wait years to achieve success. As long as they were visible, as long as they could get seen, they could have it, and they could have it now. For those who succeed, these must be happy times indeed. For those who don't however, life as a practising artist can be difficult as Charles Hall finds out when he looks up three artists whose degree shows he admired to find out how life has treated



them. He finds, that for the most part, it has treated them "badly". Most interesting were the comments of graduate Isobel Barrett. According to Barrett: "It all gets so complicated when you leave. I know people who spent right up to their overdraft limit, thinking they must have the best possible degree show, and that everything would sell and they would be all right. But that's not how it works." (Hall, 6.'96, p.44/45.)

This hidden cost factor, the amount students borrow and the part-time jobs they take in order to supplement the cost of their education, thereby contributing to a large, extant art industry, is unknown. For artist Gillian Wearing, who tells us that "Nothing's ever been given to me. I worked (temping) until '95." (Andrew Anthony, The Observer Review, 22 November 1998, page 2.), it must be gratifying to reap the rewards of her hard work. But as we can see, it just doesn't work out like that for all of the 1,200 who graduate in fine art from British colleges each year.

#### THE AUDIENCE:

There exists a large and supportive audience among the young for the art of their peer group. The sheer number of artists: 1,200 graduates in fine art every year in Britain alone would seem to be big enough to constitute a large enough well informed audience in itself. But the yBa



phenomenon seems to have succeeded in raising public interest in art. Magazines devoted to the young and hip - The Face, Blitz, and Esquire - introduced regular art columns. Throughout the 1960's and 70's, the spirit of Nam June Paik, member of the Fluxus Group, was being introduced to a new, young and vast international audience. Whether or not they realised it, this young audience was being exposed to the latest in fine art video practice and therefore, to contemporary art discourse. The anarchic anti-high art stance assumed by Fluxus was being presented to a new generation as a fully formed, accepted and institutionalised 'art form' through the medium of the fine art videos presented regularly on M.T.V. The 'look' of contemporary art is as familiar and acceptable today,, as 17th century Mannerist painting or 19th century Impressionism. Indeed, 20th century avant-garde has, on the whole, fitted in quite well into public and commercial culture. Growth in the training of art historians, critics and cutarors means that "understanding of contemporary art has resulted in a propessionalism and institutionalisation of the avant garde itself". (Taylor, '95 p.10).

Attendance at public museums is higher than at any time in history. The annual Turner Prize exhibition causes so much public interest that the Tate has on certain weekends had to close its doors. For whatever reason, there is no doubt that interest in art is at an all time high. Facts and figures from the British Arts Policy document published in



the early '90's show that visits to museums and galleries in the United Kingdom now total between 80 and 100 millions each year, across all social groups. (Details re-printed in Arts Review, Dec. 1992, p.22.)

Figures from the "'Sensation!": Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection' show, held at the Royal Academy, show that it had tallied 284,734 visitors, a daily average of 2,800," making it one of the Academy's most popular shows in the past ten years." (Macritchie, '98, p.37).





CHAPTER 2.

SENSATION. ONE GETS SUSTENANCE, THE OTHER CREDIBILITY:

"Saatchi's dominance does not merely support, but possibly distorts the nascent market, both here and abroad, for contemporary art from Britain but, much more importantly, it suggests a consensus about the relative significance of the art he collects.

Worse, despite the apparent variety of work in the Collection, it in fact subsumes the real diversity of contemporary art practice into a false homogeneity." (Bickers, 11.'97, p.2.).

"Sensation!": Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection', 1997, at the Royal Academy, was organised by Norman Rosenthal (who was also one of the organisers of 'A New Spirit in Painting and Zeitgeist), and Charles Saatchi. The work selected for the show came exclusively from the Saatchi collection. To explain how this extraordinary situation came about we must go back a little, to 1995. At the time of the opening of the '"Brilliant!" New Art from London' show at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, when "the word went round among artists and dealers that Norman Rosenthal, Exhibitions' Secretary of the RA, ... was planning his own 'Brilliant!' show. There was much excitement about it and speculation as to who would be selected."

(Patricia Bickers, Art Monthly Nov. 1997.). Nothing seemed



to come of this planned exhibition, but then suddenly, the Royal Academy show was on again. "According to the official version promulgated, for instance in the recently screened BBC 'Omnibus' programme ('BritArt at the Royal Academy', broadcast September 14 1997), a gap appeared in the Royal Academy's programme and Rosenthal was approached by Charles Saatchi, who generously stepped into the breach....There is, perhaps no reason to question this version of events; any proposal to mount a 'Brilliant' style show in London would, in any case, have involved borrowing major works from the Saatchi Collection and with a £2 million plus deficit hanging over the Academy, it made sense to reduce the scope of the show to the collection of one London-based collector." (ibid).

In the Sensations catalogue introduction, Rosenthal tells us that the model for this show was 'Freeze', which he managed to see "courtesy of the persistent young Hirst, who came to collect me very early one morning in a rickety old car and drove me down to the docklands so that I might be back at the RA by 10.30 am....It is now virtually a decade (a long time in the history of any art movement), since Freeze." (Rosenthal, '97,p.9). His linking of 'Freeze' and 'Sensation!', combined with his use of the word movement further promulgates the myth that what we are witnessing here is an artist led movement, forging genuine art cadres, which describes itself, and defines its own boundaries, and that 'Sensation!' exemplifies this movement. Is this what Liam Gillick means when he states that : "He who pays the



printer sets the colophon.", the colophon - yBa, meaning a new art movement in Britain - set by Saatchi, and being printed by Rosenthal?

In this regard, it is necessary to consider the media phenomenon that "Sensation" became. Some of the artists were already media regulars - Hirst's exploits around London's night spots, his friendships with rock stars (Blur played at the Goldsmiths' Degree Show, the year Hirst graduated), often feature in both the tabloid and broadsheet press. Tracy Iman and Sarah Lucas emerge as media favourites because of the sexually explicit nature of some of their work and the frankness of their interviews. At a packed opening, "Sensation" was attended by pop stars and super models as well as Academicians.

"In this climate, the exhibition turned into a sort of Punch and Judy show, its supposedly "controversial" works first attacked with a gusto in the press then stoutly defended by RA spokespersons. The most strident outcry centered on Marcus Harvey's "Myra" (1995), a large grisaille portrait composed from hundreds of prints made from a plaster cast of a child's hand. Based on the famous police photograph of the convicted child killer Myra Hindley, whom Britons remember as an accomplice in the "Moors Murders" of the 1960's, the painting became the subject of a vociferous tabloid press campaign. The newspapers even paid for the mother of one of the murdered children to come to London to



express her grief and outrage to patrons lining up to be searched before they were admitted to the gallery. Despite precautions, the painting, perhaps inevitably, was physically attacked. Ink was thrown at it and, after the work was cleaned up, it was returned to the exhibition behind protective glass. The RA refused to bow to pressure to remove it from the show altogether, on the also inevitable grounds of freedom of expression." (MacRitchie, 1998, p.37).

#### URBAN RENEWAL AND THE NEW TATE GALLERY:

Had this been an advertising campaign, Saatchi could not have organised it better, and it is difficult to escape the suspicion that an advertising campaign, for himself, for the yBas and, by association, for the RA, was just what "Sensation" was. Saatchi did, after all, give Britain its catch-phrase, "Labour isn't working", heralding a new phase in British politics. Why not a new art Movement to go along with it? Historically, art and culture are built on the back of industrial and commercial success.

In today's mediated society however, it is possible to generate commercial success, by creating a rich cultural ambience. Hackney becomes London's new Montparnesse, or on the other hand, Hackney becomes Bilbao's new Guggenheim Museum. The promotion of the London-based yBa has come 'hand in glove' with the campaign to build a new Tate Gallery of Modern Art at Bankside close to the city of London. "With £50 million provided from the Millennial





Fund, the new museum will form part of the redevelopment of the Borough of Southwark and the South Bank complex.

