National College of Art & Design; Fine Art Sculpture

THE PHILISTINES: YBA and Contemporary Critical Theory.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to examine the concept of the philistine as proposed by Dave Beech and John Roberts. I intend to examine the aesthetic value of engaging with the everyday experience and the voluptuous. Beech and Roberts single out these particular characteristics as philistine behaviour. This is as a result of their critical support of Young British Art, in light of the heavy criticism that the art has received regarding its use of shock sensationalism. What I find of particular interest, are the consequential debates offered by critics, for example, Andrew Bowie, Malcolm Bull, and Julian Stallabrass. This is as a result of Beech and Roberts intentions to readdress the cultural position of a possible 'philistinism' in order to stress the relevance of an art practice that addresses issues of everyday experience. It is possible to identify philistine pleasures in relation to Young British Art that appears to indulge freely in popular pleasure, particularly the pleasures associated with the body. The discourses offered in response are often skeptical about the revaluation of popular indulgences, and for them to be included within the parameters of a high aesthetic critique. The reason for this seems to be consistent with historical referencing of the term 'philistine'. Traditionally someone who is considered a philistine is acting against the codes of proper moral conduct and can provide no positive input in maintaining a cultured society. For example, Bull mentions in his 'The Ecstasy of Philistinism' that if

confronted, philistines invariably argue that they are not actually philistines at all but someone whose personal interests might, at times, extend outside the pre-conditioning of conservative taste.

There is evidence of a lack of co-operation from critics who continue to rely on high aesthetic ideals when referring to recent 'Brit-art' as mere shock tactics. I intend to follow and support Beech and Roberts argument, which employs the concept of the philistine as a defense of the lack of critical distance and apparent 'commonness' of recent British art. It is an important critique of Young British Art, which appears to be in danger of being misread as mere shock tactics. To consider the artists in this manner can only lead to the obvious fate of soon passing its sell-by date. This I believe to be a tragic yet possible conclusion to an art practice, which seems to be, consistently surface read as simply media sensationalism. At times when shock tactics may be the case, there exists only a constrictive aesthetic critique which fails to ask why artists are employing distasteful images, beyond what is immediately read as attention-seeking.

CHAPTER 1

In the following chapter I intend to show how the cultural position of the philistine accentuates how dominant conservative tastes deny common pleasures in their critique of what is aesthetic value.

The 'spectral philistine'

The philistine is understood to represent the vulgarities of a culture that pays no heed to conservative moral conduct. The 'spectral philistine' may then be understood as a common fear seen only in the eyes of aesthetic idealism. The relevance of the philistine as *spectral* determines the philistine as a continual ghostly apparition of all that conservative tastes deny - the everyday and the voluptuous. Philistinism serves then as a monkey on the back of the conservative ideal of aesthetic autonomy. The autonomous ideal insists on distancing art from the everyday experience. However, for Young British art the everyday experience becomes their art. The philistine as spectral suggests that should high aesthetic critique continue to exclude philistine forms of attention, the continuation of philistine behaviour will therefore exist always as a ghostly reminder that high aestheticism is a completely impractical and pretentious process of determining cultural integrity and value.

Beech and Roberts, in their 'Spectres of the Aesthetic', propose the ideological term of the philistine in order to redirect attention to areas of art theory and practice, i.e. the philistine and the voluptuous. They believe that 'inappropriate' forms of attention are excluded by a dominant conservative

art world, in order to contain an aesthetic critique from the impulsive qualities of popular pleasure. They intend for the concept of philistinism as an "immanent critique of the repressions and aporias of art history and the philosophy of aesthetics by way of consideration of that which they exclude: philistine forms of attention" (Beech/Roberts, 1998, p. 47).

Whilst Beech and Roberts intend for the spectral philistine to be considered as a new understanding of the arts within a culture, they are not speaking in defense of the modes of behavior of the philistine. The critique of contemporary philistinism serves as a refusal to engage with a culture that "stands as a judge over the philistine pleasure without the philistine's consent" (Beech/Roberts, 1996, p. 126). The position of the philistine should be viewed alongside the modernist conception of art's autonomy. It is possible then to see how engaging in the voluptuous and the everyday serves to exemplify the conservative aesthetics denial of such immediate forms of attention. The philistine highlights what a cultured critique denies. These terms of denial may be considered as blindness and anxieties. Roberts argues that "the concept of the philistine is peculiarly well placed, as the definitional other of art and aesthetics, to bring to bear on art and aesthetics the cost of their exclusions, blindness and anxieties" (Beech/Roberts, 1996, p. 126). Therefore whilst the philistine may be considered a term that insinuates a category as 'uncultured' with a derogatory history, the philistine will (and maybe always should) pose a threat to the status of the intellectual and cultured.

Andrew Bowie considers that initiating philistine forms of attention towards a progressive cultural structure is to be seen as a naïve and speculative approach to believe that a meaningful culture will emerge from

the distribution of social wealth and bodily pleasures (Bowie, 1997, p.114). It may be that Bowie is suggesting, that to consider tasteless activities as a form of cultural importance would imply a degeneration of British conservative supremacy. Beech and Roberts are not advocating philistine behaviour as such, but intend for it to serve as a spectral existence that plays up the rigidity of a traditional aesthetic idealism. They do not intend to replace the traditional aesthetic ideal of beauty with an alternative expression of natural desires. Instead they set out to incorporate 'inappropriate' forms of attention and the immediacy of everyday pleasures within an already existing contemporary aesthetic discourse.

What Beech and Roberts are interested in is exemplifying the positional advantage that the concept of the philistine embodies. The 'positional politics' are such that by means of the existence of a theoretical discourse, which does not ignore everyday pleasures, including those of the body, this will ensure that alternative issues are not always submerged under majority rule. This means that if conservative idealism could accept that everyday experience is a crucial part of cultural growth, then perhaps philistine attentions may become more obvious in regards to high aesthetic critique. Beech and Roberts propose that the philistine is not attacking the autonomous ideal of art (as being purely an elitist form of judgement) but that to integrate philistine forms of attention would "transform the conception of art's autonomy immanently from the closures of exclusion and isolation to the constellation-like openness of permeation, inter-presence and inter-relationality" (Beech/Roberts, 1996, p. 127). This, however, can be conceived only by reviewing the concept of the philistine in a contemporary fashion. In doing so, they suggest that it may then be "possible to theorize the spectral philistine as the missing term of the

impasse in the contemporary dispute over mass culture." (Beech/Roberts, 1996)

The dislodgment of high theory concerning recent British art and Philistine forms of attention

The argument of truth and aesthetic value concerning what the concept of the philistine has to offer appears as problematic to Bowie and again to Bernstein. For them, any truth that the philistine offers can only be considered as an 'illusory happiness'. The illusion is based on the notion that popular culture and primal instincts can offer only immediate satisfaction and offer no extended value of a more advanced aesthetic understanding. This can lead only to a discovery of a false hope. Philistine modes of behavior are then to be considered as autogenetic by Bowie and other critics as they exist without philosophical or historical reference. This is perhaps one of the main reasons that the huge diversity of skepticism exists around the debate as to the relevance and value of the now notorious 'Young British Art'. The work has been criticised for lacking any theoretical content. For this reason it could therefore be accused of being shallow, as much of the work relies on the experiences of commonplace life. The work of Richard Billingham confronts the viewer with a photo-documentation of his family's suburban domestic lifestyle (fig. 1,2,3). The photographs are a detailed portrait of the closest members of his family. The vibrancy of a synthetic medley of colours, ranging from the tacky floral wallpaper to Billinghams mothers' tattooed arms, heightens the sense of confusion. Disturbing scenes of marital violence are amalgamated with detailed attention to individual characters.

Fig 1. Richard Billingham, *untitled*, 1994

There seems an odd sense of voyeurism concerning Billinghams work. This could be largely due to the fact that that it is real life we are witnessing. Nick Hornby notes that when faced with the realities of the alienated working class, instead of being able to walk off so as to find something more beautiful, curiosity compels the viewer to get closer to the detailed images. Hornby remarks that "wandering off is not an option, not if you have any curiosity at all." The fact that there is no conclusion or starting point to Billingham's photographs constructs a detailed narrative to an ongoing saga. And whilst the images depicted at times can seem almost theatrical, this only highlights the extremes of the alienated reality that exists. The work of Billingham is surprisingly matter-of-fact when considering his personal ties. Instead, his position behind the lens could be described as without sentimentality, perhaps because he has seen the story many times before and knows the ending.