According to South Bank News in December 1995, 'The £106 million project is expected to create 650 jobs locally and 2,400 throughout London, generating £50 million in new economic activity each year.' The area is also the prime target for a relocated Institute of contemporary Arts." (Ford, 1996, p.7). A vibrant culture not only attracts business, but tourists also. It is the artists though, that these tourists are coming to see, not the art.

According to a report in the Sunday Times, 17 December 1995, "Two weeks ago the first coachload of tourists ... turned up at a canal side 'nest' of 120 artists behind Hackney Town Hall". The visitors were chasing Damien Hirst, this year's Turner Prize winner, who is dubbed "the god-father of Hackney" despite working in Brixton, south-west London." (Ford, '96, p.7).

The building of the Tate Gallery of Modern Art and the continuing need to promote London as a world class cultural (with its own yBa art 'movement') and financial centre are, according to Ford, "interconnecting issues. London is required to reassert its claim to cultural significance in order to remain a major financial centre." (ibid).

There was some difficulty with the title of the show, and in the 'Sensations' catalogue, Rosenthal himself acknowledges the part played by the dealer, Jeffrey Diech, a senior Vice President of Sotheby's, in choosing the title. In the end,



"a compromise was reached" (Bickers, 1997, page 2), thus we have: "'Sensation!": Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection'. The catalogue for 'Sensation', like the subtitle of the exhibition ('Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection'), reflects the emphasis of the show - most obviously by the inclusion of an essay by Lisa Jardine, flatteringly called, "Modern Medicis" Art Patronage in the Twentieth Century." Directly, and by association, Saatchi is compared by Jardine to important British collectors like Samuel Courtauld, William Burrell, Joseph Duveen, the Sainsburys, Charles McAlpine and Ted Power. By this association, Saatchi purchases a kind of immortality for himself and his collection. The acronym, yBa, deriving from the series of Young British Artists shows at the Saatchi Gallery, beginning in March 1992, was not, at the time of its inception, the portmanteau it has since become. Six Saatchi shows later, the term had stuck and become an homogeneous term, binding a ubiquitous group of artists and attaching them (whether they liked it or not), to one man: Charles Saatchi. The 'Sensations' show, cements the title and also attaches Saatchi to a public institution, The Royal Academy. As expressed earlier, the general impression, is that we are witnessing a new art Movement, when what may be a more accurate conclusion, is that the Royal Academy gets sustenance and the Saatchi Collection gets credibility. When one hears, that a year later, in 1997, Saatchi decides to sell off his entire collection of Young British Artists, by auction at Southeby's, it is difficult to escape the



cynical conclusion, that "he who pays the printer sets the colophon."

The 'Sensation' show , far from pleasing all Royal Academicians, caused four of them to resign. They were Cragie Aitchison, Gillian Ayres, Michael Sandess and John Ward. An attempt by the institution to bring its membership rolls up-to-date "misfired badly when Rachel Whiteread, 'Sensation' participant and British representative at last year's (1997) Venice Biennale, declined its invitation to become an Academician." (Macritchie, '98, p.37).



WHAT DO THEY MAKE? DO YOU GET IT? SAATCHI DOES!

If the art context of the eighties and nineties, with its heightened visibility and its current high profile doesn't work for all graduates, then perhaps there is something new and innovative about the work of the so called yBa, that makes it worthy of so much attention. Are they, as Karsten Schubert suggests, simply 'incredibly brilliant', forging genuine art cadres, pushing the High Art boundaries to new, unexplored realms? Or, are we simply witnessing a range and oddity of the work being produced, provoking increasingly adversarial arguments concerning its aesthetic value. These 'adversarial arguments' imply critical resistance to the work. It is this critical resistance, however, that turns, via pastiche, yBa art-works, into 'works of art'.

"More than any other creative form, contemporary art - and especially its mediation - trades in terror: the sheer bowel-loosening fear of not 'getting it'. (Andrew, p.2, 22 Nov. 1998.)

Looking at the art-work presented in 'Sensation' we see that although a range and oddity of Form is evident. It is not site -specific, nor does it include performance. It is usually presented in the form of a discreet art object, in the traditional 'white cube' setting. But then, that's the way their main collector, Charles Saatchi likes it. He does not generally buy editioned work, for instance, "and he has





been known to suggest that less portable (and therefore less marketable?) works like wall drawings be transferred on to canvas." (Bickers, Nov. '97, p.6). As we can see (Fig.3) Damien Hirst obliged by transferring his 'Spot Painting", which first appeared on the wall in the 'Freeze' exhibition, and which subsequently appears in the form of an oil painting at the 'Sensation' show. Here we see, that far from resisting any external challenge to the integrity of his work, Hirst is willing to comply with the wishes of anyone willing to buy it. "He (Saatchi) tends also to go for works that have immediate, though not necessarily lasting, visual impact; one dealer recalls how he once remarked that if he didn't 'get' a work 'like that', snapping his fingers, he was not interested in it." (ibid).

What is there to 'get' in this work? "Scatological posturing", is Liam Gillicks' adversarial comment, referring to these artists who emerged in the early '90's "with their birth, life, death, sub-cultural non-profundity." (Gillick, June '94, p.11.).

Here are some examples of the scatological art being produced by the yBa's: rotting heads - Damien Hirst, (Fig.1); elephant dung - Cris Offili, (Fig.4); masturbatory scenes - Gillian Wearing, (Figs.5); a miniature 'Dead Dad' - Ron Mueck(Fig.6); mutilated pre-pubescent girls in runners - Jake and Dinos Chapman (Fig.7); or an advert in a Lonely Hearts column as with Gillian Wearing's "Confess all



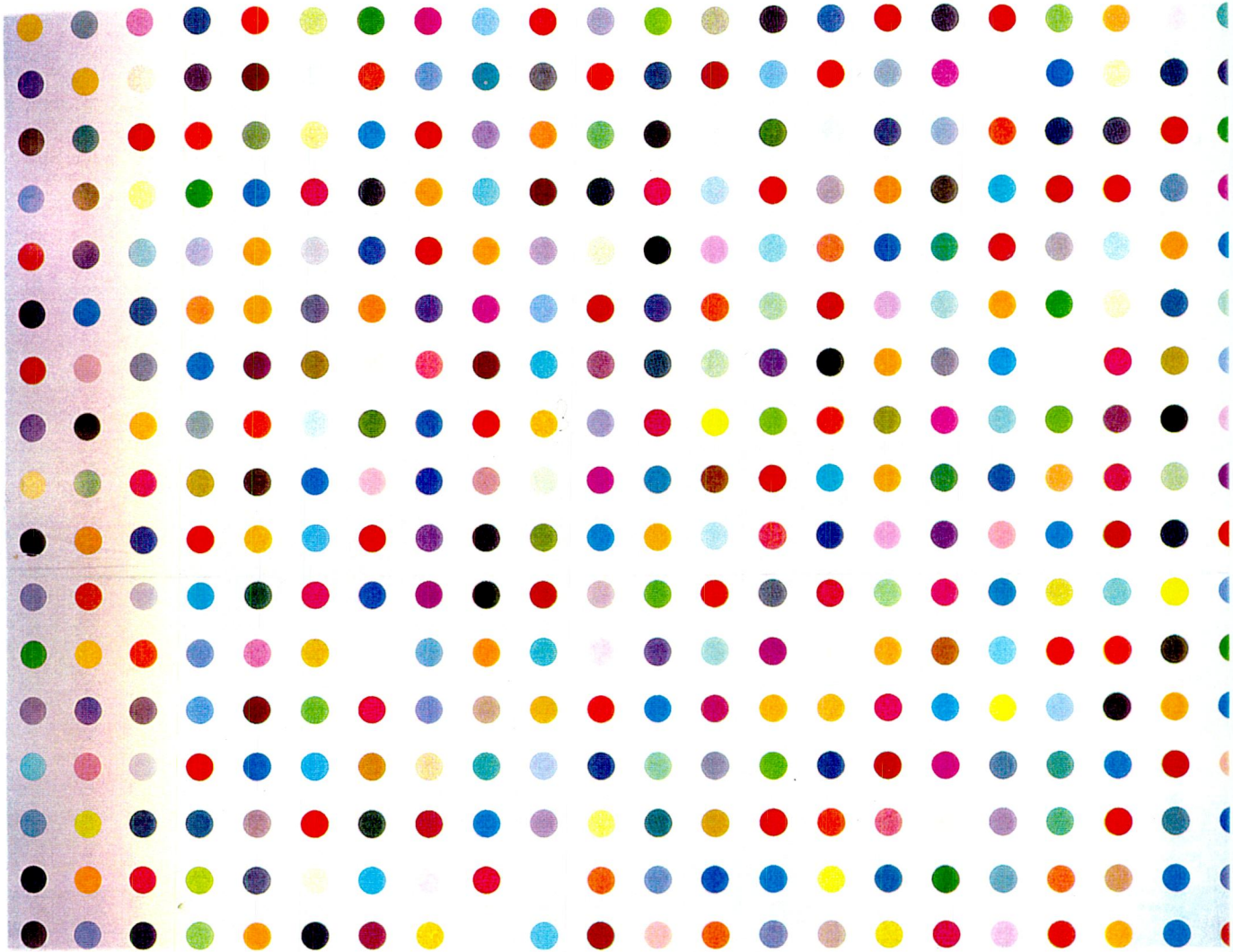


Fig. 3. **Argininosuccinic Acid**, 1995, gloss household paint on canvas, 335x457.2cm., by **Damien Hirst**.





Fig. 4. **Popcorn Tits**, 1996, oil paint, paper collage, glitter, polyester resin, map pins, elephant dung on linen, 183x122cm., by **Cris Ofili**.





Fig. 5. **Masturbation**, 1991, photographs (original in colour) by **Gillian Wearing**.





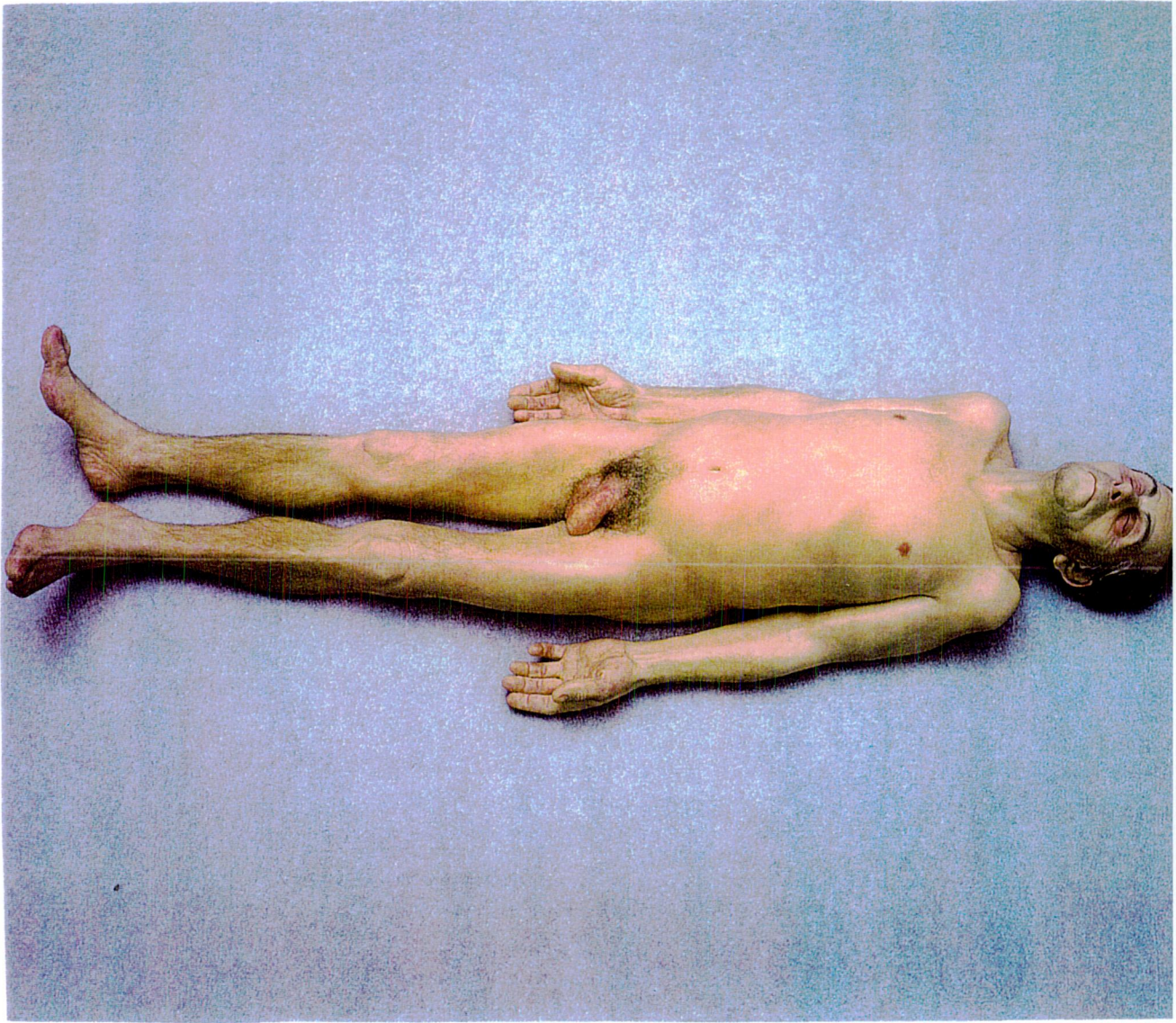


Fig. 6. **Dead Dad**, 1997/7, silicone and acrylic,  
20x102x38cm., by **Ron Meuck**.





Fig. 7. **Zygotic acceleration, biogenetic, de-sublimated libidinal model (enlarged x 1000)**, 1995, fibreglass, 150x180x140cm, plinth 180x20x150cm., by **Jake & Dinos Chapman.**





Fig. 8. **Confess All on Video**, 1994, video for monitor, by Gillian Wearing.