Fig. 2, Richard Billingham, *untitled*, 1994.

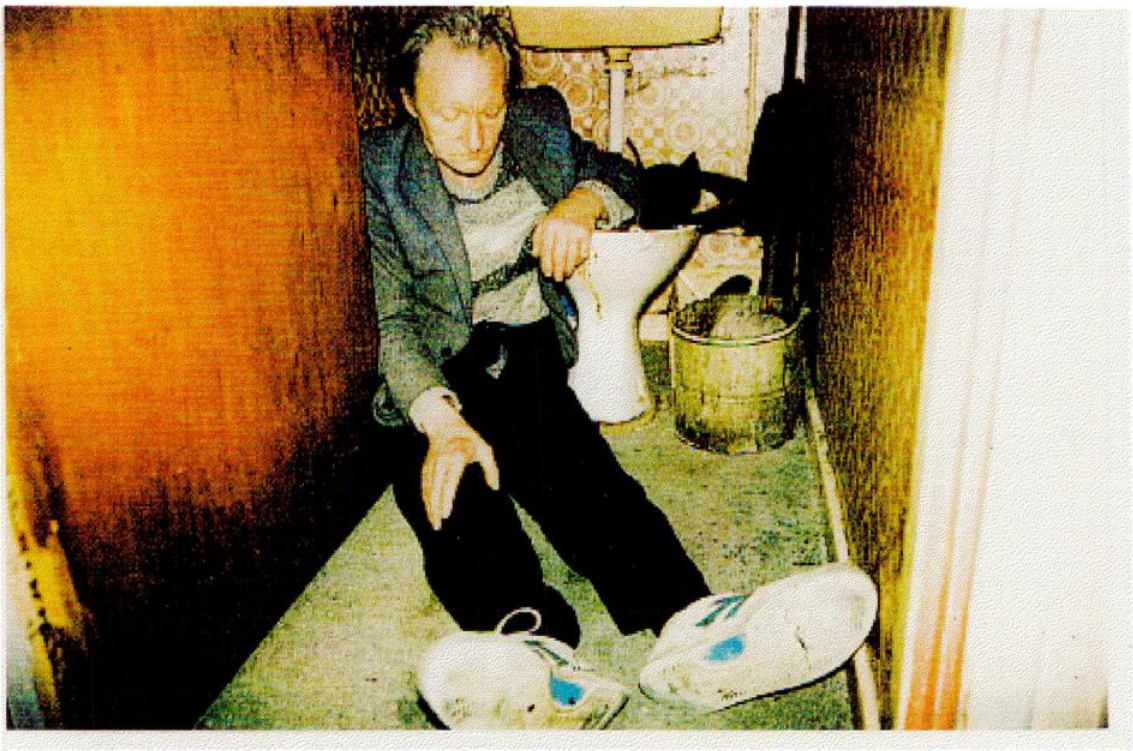

Fig. 3, Richard Billingham, *untitled*, 1994.

Billingham's usage of the documentary photograph is characteristic of many of the Young British artists who employ the style of the home movie, the snapshot or the personal diary as a means of negotiating with the immediate issues of the everyday. Alasdair Duncan remarks on the growing trend of young British art that employs the personal narrative as a means to depict close experiences. The personal comes across as first nature and individual, therefore needing no theoretical backdrop.

> The narrative motifs and structural devices that emerge from an art that is experienced as occupying a conceptual space and time that is continuous with familiar 'everyday' non-art space and time are, of their nature, narratives of the sort that occur from the 'everyday' lives (Duncan, 1996, p. 18).

An important observance of the strategy of the narrative is that the artists are now seeing themselves as us. What characterizes the narrative of the young British art is the almost clinical distance at which they place

themselves from their own experiences. Sarah Greenberg sees this trend as a kind of "emotional detoxification, purging its demons for the delectation or disgust of the viewer." (Greenberg, 1995, p. 131) Billingham's characters rarely look into the lens of the camera, as if oblivious of the presence of their own son. This creates the feeling that Billingham is documenting a domestic lifestyle that is not exclusively his own, but exists for many as a standard way of life.

The new approach to the aesthetic that has been taken on by the 'Young British Artist' appears to have abandoned the need for high forms of aesthetic critique. As I have discussed, this is as a result of a rethinking of approaches to everyday experiences. Such modes of attention are characteristic of the young artist who sees popular culture as imperative for an understanding of their own involvement and desires. To understand recent British art within the context of the spectral philistine is to take into account the artists' divorce from academised critical theory. It must therefore be realized that the 'new' philistine has not abandoned aesthetics altogether but is reconstructing a new critique in response to the realities of his/her own culture.

The blindness of a conservative art world

Art that displays levels of unabashed enjoyment in the face of popular pleasure gives rise to a somewhat knee-jerk reaction by conservative tastes. The result is that British art has been accused of anti-intellectualism. David Beech points out however that this accusation must be itself accused of anti- intellectualism in that it obviously points to a closing-off from

unfamiliar modes of intelligent behavior. (Beech, 1996, p. 5) Roberts similarly argues that

> Kantian aesthetics speaks of blindness, such as the insensitivity of the philistine, but it may also be considered as itself blind, in its inability to acknowledge the diversity of bodily pleasure and approaches to art (Beech/Roberts, 1996, p. 104)

The blindness that Roberts speaks of is cognitive in both respects of the conservative idealism and of the philistine. Conservative tastes remain blind to philistine levels of enjoyment whilst the philistine is blind to the pleasures obtained from aesthetically refined judgements. Roberts therefore proposes that in order for a wider appreciation of the diversities that exist in culture to be achieved, theory must begin on the assumption that blindness exists in both cultured and uncultured eyes. It may then be possible to realize that blindness is integral to all cultural experience, and not exclusive to what could be considered as alternative or unfamiliar modes of behavior. The philistine therefore accuses conservative aesthetic judgement of suppressing the demands of the voluptuous body. By this accusation, the philistine is therefore disallowing an aesthetic to condemn illicit modes of behavior, which the aesthetic is unfamiliar with in the first place. It is this conservative estrangement from the popular pleasures that Beech sees as anti-intellectualism within the margins of a dominant yet conservative critique.

After all, seeing as Goldsmiths College is the 'myth of origin' of the Young British Artist (Ford, 1996, p. 3), all the artists appear to have received an aesthetic education of at least third level standard in one recognized form of establishment. A work of art that has no singular emphasis is perhaps a worry to those who take pleasure in reminiscing on the works of the great masters as the canons for future art. The ideology of

Beech and Roberts 'spectral philistine' could hardly be viewed as a canon of referential value. It is, in fact, the opposite for the philistine regards the aesthetic object to be valueless. When the aesthetic object is viewed in the context of history only then does it gain a form of value as a commodity, a relic of a specific time or moment.

Jeremy (Jay) Jopling is a relative newcomer to the YBA scene but has quickly established his name as a dealer for some of the better known artists, for example Tracey Emin, and the name that sends a chill down many a spine, Damien Hirst. Joplings personal taste (and his ideas of marketability) are reflected in the type of work he supports."I'm not at all interested in issue-based art; for an issue-based idea would have to be pretty extraordinary to stand out beyond the relevance of that particular issue" (Ford, 1996, p. 7). Jopling perhaps echoes a post-modern awareness that should one be concerned about a particular issue outside of aesthetics, art is not the most effective medium to generate awareness and support, particularly due to the small percentage that it caters for. The art in question therefore has come to examine matters that through being of a personal nature could then be considered of universal relevance. An example of the how the once familiar properties of what art should be, lies in the very existence of the question, 'but is it art?' In an interview with Damien Hirst by Francesco Bonami, Hirst illuminates the progressive advantages of recent British art.