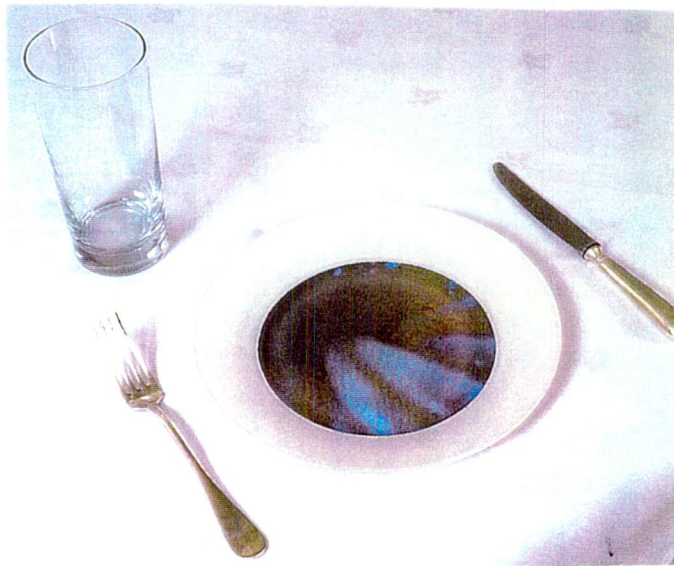
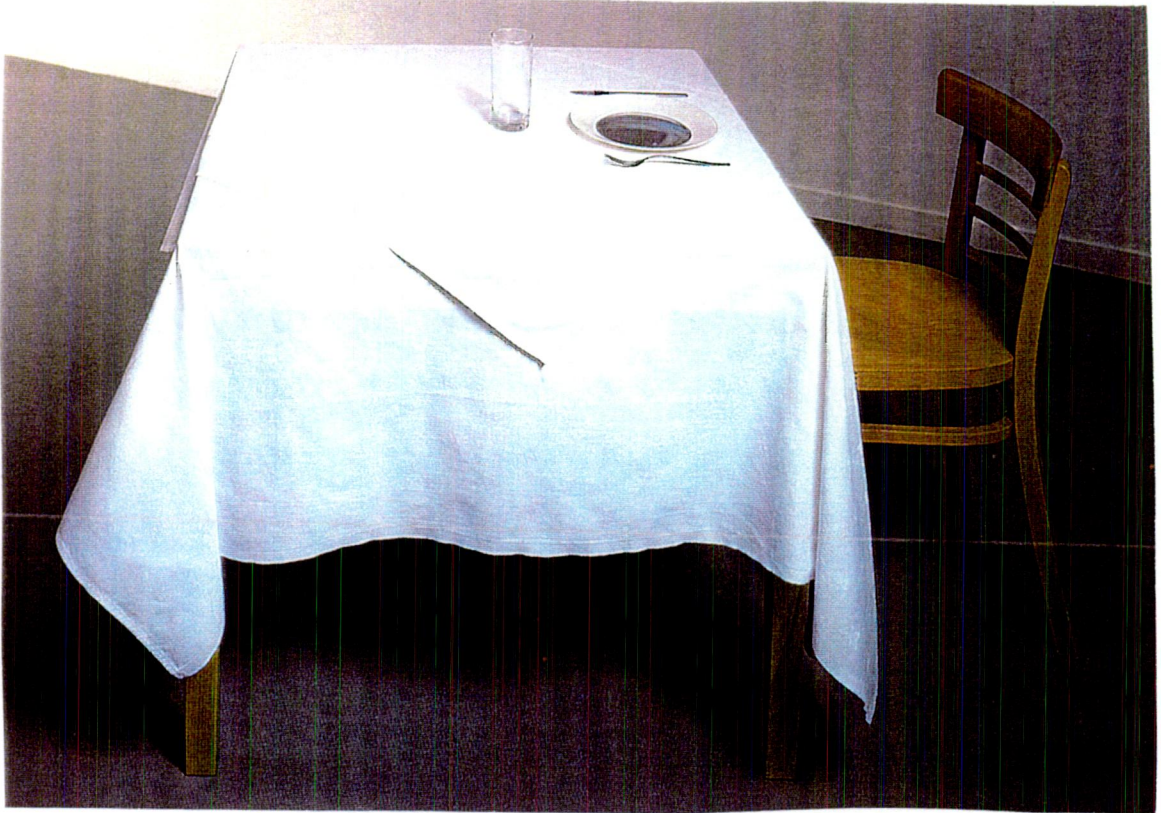
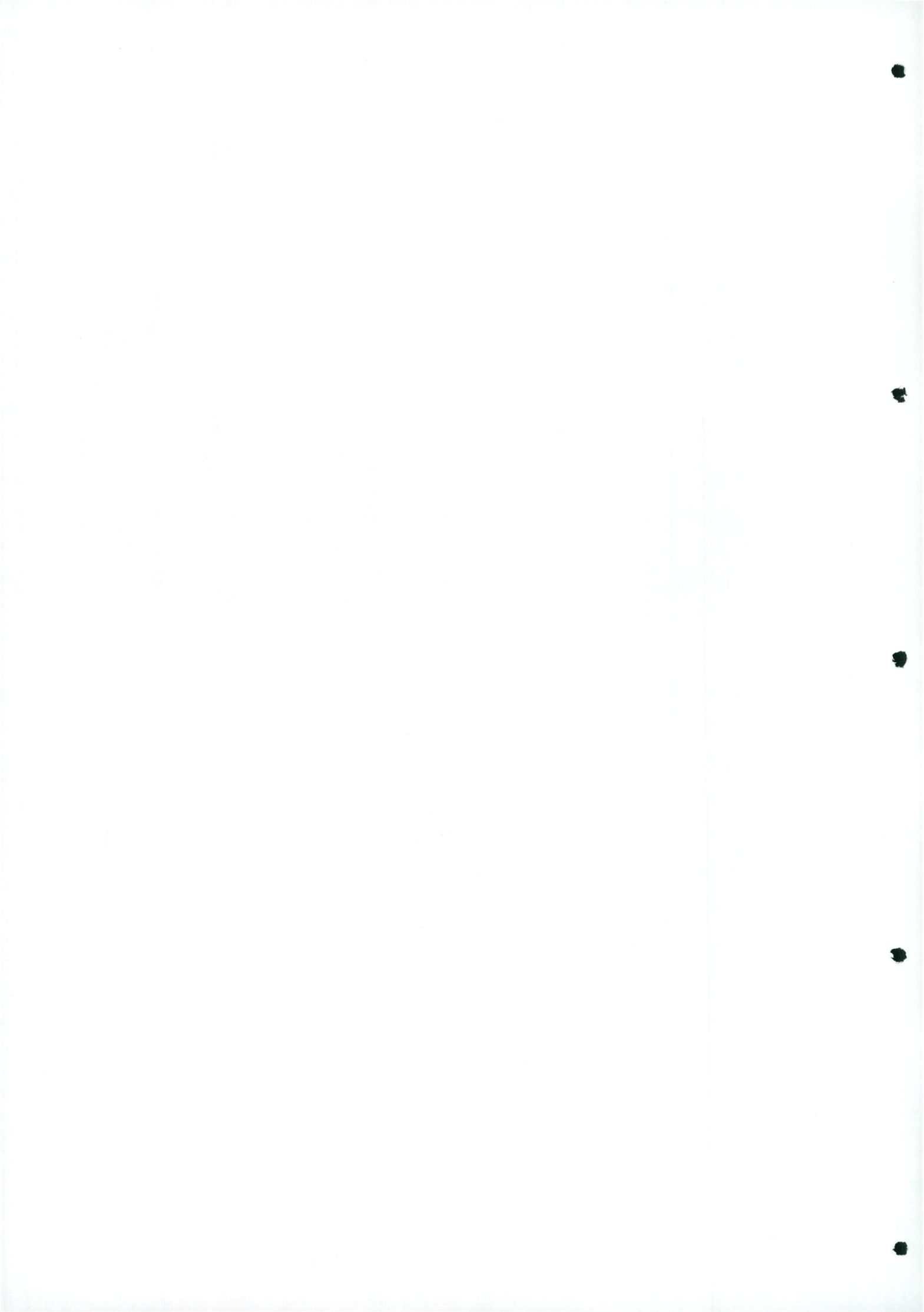


Fig. 9. **Deep Throat**, 1996, Table Chair, Television set, glass plate, fork, knife, water glass, laser disc, laser disc player, 74.5 x 58 cm, by **Mona Hatoum**.