> I can walk into my gallery with a banana stuck to a dog shit and ask Jay (Jopling) what he thinks of it – especially with a good title – he has to look at it, he has to consider it. There are regular moments in the art world where something has been invented and no one knows if it's good or bad. How fantastic is that? (Bonami, 1996, p. 114)

What is fantastic is not that there still remains the question "is it art?" but that the question must be asked. If art can no longer be judged in terms of a prevailing dominant taste (right-wing or left-wing) it then possesses the advantage of being able to develop alongside the many facets of cultural exclusions and inclusions.

The positional politics of the philistine

The social history that governs the application of the term philistine takes form as a consistent exclusion from a conservative dominance and a hierarchy of aesthetic critique (Beech/Roberts, 1997, p. 65). The bourgeois claim on aesthetics therefore must spotlight aspects that constituted what the bourgeois were to term as philistine, for as Malcolm Bull points out, the philistine exists as a negation of the aesthetic. It is therefore necessary to evaluate what it is that constitutes the term 'aesthetic' and what it is that the philistine is negating. The properties of the aesthetic are such that it could identify an experience of beauty, and therefore exert a form of dominance on what was to be considered as without good taste. The aesthetic provided a distinction between the material and immaterial, governing the physical and emotional aspects of humanity. It was to censor our 'sensuous life' from within, while allowing it to thrive in all its relative autonomy. In the pursuit of a utopian ideal, the bourgeoisie 'ripped the humanity out of nature', making 'cultured' and informed decisions for the good of society.

The term philistine can be said then to exist only in the eyes of the educated and therefore to be a term of elitist abuse. Roberts sees it as

crucial to recognize the position of those who are on the receiving end of an elitist form of abuse. This provides an illumination of the position of the 'cultured' to judge others as 'uncultured'. In doing so he highlights the crucial proximity of the 'excluded' (the uncultured) from its 'excluder' (cultured). The close proximity is further highlighted by the necessary use of the term, philistine. It suggests that the bourgeois must suppress what they consider as a threat to their bid for the autonomous individual subject. Roberts describes this proximity by viewing "the philistine as the most exacting cultural category within the context of massive inequalities in cultural capital and the symbolic violence that goes along with it" (Beech/Roberts, 1997, p. 48). The 'symbolic violence' that is referred to denotes the necessity of subduing the uncultured masses to provide a rational and organized framework for a civilized society. The relevance of the masses in a contemporary light is depicted in the work of much recent British art. Whilst the work is still considered to be fine art, there is little that might distinguish it from a witty advertisement, or a tabloid headline. This highlights the close relationship that the artists have achieved with common images of the everyday, that are considered as valueless by conservative taste, and that they have assimilated these experiences into a fine art context.

The association of the philistine with the proletariat

Beech and Roberts highlight the significance of associating the excluded philistine with the proletariat as a result of the concept that unacceptable modes of behavior are excluded from social (and in particular Westernized) manners. The philistine is associated with the proletariat.

This illuminates them both as forms of exclusion from a dominant governing state. Beech and Roberts deconstruct the social process by which the proletariat is the excluded from an institutional power whilst the philistine is the excluded from aesthetic superiority or in basic terms, values of good taste (Beech/Roberts, 1997, p. 58). They portray the shifting of values as the 'proletarianisation' of the philistine. The emergence of contemporary critical theory in the twentieth century saw how the modernist movement held a powerful cultural position in terms of their pure critique of the aesthetic, whilst the bourgeois realists maintained an influential political position. Therefore, the elements of the popular and the commodity came to be considered as trappings of a proletarian lifestyle. Through observing how the term 'philistine' is employed by dominant and elitist parties, it is apparent then that the site of application depends on issues and the contexts of the prevailing dominant discourses at that time.

Julian Stallabrass points out that to apply brutish and primitive characteristics to the working class would be in very poor judgment. Stallabrass argues that "for the majority of the working-class people who are not fans of the Sunday Sport, this simple-minded identification of their culture with the products of the porn-mongers and media monopolists is pretty insulting" (Stallabrass, 1997, p. 16). The products that Stallabrass refers to are the images and services that appear in prolific proportions in the current Westernized culture. Such images would be that of promised glamour and material goods. Stallabrass' identification of such pleasures with the working class is mainly due to Roberts stressing of philistine pleasures i.e. pleasures of the body, in general, a lack of modesty within a consumer society.

While Beech and Roberts identify the similar exclusions of the philistine and that of the proletariat from a dominant culture, they do not intend for the two to be considered the same as each other. This they believe is what is happening concerning the interpretation of the YBAs'. This is perhaps as a result of the confusion of the artists engaging with the everyday that is being read as "slumming it for egregious effect" (Roberts, 1996, p. 37). Should this be the case, then it highlights Beech and Roberts' notion of the philistine having the capability to work as a reactive category, moving in accordance to a position of aesthetic dissidence. This means that by recognizing the concept of the philistine as aesthetic relevance, a huge part of our culture can be involved in positive aesthetic theory, and not simply dismissed as a weakness in the light of cultural development.

The philistine as the excluded from prevailing dominant tastes

Concentrating on the notion of the 'excluded', Roberts clarifies the contemporary positional politics of the philistine. Firstly, that the philistine is not opposed to the aesthetic but holds an identity which by means of possible rejection of theoretical superiority, can gain an autonomous position, thus enabling it to rebuild its own critique specific to a local context. In terms of the category of the 'Young British Artist', Roberts defines those belonging to it as "those who see the definition of art as 'ordinary' as an ethical and political challenge" (Roberts, 1996, p. 35). This exclusion from a higher interest in culture, beyond popular pleasures, takes shape as an existing 'other'. An acknowledgment of the concept of the 'other' highlights the changes in twentieth century understanding and

acceptance of the various existing modes of behavior, life-styles, religions, etc. The philistine, to exist as an 'other' of aesthetic taste cannot therefore be used as a term to act as an umbrella to cover all other alternative forms of culture. By avoiding such a generalization of the term 'philistine' Roberts sees it as crucial to develop the concept of the philistine as a particular 'other' in order for a contextual significance to be perceived as of positive importance, and not just another term for the 'Avant-garde'. It must be "positioned in relation to the non-European, the feminine, the abject, the grotesque, primitive and anti-intellectual." (Beech/Roberts, 1997, p. 49)

In response to Beech and Roberts writings on the concept of philistine, Malcolm Bull puts forward an explanation of philistinism. Bull regards the philistine as a consequence of a series of negations: an atheist is a negation of spirituality, the critique of atheism being that without God there can be no political authority; anarchy is a negation of political authority, the critique of anarchy being that without political authority there can exist no morals, nihilism is a negation of morals, the critique of nihilism being that without morals there can no longer exist a true sense of beauty, philistinism is a negation of the true ideal of beauty- in other words, a negation of the aesthetic (Bull, 1996, p. 27-30). This deconstruction of negations provides a very simplistic understanding and hypothetical view of reactionary consequences that might be a result of cultural and political authority. What it does not seem to allow for is that atheism, anarchy, nihilism and now philistinism have not disappeared simply because they were overwhelmed a rising cultural understanding. There is never one only way of thinking and if anything, Bulls deconstruction serves only to further

highlight the inequalities that exist surrounding the power that the dominant aesthetic voice will assert over others.

Should philistinism become mainstream, might it then be possible to speculate what would become the excluded alternative of a philistine authority? Julian Stallabrass echoes such a speculative approach in asking "should working class forms, or at least middle class views of them, move into the mainstream, will Roberts take to recommending bourgeois high seriousness as the excluded alternatives?" (Stallabrass, 1997, p. 15). If traditional aesthetics should become the excluded from a dominant critique, then it would seem that by means of such exclusions, the philistine would run circles around aesthetic judgements. This highlights the lack of empirical value of Bull's series of deconstruction. The philistine should not be working to suppress bourgeois aesthetics. It instead it should exist alongside aesthetic idealism. The philistine refuses to be excluded from aesthetic practice on the grounds that it will not judge everyday experiences by means of hierarchical values.

CHAPTER 2

An examination of the discourse of the value of forms of pleasure that are associated with the philistine and the voluptuous

In order for the bourgeoisie to hold on to dominant territory, it must control the philistine; a voice which advocates the sensuous and therefore the irrational, which pose a threat to order and system. Bourgeois decorum consists in converting morality to style, aestheticising virtue and so deconstructing the opposition between the 'proper' and the 'pleasurable'. The irrational in question here refers particularly to the voluptuous.

The everyday pleasure; a new opening for feminine art

The widespread tendency of recent British art to engage with the everyday has brought many female artists to the public's attention. Emblems of the everyday and their particular relationship to pleasure and enjoyment have come under scrutiny by artists such as Georgina Starr, Gillian Wearing, Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas. Photography and a critique of representation had a central role for older female artists in order to deconstruct the mechanics of representation, particularly among the mass media, for example, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman. What distinguishes the new generation of female artists is that they resist distancing themselves from the pleasures of the masses, as a means of

deconstructing the patriarchal gaze. Instead they embrace the pleasures for themselves. Instead of maintaining a critical distance, the artists are confronting collective myths by associating their own desires with the desires of others.

Contemporary philistinism might be considered at its strongest within the dissonant voice of the female artist. Without the restrictions of critical distancing from their work, the artists' refreshing voices now display elements of 'rudery' and 'in yer face' attitude which are considered as a "loss of guilt in front of popular pleasures"(Roberts, 1996, p. 38). The art no longer recognizes the demands of emotional pain and suppression. The art is now crude, ironic, disgusting and funny.

Sarah Lucas exhibits such traits with a personal style of self-defiance and confrontation with the spectator. There is little that is sensual or spiritual about Lucas's work but much that is vulgar, yet her work is still embarrassingly provocative. There is a dichotomy in probable responses in her work, for example, the piece that saw her first recognition, entitled *Sod You Gits* (fig. 4). It consisted of a tabloid pullout, blown up to a size of seven feet by ten feet. The selling story is of a midget woman working as a topless kissogram. The ambivalent context takes form whereby it could be considered that Lucas is being exploitative of the woman or that it highlights the issue of men exploiting the midget's disability. However, the title suggests that the kissogram is acting in defiance of her 'abnormality', perceived by others, declaring, "I'm fairly damn sexy for my size." Lucas's work can often appear comical on site but the confrontational effects are what linger.

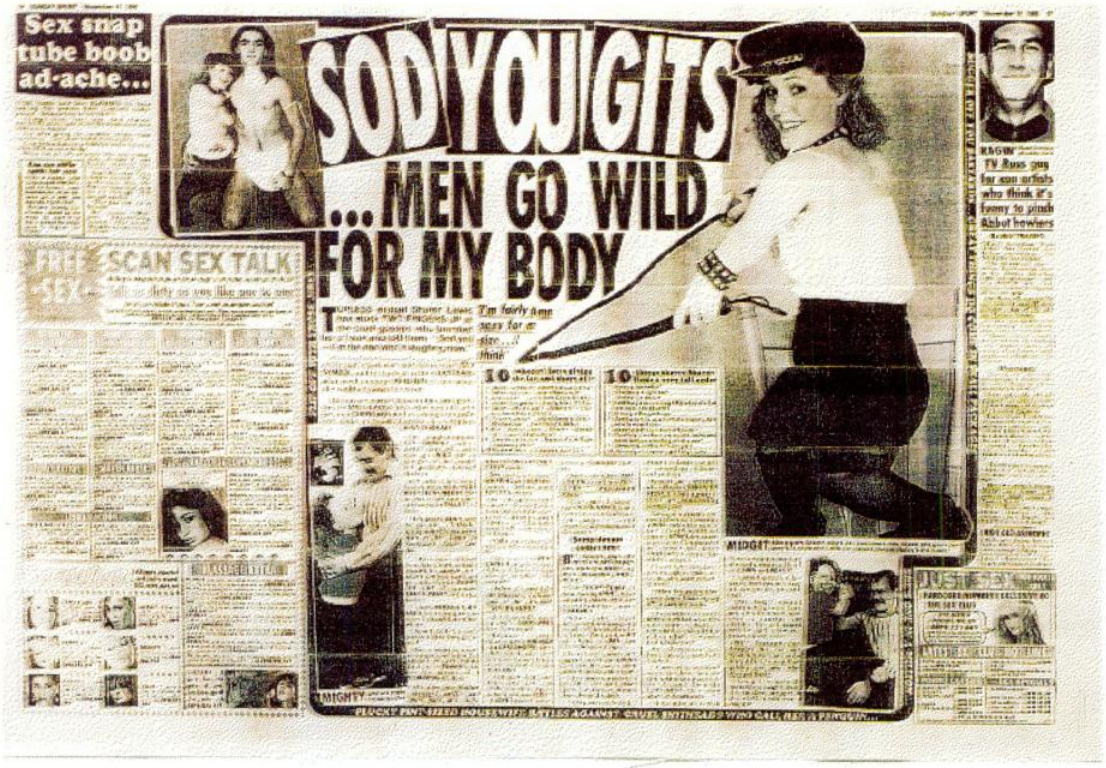

Fig. 4, Sarah Lucas, *Sod You Gits*, 1990.

Despite the often-personal aspect of much of the young artists, there always exists a sense of emotional detachment. Whilst the works might examine emotional reactions, they are always presented with a clinical aggressiveness. This personal disengagement has often been interpreted as a common attitude and unfriendliness about the works of the young British artists. Lucas represents the body as unfeeling and machine like. She illustrates this by focusing on the cyclical motions by which we ingest and consume, so as to egest, then ingest and egest and so on. In her referencing of various bodily orifices and the passing through of substances, whether they are bodily fluids or cigarette smoke, the body appears detached from the mind. However, that the strength of her work lies in the very denial of feeling and emotion when twisting all pre-conceptions of the body as an object of desire. This absence of the conscience is reminiscent of Warhols repetitive images which highlighted the possible numbing of our powers to

discriminate and moralize due to the succession of shocking images that the media produce each day. *Chicken Knickers* (fig. 5) is another work by Lucas, which seems to reflect the icy tones behind a comical mask. The photograph is of a plucked supermarket chicken pinned on to a pair of knickers. The rear opening of the chicken resembles the vagina. The humour of such an abstract composition is sharply edged with disgust. The viewer is enticed close to have a laugh but retracts at the sight of the plucked flesh and uncanny metaphor. Sarah Lucas operates as an "aesthetic terrorist, pillaging mainstream culture. In doing so she acts as a mirror, monitoring the sexism and misogyny routinely found there" (Kent, 1994, p. 58). Not many people like to hear their own voice, but it seems that that is what Lucas is portraying.

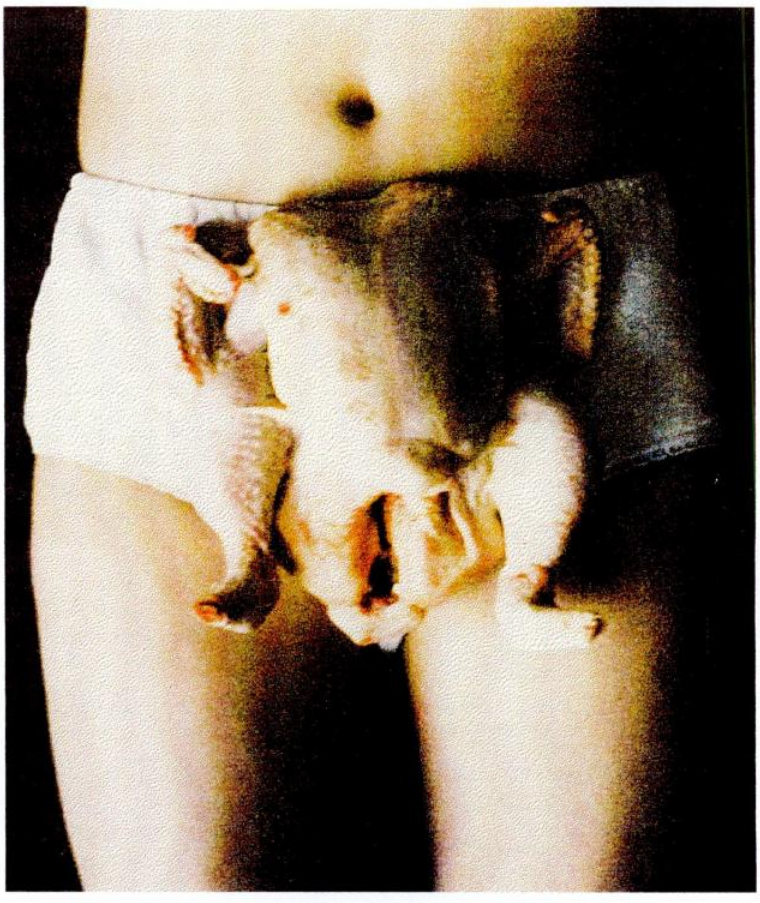

Fig. 5, Sarah Lucas, *Chicken Knickers*, 1997.