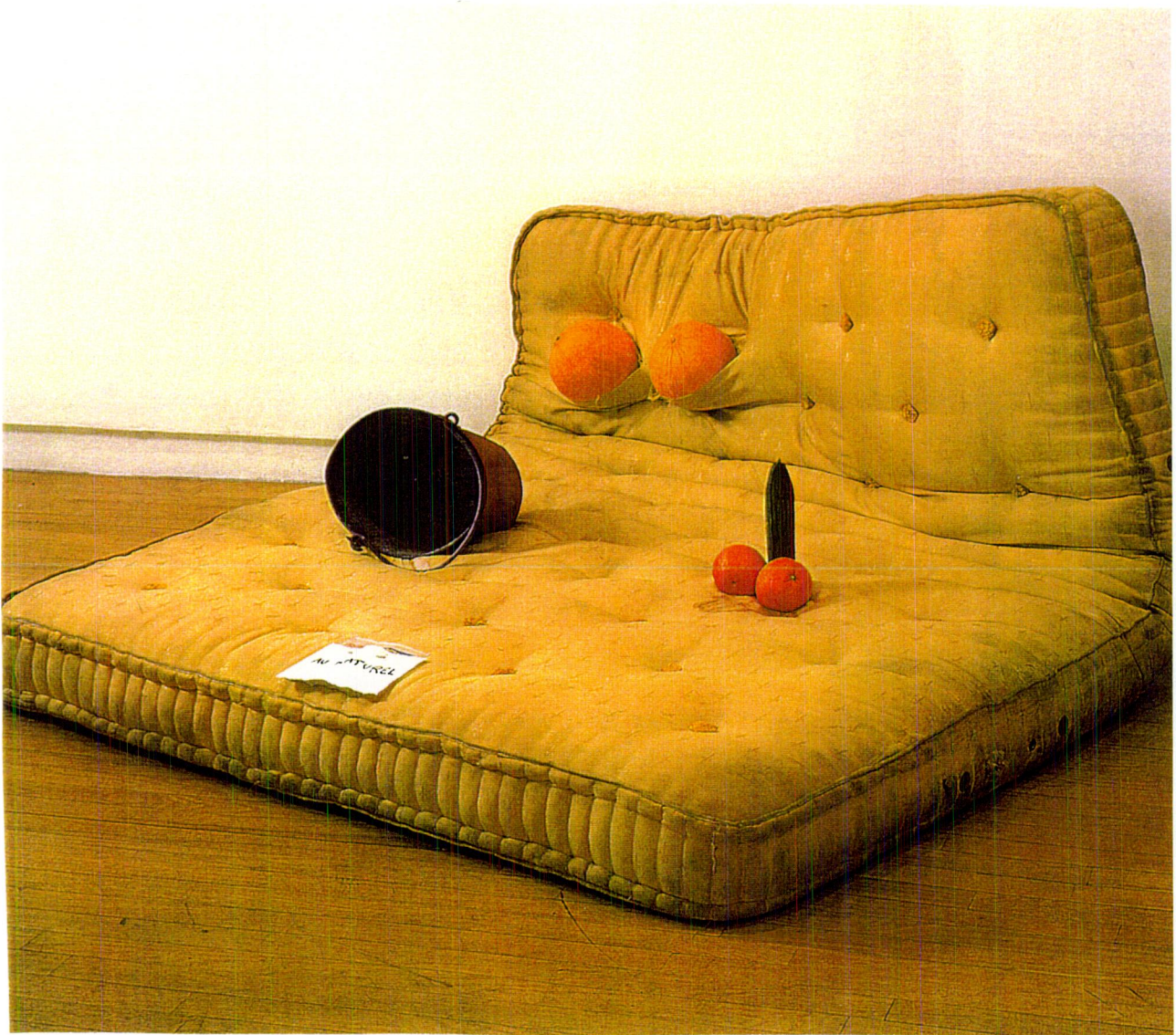


Fig. 10. **Au Naturel**, 1994, mattress, water bucket, melons, oranges, cucumber, 83.8 x 167.6 x 144.8 cm., by **Sarah Lucas**.



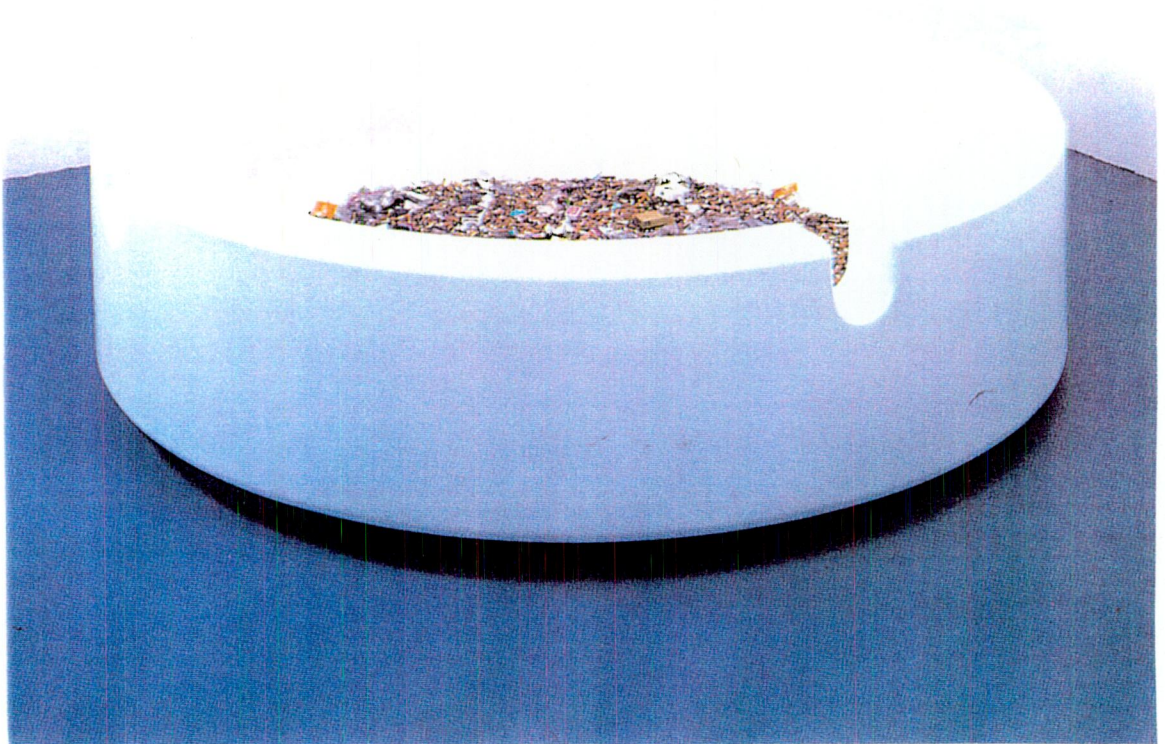


Fig 11. **Party Time**, 1995, G.R.P. composites, foam, contents of ashtray, by **Damien Hirst**.



on video. Don't worry. You will be in disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian ... ".(Video for single monitor, 1994.), (Fig.7). The list is endless. This group works with a range of materials and in variety of media and with such enthusiasm, that it is as though they are pouring the whole of art history into one decade. A fin de siecle rush to see, feel and do everything before some imagined 'end' perhaps? Their art speaks to us of the body, served up on a plate, complete with fiber-optics, (Mona Hatoum, 'Deep Throat', Fig.9), and it's not bed of roses; more a dirty mattress. (Lucas, "Au Naturel", Fig.10).

"Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body ... It is as though philosophy suddenly wakes up to the fact that there is a dense, swarming territory beyond its own mental enclave which threatens to fall utterly outside its sway."

(Eagleton, 1990, p.13). It is this 'eternal question' that is addressed in the works of Aimee Morgana, John Miller, Sue Williams and Kiki Smith. Their work seems to reflect genuine concern for a society in which "the baleful hierarchy of the "civilised" body which elevates the rational and functional while it represses the instinctual and emotive. Smith emphasises that our bodies are constantly "stolen from us ... we have this split where we say the intellect is more important than the physical:"

(Taylor, 1995, p.160/161). The presence of bodily fluids in Smiths work and the pornographic imagery of Williams, express genuine for todays society. The work of Hirst and



Lucas has a more "up-yours" attitude. More like a bold child trying to shock the adults, Hirst tells us that "I like the idea of rich people buying my burned out fag ends." [(Hirst, 1996), Fig.11].

Perhaps they accurately reflect a media generated consumer society, more interested in the bedroom antics of the President of the United States, leader of the western world, than they are in his politics. The years between 1985 and 1995 are rich with issues ranging from the election of Michael Gorbachev as president of the U.S.S.R. (1985), and the 'glasnost' years; the fall of Communist in eastern Europe (1989); the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany (1989/90); the Gulf war (1991); the outbreak of civil war in the former Yugoslavia (1991); 10 million cases of HIV estimated worldwide (1991); global warming threat officially recognised in 1990; 'Information super-highway' concept promoted in the U.S.A. (1993); Internet systems linking millions of users world wide, revolutionising communications; not to mention world hunger and the constant threat of nuclear power. Closer to home, we see Britain in the grip of recession, isolating itself from the rest of Europe, with its rejection of the Single European Currency. None of this, however, interests the average yBa.

"The radical social agenda of the later 1960's that provided a supportive context for earlier avant-garde art - the anti-Vietnam War protests, the students' and workers'





strikes, the growth of feminism - was widely perceived to be past history." (Taylor, '95, p. 9), comments Brandon Taylor on the dissolution of the '60's avant-garde. Perhaps, in their emulation of previous avant-garde and conceptual art, the yBa forget to look for an agenda of their own. "A certain kind of irresponsibility seems to me to be a very key concept that brings all these people together, aesthetically." (Renton, '91, p.17). Perhaps, unable to cope with the enormity of global issues, they turn inward, focusing on things closer to home: Britishness replaces world affairs; sexuality replaces gender issues; sex is sex is sex; the body is the body is the body; death is death is death. "What seems to be interesting about a lot of these artists, although it's difficult to generalise, is the very defeat of metaphor. For me, most of these artists when they are at their best are non-metaphorical artists. They're not taking you elsewhere, they are taking you to the thing, The thing is the thing is the thing." (ibid. p. 39).

" A major claim made for the yBa's work is that it parodies a notion or tabloid 'Britishness'. Although the work refers to, and derives much of its celebrity status from popular culture, the intended audience for these works is well defined, The style of the popular and the vernacular is quoted but only in order to be converted via pastiche to rejuvenate a moribund high culture. A high culture that depends on its difference from popular culture to justify its existence. ... The artists, though, are never in any

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doubt that what they are doing is making art." (Ford, 1996, p.5).

But is this fair comment? In Artscribe, November 1990, Jutta Koether raises some interesting points: "It's far from clear whether what is going on here is the forging of genuinely effective art cadres or whether all that's happening is the delivery of high-class and ultra cool market fodder." Later in the same article he asks: "What is the role of the teachers in all this? Are there orders from above - is it the postmodern version of the master-class?" (Koether, '90, p.56 & 58). Is there any currency in the argument presented by Sara Greenberg when she describes how Goldsmiths has become the byword for neo-Conceptual art - "meaning, loosely, a multimedia, idea based art bred by artist and professor Michael Craig-Martin".

Why? Why are the artists in no doubt that what they are doing is making art? Why, with their home videos, page three girls and pornographic imagery are they so convinced that what they are making is art? The answer may lie with the educators.



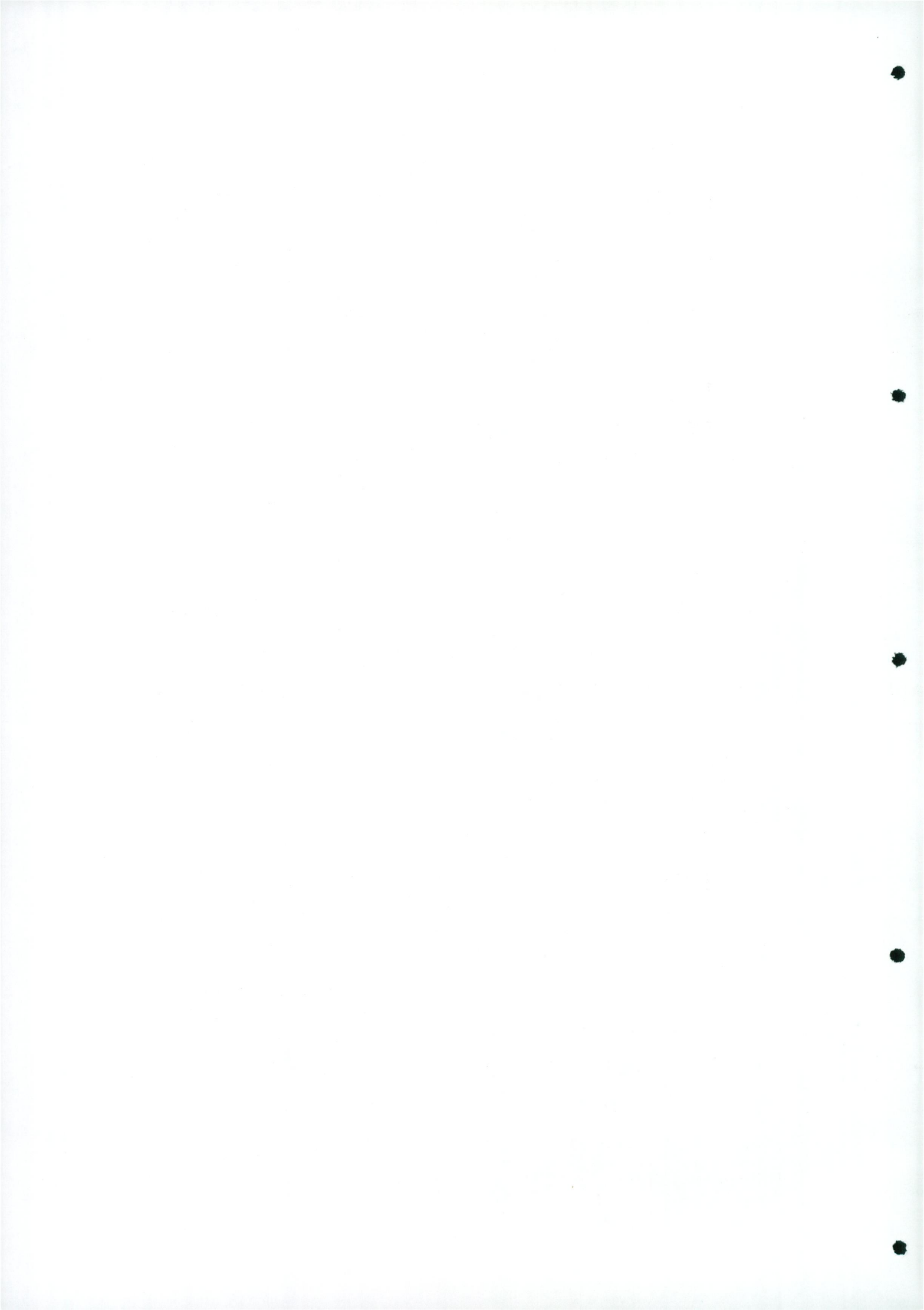
**CHAPTER 3.**

## THE EDUCATION INDUSTRY.

We have seen that there exists, a large and vibrant art market. This market has, at its core, education, training artists to produce the art product.

"There are interesting possibilities and dangers arising from the fact that the avant-garde is now institutionalised in education to the extent that it emerges fully-formed from art colleges, and the fact that the avant-garde is now also institutionalised in public funding to the extent that it has become the endorsed style of the state." (Lee, '96, p.8)

Until the late '50's the teaching of art in Britain was based on practical experience, particularly on anatomical drawing. This strictly academic approach is born of the concept of art as a natural, inborn ability, and one which places premium upon manual dexterity. This approach is still in use at the Royal Academy schools today. The break with this type of educational approach in the visual arts began around 1955 at the Central School of Art and at the Hammersmith School of Art, London. Here, for the first time, industrial design and architecture were incorporated into the teaching of the visual arts. At the same time, there was developed a theoretical course based on Bauhaus derived principles resulting in a practical course that became more radical, inquiring and investigative.



A mini revolution in British art schools was to follow with the Coldstream Report in 1960. This twenty-one page document was instigated by the Ministry of Education. It moved towards a position of deliberately encouraging diversity - both conceptually and methodologically. Some forty-five schools were selected and provided with authority to award a national diploma provided certain conditions were met. Teaching was to be primarily the responsibility of part-time staff who were practising artists. This system provided students with artist/teachers who were able to pass on their own experience as working artists.

Goldsmiths' College, Newcross, London, is an exemplar of this system, and another myth attached to a yBa, is that he/she, attended Goldsmiths'. Many, though not all, did. The concept of a 'new movement in British art' is, however, strengthened, by the notion of a unique school of thought, developed in a single nursery: Goldsmiths' College.

At Goldsmiths, students are treated as incipient artists from the moment they arrive. The course prepares them for being professional artists after they graduate. The Principle, Jon Thomson, abolished the traditional divisions between departments (painting, sculpture, print, photography etc.), facilitating the students freedom of movement and choice. For Thomson, "The single most deadening factor in the teaching of fine art was the institutionalisation of the generic practices themselves." (Greenberg, '97, p.10).