Lucas confronts the myths of the male gaze by taking on a masculine role herself. She mimics the violent gestures and language that are associated with a certain British working class, heterosexual masculinity. However in doing so she allows for her own pleasures and humorous opinions. Evidence of this is at its most prominent when regarding the subject of the body as an object of desire, but also of the waste and abuse the body is subjected to. Engaging with the everyday and obtaining pleasure from doing so gives the mis-conception that the artwork advocates sexual indulgences, drug taking and acting without morals. Instead what the works suggest is that such hedonistic activities do not always amount to enjoyment. This does not mean that the artists are warning people away from their own experiences. But that they are telling it how it is, warts and all. For example, "Tracey Emin's pursuit of pleasures ranges from trying on friends clothes or dancing to her favourite pop songs to activities which leave her troubled by hang-overs, unwanted pregnancy and heartache" Burrows/Smithard, 1997, p. 12). Such activities are nothing strange. They might be considered as valueless in terms of traditional aesthetic criticism. However they have value for Emin and that is what she sees as important. This in turn should be what gives her art value.

The values of pleasure as opposed to the values of a 'proper' aesthetic critique

For Adorno and Horkheimer, capitalism expressed a systematic routine of false promises to the unsuspecting masses without evidence of the supposed fulfillment. By negating the temptations of immediate pleasure, in the view of I.A. Richards, it is possible to expect an interest of higher

pleasure and achieve a more intense sense of satisfaction. This idea is comparable to that of Meyers (1959) in his deconstruction of contemporary forms of music. Primitive listeners must be content with 'sensuous-associative pleasure,' whilst sophisticated listeners harvest the rewards of 'syntactical-associative pleasure' (Connor, 1992, p. 207). Value inheres only in the more or less intense refusal of immediate pleasure. Meyers model of the pursuit of a higher more intense experience amongst the masses whom reap sensual-associative pleasure, brings into question the significance of education in order to understand and achieve the capability to advance one self from 'pleasure' to 'proper'.

For Richards, "bad art is one that offers instant gratification" (Connor, 1992, p. 205). The more one listens to jazz or to classical music the more one can decipher and appreciate particular 'riffs' or prominent crescendos. One of the best known faces of Brit-pop, Damon Albarn, states why a recent track 'Song 2' was quickly assimilated by MTV into the American music market, "It's perfect for MTV culture, because a lot happens quickly in a ten second burst" (Smith, 1997, p. 4). What Meyers does not leave allowances for in his categorizations, however, is the possibility of a sophisticated listener appreciating primitive music. This observance stresses the involvement of art with the everyday, as well as throwing light on the characteristic of the artist 'playing dumb.'

This particular trait exemplifies the myth of the 'artist with attitude'. Fredric Jameson points out that, for Adorno, philistines are not "those who do not "understand art, or better still, who do not understand modern art, rather that they understand it only too well"(Beech/Roberts, 1996, p. 124). This exemplifies the advantageous position of the philistine not having to

incorporate an accepted level of aesthetic understanding. This highlights the art world as an exclusive cultural category. Bowie appears to have taken on the notion that the philistine acts superior to theory by means of abandoning it in favour of a popular culture. He regards this behaviour as ignorant and (perhaps) a contradiction considering the conspicuous alliance of the philistine with the working class. He suggests that aesthetic education should be under suspicion as a means of a "repression of the philistine pleasures." This would be wrong to think, for the philistine would be unable to abandon education if it had not received an education in the first place. The absence of education, Bowie argues, "looks more and more like a luxury for theorists who now wish to reject what others may never even get a chance to try" (Bowie, 1997, p. 123).

It appears, however, that the philistine is not working against education. For it is only through education that the philistine has gained the freedom to choose. Education should not serve as a weighty responsibility to impress on others. It ensures a development of the individual to have the advantage of making educated choices even should those choices run contrary to standardized behaviour. The increase and accessibility of multimedia has naturally influenced artists realization and production of ideas. As Bowie correctly argues, the importance of aesthetic critique and education within the media industry is essential in order to throw light on aspects of the art work which would otherwise fail to be articulated.

The Japanese photographer, Araki, provides an interesting case study for Bowie's perseverance with the advantages of aesthetic education in order to appreciate the art subject in a more cultured sense (fig. 6).

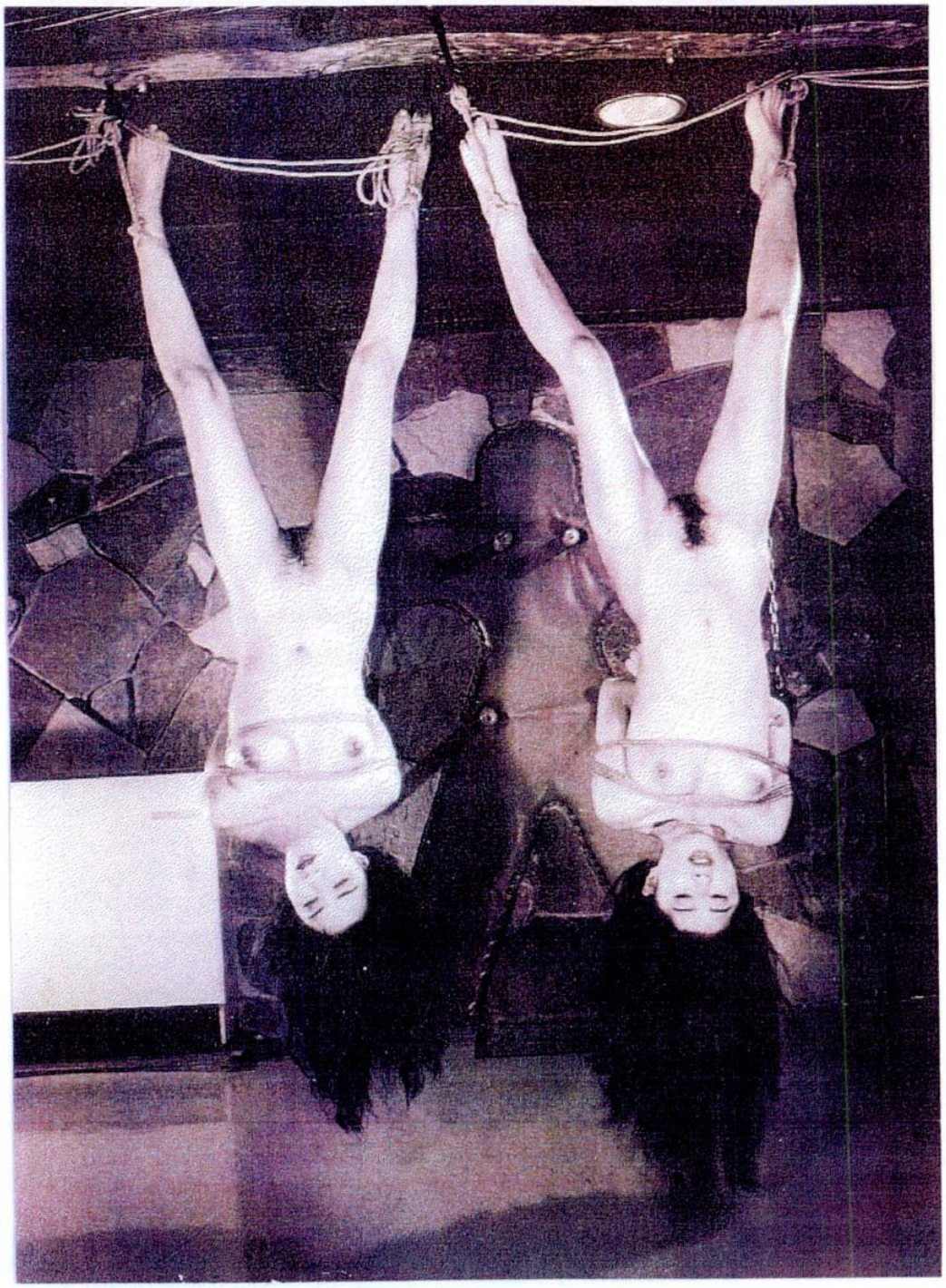

Fig. 6, Araki, 1992

The framework of Japanese society comes across as extremely efficient and orderly. However, as an article in *The Face* suggests, "the staggering proliferation of sex publications and industries in Japan shows the frustrations of a rigid society where the sexes barely socialize" (Bornoff,

1997, p. 102). Araki had previously worked in the porn industry in the seventies and eighties, before turning his hand to 'fine art'. He now exhibits photography that deals with the 'subject matter' of the sex industry in Japan. His success in these decades is astonishing. He has had over 80 books of his pictures published, and in 1994 exhibited in the capital's Hara museum of modern art - an institution which until recently would have grimaced at his work. His photos still contain images of sexual revelry yet the supposed difference now is that the context of their 'aesthetic production and reception' has changed. It seems quite startling that he is such a success in a country where pleasurable sex has its specific place and the dining rooms of well-off business homes hardly jump to mind as a hanging position. What it does suggest, however, is that the only way that the cultured and aesthetically-aware individual can associate with their own desires and pleasurable needs, is viewing such images by converting those pleasures into aesthetic value.

Methods of reproduction have brought into question the validity of the art subject. Bowie points out Schleiemacher's observation in that he sees no difference between aesthetic production and reception. With this in mind would it be valid to say that the philistine is producing solely for the popular market? as Stallabrass mentions, "to play into the hands of the worst commodifiers, and to serve the system in a real sense" (Stallabrass, 1997, p. 16). By 'serving the system' the artists are seen by Stallabrass as helping towards the myth of the cool, British culture which the powerful are quite happy with. The artists are not, however, trying to produce an art for the people as such. What they have done is taken up a position whereby they can play into the system just as easily as they can play with the system, Roberts points out that the concept of the philistine in the face of

dominant tastes should be viewed as a parasite on theory and not the destroyer. (Roberts, 1996, p.) This illustrates that they can just as easily take on the voice of the intellectual as they can of its opposite. This shows that it has not been forgotten that art is still an expensive luxury and that the artists are well aware what market the art is channeled into

CHAPTER 3

Myth and media hype

In this chapter I intend to examine the responsibility of the press coverage surrounding young British art, alleged for encouraging the sensationalism and controversy the art has produced. The sensationalism that has been produced by the critics and promoters, make it difficult for the art to be viewed in an unbiased fashion.

The myth of the 'YBA' as a descriptive term for British Art

Diversity exists under the umbrella title of the Young British Artists. There is now 'The Old Young British Artist' e.g. Rachael Whiteread, 'The New young British Artist' e.g. Sarah Lucas, and then the 'New Young British Artist doing Old Young British Art' e.g. Damien Hirst (Duncan, 1996, p. 17).

The characteristics and terminology of the YBA have been used (and abused) in portraying British art. 'With attitude', being 'brash', and 'in yer face' are now overly familiar descriptions concerning what constitutes the acronym of YBA. These apparent forms of artistic behaviour have become stereotypes which more recent art is compared to, and worse, mistaken for. The result of continually using such overly familiar descriptions makes it difficult to distinguish more recent art from earlier examples, such as the

Freeze exhibition.[1] The notorious group shows, for example *Sensation*, could be held partly to blame for the misreading and misrepresentation of more recent art. It has always been observed that recent British art has no specific style, yet for this very reason the works are grouped together which appears ironic in itself. This misinterpretation is as a result of categorizing recent British art under the remaining stereotypes which earlier work is responsible for. Therefore, surely the more recent British artists should demand a mature and critical discourse of their work instead of being grouped as part of the YBA brat pack

Originality can only last a short amount of time. It then ceases to be original any more. *Brilliant... New Art from London* (1995-96) is an example of a miss-use of the fame that initially surrounded Young British Art (fig. 7). The exhibition was held in the Walker Center of Modern Art in New York. However, the promotion catalogue for the exhibition seemed to rely on the stereotypes that are still attributed to the old Young British artist making New Young British Art. The cover of the article depicts an image of the aftermath of the 1992 IRA bombing at Bishopsgate in London. The text is reminiscent of a Sex Pistols album cover, whilst the loose-leaf design of the catalogue suggests an idea of a cheap tabloid paper. It therefore seems that the intentions of the promoters are to initiate the viewer by means of attempting to imitate the context of the art. This is achieved by presenting the idea of the art as sensationalism, similar to that of a cheap tabloid, of the artist as anti-establishment, with the anarchic

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[1] This show was organized by a group of third year students from Goldsmiths College and was held in the summer of 1998. It especially engaged the attention of the advertising guru, Charles Saatchi. Saatchi has invested in the majority of young British art and therefore holds a lot of responsibility as to how the art is presented.

intentions of the Sex Pistols and of Britain as a once powerful establishment, crushed by its own political obesity.

Fig. 7, Walker Art Centre, *Brilliant...New Art From London*, 1995.

The huge effort of the promoters to continually remind us of what made young British art notorious in the first place, leaves little room for the artist to develop their style and practice beyond what is seen as typical of YBA. The 'Brilliant' exhibition highlights then that British artists are in danger

of being selected for the group shows only on the grounds that their work fits into now pre-conditioned ideas of what a YBA should look like.

Young British Art is not exclusively about the 'Brilliance' of everyday. It instead illustrates how the artists view themselves working within the common boundaries of the everyday. They therefore make no hierarchical distinction between its pleasures and the pleasures to be had from art. The art has been criticized for coat-tailing media sensationalism (Stallabrass, 1997, p. 15), however it appears by the lay out of the 'Brilliant' catalogue that it is the promoters and critics involved who should be to blame for this and not the artists.

Another example of the Young British Artist not receiving a sustained level of critical attention is seen by the decision of the British art periodical, *Modern Painting*, to devote an entire article to the YBA scene. Firstly, this kind of treatment may be blamed for insinuating that the artists are simply attention-seekers and must be treated accordingly. Like that of a spoilt child, they get their attention in the hope that it might shut them up. Secondly, this decision once again questions the responsibility of the editors of the periodicals to incorporate levels of the Young British Art within their current reviews of contemporary art. Instead of narrowing their overall coverage to one issue, they should explore the development of the individual artists alongside other contemporary artists. This would generate ongoing constructive criticism for the artists within a broader spectrum of the art world.

The Media's' involvement.

The abundant media coverage leads to an aspect of the Young British Art that makes it very difficult for the work to be viewed in an unbiased fashion. Damien Hirst would be a typically over-used cliché. "Hirst's greatest creation of his career so far has been a walking talking installation that goes by the name of Damien Hirst" (Ford, 1996, p. 8). Howeverm, it is the mixture of contempt and controversy that fuels the supporting role that the media play in sustaining the general euphoria around the YBA. The media have a tendency to publish stories of the young and popular. Therefore the 'Young' aspect of YBA no doubt is influential with regards to its success within the popular audience. The promotion of Young British art by the media points also to the type of youth culture which the popular media aim for. The production of art has changed considerably due to increasing availability of multimedia effects. Less traditional forms of art tend to appeal to a younger audience whom identify more easily with technology based imagery. Jay Jopling, points out that the "visual art world is working hand-in-hand with communications - media, film and rock and roll" (Ford, 1996, p. 8). An older audience might consider the success of Young British art as ageism, due to the level of attention they have received by a younger audience. However there is now an increased interest in art, particularly amongst the younger generation, which points to a widening of the public's interest in art.