Also, each student, in consultation with a tutor, structures his or her own course. An open studio system throws artists together into a shared space. Gary Hume, Fiona Rae and Ian Davenport shared a studio, for example. For the most part, tutors are practising artists, creating and maintaining contact between art education and art dealers and collectors. Encouraged to submit and show whilst they are still at college, students share something of the professional life of the practising artist. Dealer Leslie Waddington (who represents Michael Craig-Martin), is a regular attender at Goldsmiths' Degree Show. According to David Lee "Michael Craig-Martin is the 'eminence grise' behind this revolutionary new situation. (Lee, '96, p.8).

#### MICHAEL CRAIG MARTIN.

Appointed the first Millard Professor of Fine Art at Goldsmiths College in April 1994, Craig-Martin is a conceptual artist who enjoys an international reputation and has taught or inspired this, the most noticed generation of younger artists working in Britain today. Born in Dublin in 1941, he was educated at Yale, where he studied under Josef Albers. He spent ten years in life drawing classes which he describes as "very empty experiences." (ibid.) He is notorious for his belief that students don't need to draw. He believes that skills should be taught on a 'need-to-know' basis. He considers Minimalism to be "the last great modern aesthetic". (ibid.) He believes that "the literal characteristics of materials as expressive in Minimalism



opened possibilities in an immense range of materials and processes of making. The extension of material reductivism inherent in Minimalism inevitably led to dematerialisation, and finally to language itself." (Craig-Martin, '88, p.3). Craig-Martin is something of a 'Guru' figure. "So catching is his enthusiasm that one emerges from a discussion with him questioning long-held beliefs... Craig-Martin is that contradiction in terms: an intellectual salesman." Lee goes on to say: "One thing about Craig Martin is that while he is modest and reasonable, he doesn't compromise his belief that the artist is God." The fulminations of Brian Sewell, critic for The Evening Standard, with his "... Artists who cannot paint, draw or sculpt ..." (mentioned earlier in page 8.), seem to be a direct attack on the Craig-Martin school of thought.

AN OAK TREE:

'An oak Tree', 1973, (Fig.12), now in the National Gallery in Canberra, is his most famous piece. The work comprises a glass of water, two-thirds full, on a glass shelf nine feet above the ground. It is accompanied by a text containing an 'interview' in which the artist interrogates himself, an excerpt of which follows:

Q. To begin with, could you describe the work?

A. Yes, of course. What I've done is change a glass of water into a full-blown oak tree without altering the accidents of the glass of water.

Q. The accidents?

A. Yes. The colour, feel, weight, size ...



Q. Do you mean that the glass of water is a symbol of an oak tree?

A. No. It's not a symbol. I've changed the physical substance of the glass of water into that of an oak tree.

Q. It looks like a glass of water ...

A. Of course it does. I didn't change its appearance. But it's not a glass of water. It's an oak tree ...

Q. Haven't you simply called this glass of water an oak tree?

A. Absolutely not. It is not a glass of water any more. I have changed its actual substance. It would no longer be accurate to call it a glass of water. One could call it anything one wished but that would not alter the fact that it is an oak tree.

Q. Isn't this just a case of the emperor's new cloths?

A. No. With the emperor's new cloths people claimed to see something which wasn't there because they felt they should. I would be very surprised if anyone told me that they saw an oak tree.

Q. Was it difficult to effect the change?

A. No effort at all. But it took me years before I realised I could do it.

Q. When precisely did the glass of water become an oak tree?

A. When I put the water in the glass.

Q. Does this happen every time you fill a glass with water?

A. No, of course not. Only when I intend to change it into an oak tree ... "

The ultimate irony occurred when 'An Oak Tree' travelled



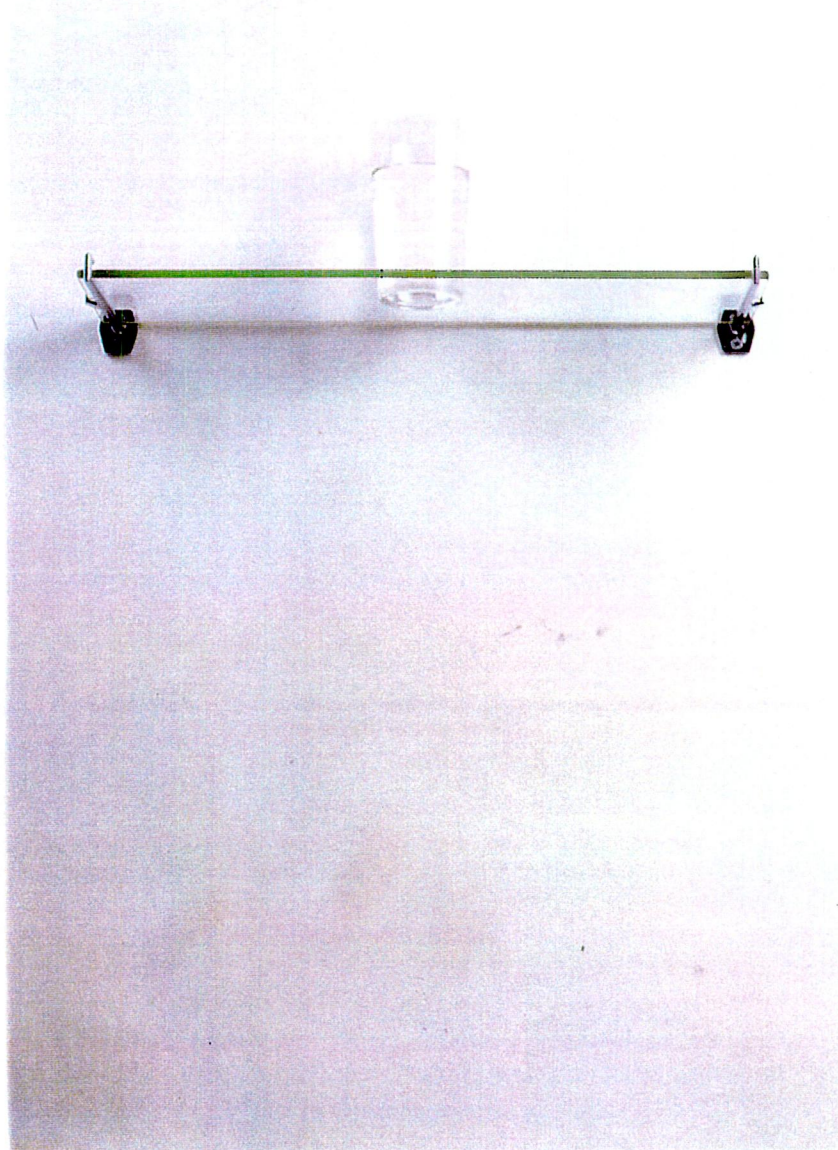


Fig 12. **An Oak Tree**, 1973, objects, water and printed text, 13cm high, by **Michael Craig-Martin**.





abroad for a show. As Craig-Martin explains: "In 1976 a small retrospective of my work was arranged to tour Australia. I happily accepted the invitation to fly out and install the first show. I arrived in Brisbane two days before the opening. The gallery director explained anxiously that though the crate containing my work had arrived safely, it had been impounded by the Ministry of Agriculture - without explanation. We went immediately to try to obtain its release. I asked the customs official what was the problem. He thrust the bill of lading in front of me and pointed to the item listed: 'an oak tree'. No plants allowed," he said firmly, with the satisfied confidence of a man stating the obvious." (Lee, Dec/Jan '96 p.9). 'An Oak Tree' becomes an oak tree. The work is complete.

MARCEL DUCHAMP:

This fortuitous travelling accident echoes the work of that other avant-garde artist, Marcel Duchamp. 'The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even', often known as the 'Large Glass', was constructed between 1915 and 1923 and made of oil paint, lead wire, foil, dust and varnish, between two sheets of glass. It was shattered on returning from an exhibition in Brooklyn, in 1927. Duchamp declared that this entirely 'chance' accident, had the fortuitous effect of completing the work.

If, as Lynne Cooke tells us, in *Technique Anglaise*, that



"For many artists the key starting points are somewhere around Duchamp, but not Duchamp as someone who questions what art is." (page 20), it is pertinent here, to look at the Duchamp/Minimalist interface.