The weakness of art becoming popular lies in the question of whether the artists are simply producing for the public. In doing so there is the danger that the artist loses sight of their responsibilities in light of their popularity

within the media. The sensationalism of YBA might then indicate that the artists are playing into the cool image that the promoters are happy to advocate. Whilst the artists may see themselves as us, they have achieved a crucial near proximity to the popular and controversial, in that they can instrument such controversy accordingly. An example of this is highlighted by a group of students from Leeds who went to elaborate lengths in a project entitled *Going Places*. (fig. 8, 9)

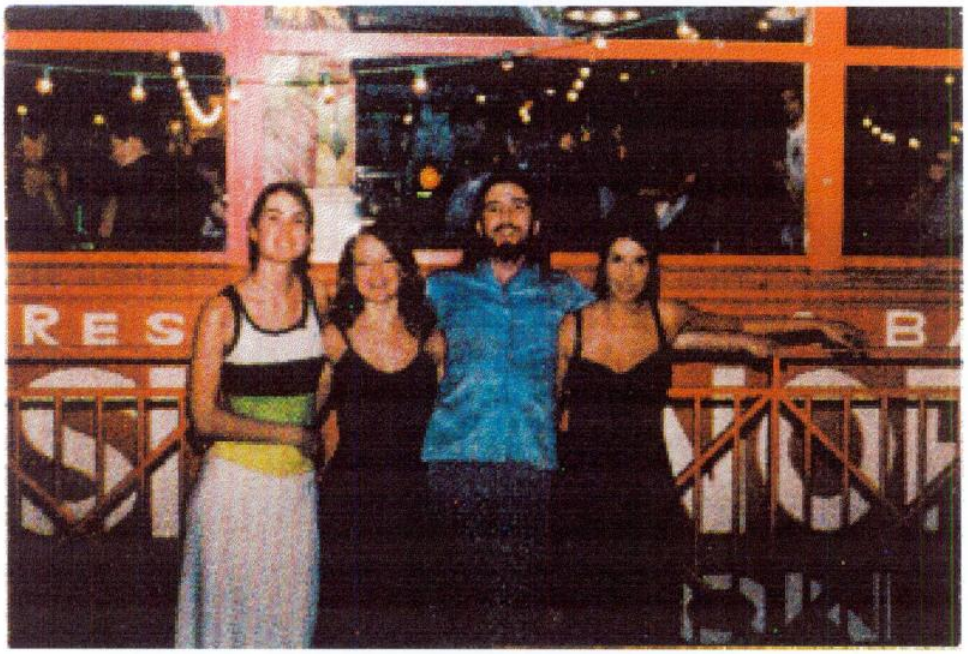

Fig. 8 & 9, Leeds 13, *Going Places*, 1998.

The students received a grant of one thousand pounds to engage in a week's work outside of the studio. The guests arrived at the exhibition of their final work only to find them-selves being driven to the airport. The students greeted them in the arrival lounge. They explained the only work that had been achieved was their enjoying of a sunny week in Spain. The newspapers caught wind of the story that showed up art students recklessly spending government money. Articles were published, showing the holiday snaps that the students had taken, and were full of predictable criticism, especially after recent educational cutbacks. Soon after however, in an interview on the local radio station the students (known as the Leeds 13) revealed that it was all a set up. They had faked the photographs on a beach in Scarborough, and that the grant was safely tucked away in the bank. The group's intentions were to involve a discussion on the nature of art. (Rugoff, 1998, p. 66) The result of *Going Places* highlighted the role that the media now play within the arts. It also highlighted how the artist can play into the system just as easily as they can play with the system.

How the media can influence our choices and opinions was illustrated to another extent by an article published in the Sunday magazine supplement of the Independent. The article examined the popularity of art that portrays images of adolescence, in particular relation to that of nearing feminine maturity. The article illustrates how media sensationalism can influence the capability of a public whom, perhaps too often, make hasty assessments as to what should be experienced. The article points out the pace at which these works sell and questions the fact that women appear the majority of buyers?

The tension that has come to exist between refusing to feel shame in engaging with the every day (without discriminating by means of a hierarchy of values), and being the subject of media sensationalism is evident within aspects of such 'child art.' The question being asked is whether the awkwardness that results from dealing with a scandalous issue is due to the images depicted or that the spectator is embarrassed by the fact that the images are actually pleasing. As the article states, such art "makes paedophile's of everybody. Proof of this lies in the readiness of adults to condemn as 'paedophilic' child art that does not seek primarily to arouse" (Myerson, 1997, p. 77).

Such art that does not primarily seek to arouse, points to the artists questioning as to what extent are the publics' responses influenced by media sensationalism? It seems doubtful that there is any possibility of approaching Young British art without any preconceived opinions. What could be suggested, however, is that the viewer allows for their own direct responses, as well as those responses that would initially be inspired by the surrounding controversy.

Much of Tracey Emins' work is initiated by everyday experiences. It is perhaps then essential for Emin that the viewer remains open to the spontaneity of the personal narrative, which she employs. An example of this is featured in a solo exhibition of hers, entitled 'I Need Art Like I Need God.' Emin singled out a particularly critical review that was published in response to the show. The review was placed beside a handwritten anecdote that recounted Emins' personal experience of the critic involved. Emin described how, as a student at the RCA, she was due to have a tutorial with the very same critic. He did not turn up nor did he

appear the following week. He apparently did not apologize for his absence nor did he give any reason. The anecdote continues, remarking that on discussing her annoyance with another tutor, Emin was told not to worry for he was a 'boring old fart who wouldn't have liked your paintings anyway'. (Barrett, 1997, p. 37) By including this piece in her exhibition, Emin confronted the viewer with his/her pre-conceived expectations of her show, i.e. from reading primary reviews, and deconstructed the apparent validity of the critic's comments.

The involvement of the artist

There exists a bounty of information available to the public, which documents and to some extent, governs the individual's public and private life. In this sense, it could be said that the news media have largely returned to their earlier role as popular entertainment. What must be understood however, is that whilst the confrontational aspect is clear between that of the art and the media, they must also work closely, although carefully, in order for an artists recognition considered in a mature and serious manner.

Tracey Emin is now just as famous for her self-confessional works as she is for her drunken outburst on live television after the 1997 Turner prize ceremony. During a debate on the question whether 'painting is dead', Emin announced she didn't know what everyone was talking about, got up and walked out. This performance had some advantages. What occurred in the publics mind, post-Emin's drunken performance, was sensitivity towards her as a person, as a result of a genuine appreciation of her honesty. The audience became privy to Emin's innermost thoughts, which

revealed her as a complex individual who suffered the same insecurities and suppressed feelings as everyone else. In a Sunday times supplement, Emin remarks "I think I've become like a mini-hero after being drunk on TV, and I've certainly got people's hearts because I was very vulnerable... after that, in the street, lots of people stopped me and said hello. Cheers. Nice one." (Times, 1997, p. 34) The only media sensationalism that Emin appears to have recorded is in echoing many of people's thoughts that art is so pretentious.

Tracey Emin's individual style is in a manner of self-confession. Her past and her memories (some being her most intimate) become her work. Therefore one could say that her drunken performance was typically attention seeking in the way that much of her work might be viewed. Whether that is seen to be true or not depends on individual taste, however it would be perfectly true to say that her reaction was typically Emin.

The sincerity of Emins' work has become jeopardized by the sensationalism of her fame. She therefore has a responsibility to ensure that her work is properly read. Her work is often in danger of being simply about the fun and frolics of Tracey Emin's world, and their appears no pressure on the public which demands for them to stretch their minds a little further than a box of Emins underwear. The honesty that exists in her work might not be about the amount of people she has slept with or whether she is a good lover or not, but is about her concerns with memory of others and ultimately others memories of her. The sadness in Emins world is intrinsically woven through her consistent references to her physical needs. Emin appears to be consistently dealing with the emotional traumas of the need for security and the fear of loneliness. However she

embraces her position of celebrity status to such an extent that it is difficult to appreciate the genuine sense of loss and pain that Emin will often recount in her videos and drawings.

The inter-play between the media's depiction of the recent British artists has helped to concrete the myth of the artist as outrageous, living life on the ragged edge of disaster. Images such as the front cover of the Times supplement add more and more hype to the YBA myth, depicting Emin as a slutty, fag smoking, confess all, 'bird' which it seems the public want to see her as (fig. 9). The personal nature of Emins work and her success in a culture, which thrives on confessions and revelations, make it difficult to determine the existing context. Media coverage such as this does make it difficult to view the work on an equal basis. Some might experience difficulty approaching a piece by Tracey Emin whilst keeping out of their mind an image of Emins' favorite pair of knickers (Face, no 10, 1997).

The artists should demand for their work to be considered outside the suffocating acronym of the YBA, in order that their art and their reputation are sustained at an informed and mature level. Popularity should be viewed as detrimental to the artist only when there is evidence of it affecting the objectives of the art. Otherwise popularity serves to benefit an art world which until recently, catered only for a small and exclusive percentage of the public.

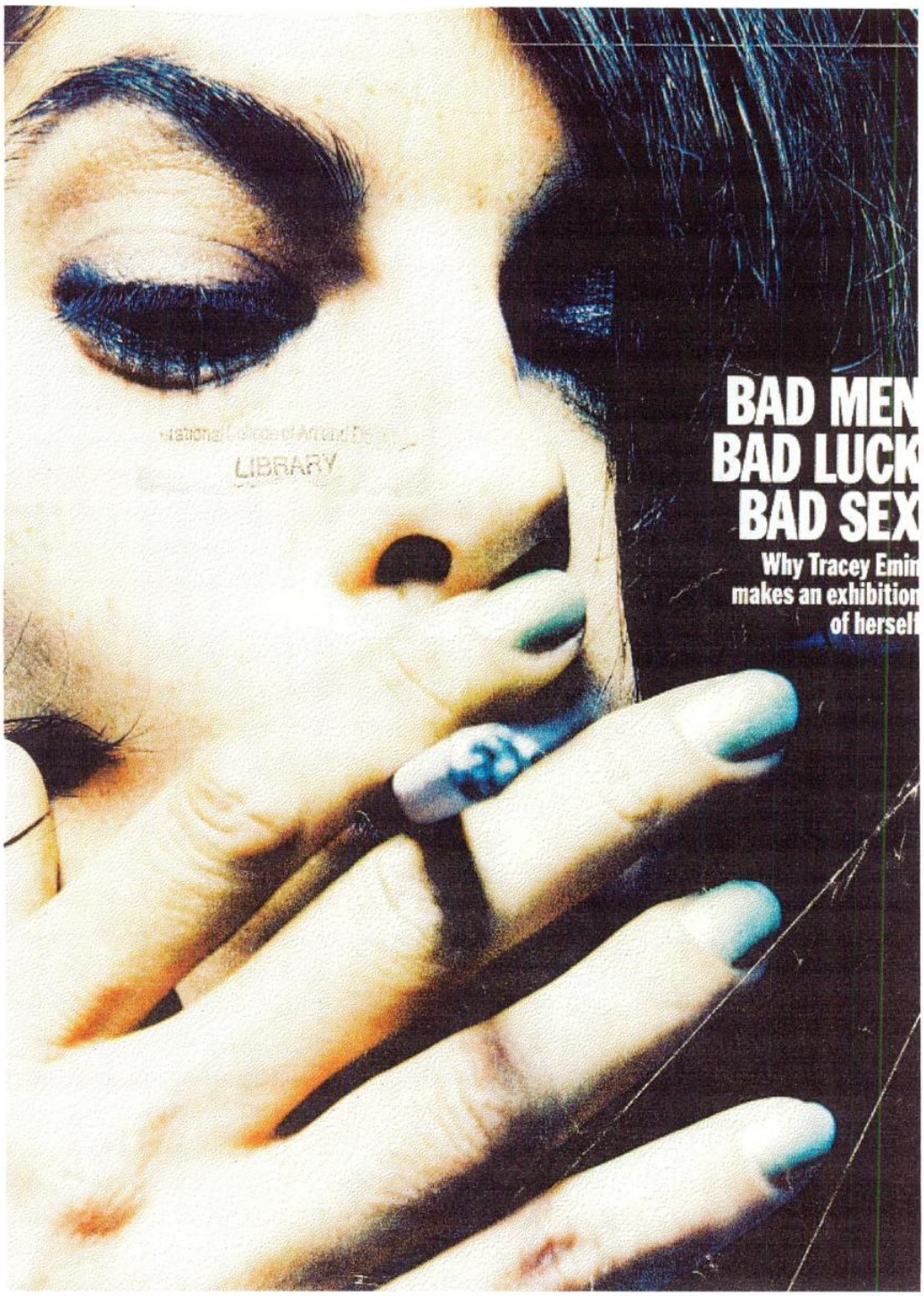

Fig. 10, Sunday Times Supplement, *Bad Men, Bad Luck*, Bad Sex, 1997.

CONCLUSION

David Barrett points out that there are as many theories of art as there are artists (Barrett, 1996, p. 33). The concept of the philistine is perhaps only one of them. However, it provides a critical evaluation of recent British art, otherwise thought to be little more than media sensationalism. The concept of the philistine offers a contemporary critical theory that illustrates the importance of including a wider range of cultural categories within the critical observations of the aesthetic. The artists who are under scrutiny are being criticized for being immature as a result of their re-defining their cultural positions of artist and individual as integral to everyday experience. Voluptuous desires are being acknowledged by this new generation of artists as first nature, therefore needing no intellectual introduction. Roberts asks that we "imagine a world that is less governed by formal hierarchies and engorged by lovers of fine art" (Roberts, 1996, p. 3).

The growing tendency of British artists happily to embrace the everyday, supports Beech and Roberts argument for a more critical understanding of philistine forms of attention. Artists are now responding to their everyday surroundings and therefore refuse to shame for engaging with the everyday. Beech and Roberts argue that the philistine will not allow itself to be judged by a prevailing dominant taste. Beech and Roberts do not see the philistine as simply thumbing its nose up at authority (something that

the *young* generation are often accused of.) Instead they characterize this stubbornness as a refusal to be marginalised by an aesthetic critique which has traditionally suppressed forms of attention it associates with the philistine. This concludes by asking how can the aesthetic know what it has not experienced.

The artists now see themselves as us. They do not distinguish their art as positioned outside of a common popular culture. The artists could therefore be understood as making no hierarchical distinction between their personal pleasure and the pleasures to be had from art. It is due to this lack of critical distancing that the work is accused of exhibiting a disregard for theory.

Recent British art has also been criticized for its easy success and popularity. Historically, the avant-garde existed always as an alternative to popular tastes. However, the philistine does not propose the type of radicalism that is associated with the avant-garde. Instead it seems that what is disturbing about the work is its very closeness to the mainstream of popular culture. This may be considered as threatening to the traditional notion of fine arts' exclusive autonomous distancing from the horrors of consumer culture. The sensationalism of young British art has increased a general interest in art, especially amongst a younger generation. Despite the every day context of recent British art, the works are still reaching exorbitant prices: Lucas' work has fetched up to $100, 000 in New York. No matter what the impasses are over the attentions to a common popular culture, art is still a luxury item and therefore a form of elitist materialism.

An important aspect of the success of the Brit-art relies largely on its promotion by galleries, catalogue producers and the media hype surrounding it. Simon Ford argues that the 'Young British Artist ' is something of a myth. Descriptions such as 'rudery' and 'in yer face' offer no more than a miss-informed sweeping statement. Roberts is guilty to some degree of this, by presenting the dissonant female voice in terms such as "Bawdy, mischievous and wants to show you how good at football she is." Ford points out that the "origination and propagation of the myth are firstly the responsibility of the contemporary arts establishment"(Ford, 1996, p. 8). As long as the catalogues immediately confront the viewer with titles such as 'Minky Manky' or 'Strop Art' the viewer is already been spoon fed a pre-conceived idea as to what type of mannerisms should be looked for in the art. This highlights the constrictive and shallow critique that the YBA's have been offered.

Fredric Jameson suggests that post-modernism's most radical insight may be seen as the view that the bourgeois individual subject is not only a thing of the past but also a myth (Waugh, 1993, p. 184). However, it appears that the evidence of a bourgeois structure in a post-modern consumer society is represented by the still existent snobbery of the middle classes' contempt for an art that engages with the social and personal experiences that might at times lie outside a conservative and 'high brow' aesthetic ideal.

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