In 1917, when Marcel Duchamp placed a ceramic urinal (a ready-made object of mass production) into the context of a gallery, his intention was to challenge the structure of art's epistemology. Entitled 'Fountain' and signed R.Mutt by the artist, the commonplace urinal was attributed an artistic value, exposing the mechanisms by which art renders 'unique', objects that are mass-produced, and challenging the unique authorship of the artists hand. " He wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind. If his work was dubbed 'literary' or 'intellectual' that wouldn't bother him, he said." (Honor and Fleming, 1995, page 748). Following in Duchamp's footsteps, '60's avant-garde artists proclaimed "that anything in or out of the gallery - lines drawn on the ground, a set of photocopied documents, a filing cabinet, a sheet of instructions, a gallery performance - could under certain conditions of production and display qualify as art. The intended result was to frustrate the market mechanism by making art objects that were resistant to being sold, collected, and evaluated by conventional means." Taylor, 1995, page 9.).

Two movements grew directly out of these early avant-gardes: Minimalism and Conceptualism.



Minimalism is the reduction of art to that which is intrinsic to its medium, and the elimination of all that it is not. The mechanical precision and bare surfaces of work by Donald Judd and Robert Morris exemplify the self-sufficiency and literalness they aimed at. Their work can be described in terms of the transformation from 'form' and 'structure' to 'place'. They aimed at the elimination of individual gesture and self expression, the two qualities valued above all by the Abstract Expressionists, Not only expression, but also illusion and even the allusion of symbols and metaphors were abandoned and "art became an intellectual game in which the form of the artwork and the identity of its maker were irrelevant." (Honor and Fleming, page 791.). Minimalism requires the presence of the viewer "to function (for good or ill) in the completion of the work". (Taylor, page 15). Work can be walked over, walked through, and often includes a temporal element.

The reductive essence of such work harks back to the 'non-art' of Duchampian ready-mades. This evolution towards the elimination of the artists hand, was finally achieved in the late sixties with Conceptual Art, and the dematerialisation of the art object. The theory central to Conceptual art is that the work of art is essentially an idea which may, or may not, generate a visible form. This is the time where the 'art moment' changes from the artists hand, to the artists mind: choice; intention; the idea, gain currency over manual dexterity. Let us look at an example of the 'idea', as currency, as employed by a yBa.



yBa USE OF AVANT-GARDE:

Artist, Gillian Wearing is a relative new-comer to the yBa scene. She plays 'nice-girl' to Hirst's 'bad-boy' persona. Wearing is an artist whose work is 'vox pop' based. She has sought to document the thoughts and lives of 'ordinary' Londoners. Winner of the 1997 Turner prize, Wearing is taking legal action over a Volkswagen Golf commercial which, she says, plagiarises her art. She is referring to her 'Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that way what someone else wants you to say.' (1992/93. [Fig.13 ]), series (which has been compared to the video for Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Home-sick Blues), in which she invites people in the street to write down what they are really thinking.

The result is a series of photographs which include a policeman holding up a card saying "Help", a slick business-man holding a card which declares "I'm Desperate", and another, where an ordinary looking man's sign says "I have been certified as mildly insane". In the £8 million VW Golf campaign, similar images are used. A macho-looking bouncer holds up a card saying "Sensitive", while a conventional suburban male commuters sign says "At weekends my name is Mandy." The slogan at the end of the commercial reads: "Sometimes what you see isn't all you get". In The Times, 12 June 1998, Wearing complains: "It's a rip-off of my work. They (the advertising agency, BMP,DDB) have used my idea. There are the self-penned messages., the disparity and the self-deprecating humour. It is just the same. But







Fig. 13. **"I'm Desperate"**, 1992/3, C-type print mounted on aluminium, 42 x 30 cm. by **Gillian Wearing** . .



they have never even spoken to me about it. Ideally I would like the campaign to stop altogether because I wasn't consulted". (Midgley, *The Times*, 12 June 1998).

Wearing's is an interesting interpretation of the Avant-Garde/ Minimalist/ Conceptualist stance in which "the form of the artwork and the identity of its maker were irrelevant" or which "frustrate the market mechanism". Wearing, the artist, has an idea. She makes that idea manifest, in images and words (in other words, she makes art 'objects'), which she then puts on the market. She uses Duchampian 'denial of authorship' in the 'Signs' series (it is a mechanism she uses a lot), by allowing the 'ordinary people'/performers in her work, to say what they want to say. She uses the Duchampian 'ready-made' technique in the form of her work, by appropriating the vox pop, fly-on-the-wall Television documentary. The appropriated 'everyday object' becomes the 'artwork', by the artists intention. She 'frustrates the market-mechanism' by taking legal action against Volkswagen. She wants their campaign stopped. So far, so good. If she succeeds in stopping the campaign, perhaps she will declare that the work is complete, in true Duchamp/Craig-Martin style.

But, according to Paul McGann (*The Independent*, 12 June 1998), Wearing has other ideas. "She has been approached in the past by advertising agencies interested in using her work. She is not in principle opposed to the idea, she



says, but she has yet to find a product that she thinks is appropriate. Now she believes the opportunity to use "Signs" commercially has been taken from her." In her own words, she's been "CHEATED!" Poor exploited 'ordinary' Ms. Wearing, who was a secretary before going to college, and to whom "nothing's ever been given", has been "ripped-off" by an advertising agency. "Everyone, or at least lots of people, know the Dylan video. A parody of that would be more in the order of homage. But if you are relatively unknown like me it feels more like being exploited behind your back." (McGann quotes Wearing).

But has Wearing been cheated, or is she just playing the game? This is the paradox of the yBa. They pursue the very corporate market that Duchamp was attempting to subvert. Their appropriation of the ready-made "rather expressed its manifest aesthetic appearance as an object of mass-production that today superimposes the notion of originality, reality and historical identity." (Gaywood, Autumn 1997, p.4. [My italics.]).

The work might look avant-garde and therefore by implication, unmarketable. The haranguing of critic Brian Sewell and the furore caused by 'Myra', in the 'Sensations!' show imply market resistance. But with today's 'ultra-cool' audience, these products of an institutionalised avant-garde, tend to be reduced to 'ultra-cool' market fodder. As 'eminence gris' of the art



world has Craig-Martin passed on anything new or radical to his students or, has he simply passed on a form institutionalised avant-garde which, in turn, emerges fully-formed from art-colleges? The fact that Craig-Martin, far from being out on a limb because of his radical ideas, has, since 1989, been a trustee of the Tate Gallery might answer that question. A more likely argument is, that what he has given his students are astute marketing skills and an awareness of contemporary art-practice.





CONCLUSION:

In the first chapter, what constitutes a yBa is described, and concludes that, far from being an acronym for young British artists who have achieved success through critical approbation, that it is a tag, created by collector/dealer/ad. tycoon Charles Saatchi, to describe the artists in his own collection. We saw that the instant success of the 'Freeze' show, caused the critics to lose their voice and take a "who cares" attitude. This is a generation that has tended to rise through the commercial or independent gallery system and that dealers, taking their lead from the young Damien Hirst, side-step the critics, taking the work of emerging artists and giving it credibility by paralleling it with the work of more established artists. We saw that although this instant success stifles the creativity of these young artists, it benefits dealers and collectors interested in making a 'fast buck' and that in fact one of the few defining characteristics of a yBa is that it is often difficult to distinguish the brilliant marketing coups and the personalities of the artists, from the artworks themselves.

It was noted, in Chapter 2, that the myth of the yBa abroad, promulgates the notion of Britain in full cultural and economic bloom. That despite economic recession, that this



an independent and entrepreneurial nation, capable of riding the storm of recession by their own, independent resources alone.

Looking at the system of education producing the average yBa, it is easy to see why an institutionalised state endorsed avant-garde would produce works that look like the real thing; that the critical resistance created by the furore in the media because of the sensationalist qualities of yBa work, serve only to imply that we are witnessing a genuine avant-garde movement, forged by "incredibly brilliant" young artists. A more realistic conclusion might be, that with a large informed, consumer audience, accustomed to the 'look' of contemporary art, what we are witnessing is the mass-production of art products.



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