

Back to the old school

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There's a crisis in contemporary art. The jump into the laissez faire joys of the popular and profane, propelled by a surge of deceitful anti-intellectualism and pap travelogue art criticism, has left a vacuum where once there was a proud reflective heart. As the homogeneous products of years of economic selection and pruning in art schools stumble forward, bereft of an understanding of what exactly the conceptualism of neo is all about, those with memories long enough to remember effective political action, critical discourse and radical art sharpen their collective knives ready for the innocent chipmunks of British Art.

A backlash is under way.

The powerful combination of boredom, irritation and anger at the inane, self satisfied, distended head of British Art has seen to that. The vapid marketing of an art purporting to celebrate the popular, the everyday, has exhausted itself and its audience. This rediscovery of the joys of nestling next to the glory of popular culture has been marketed as conveniently side-stepping the traditional image of art as elitist and socially exclusive. However the self serving belief that deep rooted political, economic and social gulfs can be magically vanished by popular gestures—'some techno music in a gallery'—is once again crumbling. That we've been here before is perhaps all the more frightening. Such transparent moves towards the popular were the easy crutch of many a second rate curator and artist during those 'halcyon days of the sixties'. As Robert Garnet has written, this tourist infatuation with the pleasures of the popular is "the easiest and oldest move in the book".¹

Similarly while reports of their demise are no doubt over exaggerated, the architects of much of this hogwash, the international super curators, are also finally starting to get some flack. Bloated on the easy pickings of "a generation of artists, who have largely disavowed their claims to authorship, who create a

deliberately dumb art that refuses to answer back, that can, therefore neatly be slotted into any theme or group exhibition 'authored by a big name curator'², their time is finally up. When artists renowned for whoring after any authority start complaining about the stupidity of curators, you know something is rotten in the belly of the beast. However, accepting the reality and need for some kind of developed critique of what passes as British Art is one thing, but my troubling suspicion is that in the rush to expose the phantasm of success this critique is slowly turning into a crusade to roll back the advances that have been made. Separating out the strands of interest from a morass of hype and confusion is obviously difficult. Yes much 'yba' is laddish, puerile, ignorant and numbingly celebratory of 'popular culture', but equally within this murky nebula much is of genuine interest. My worry about the domino effect of a backlash is that in the ferment of its reactionary zeal, it loses sight of facets of artists' work which exist outside the hype. One aspect of the backlash against the gravy train of young British art has centred on its perceived laddishness. With the media frenzy for art there has increasingly appeared to be a confluence between the new lad, loaded with hedonistic virility, and the art word doppelganger, pissed on Becks.

In a culture cancerously consumed with misogynist contempt for women, over loaded with images of pubescent 'chicks' and where statistics of male violence are escalating, this celebration of a masculinity of social irresponsibility, stupidity and ignorance has none too surprisingly deeply angered many. For not only has the new lad been held up as a paradigm of nineties masculinity, but perhaps more troubling this cut-out has become the sanctioned template for 'successful' women artists. The spectre of the female lad shouting 'bollocks' and flashing her tits haunts much of the discussion about 'yba'.

In the recently published book 'Occupational Hazard' Heidi Reitmaier succinctly articulates her own hostility at this resurrected fake in a pointed critique of Sarah Lucas' work. For Reitmaier, Lucas' constructed persona and coverage are all too familiar. Granted the honorary position of being one of the boys, Lucas' transgressive acts are then arrogantly 'rubber stamped' by male critics. Her work far from being emancipatory, is for Reitmaier, all too easily assimilated, discussed and categorised. As Reitmaier writes, the consequence of all this is to "reduce the work to trite clichés which demand attention only because of how loud one is shouting rather than what one is shouting about".³

This scenario is depressingly familiar. From the Bloomsbury group to the abstract expressionists, artistic culture has always tokenistically welcomed the "mannish female artist". When, as Reitmaier writes, "Lucas is represented as a particular kind of person and then fostered on all and sundry as the *fait accompli* of feminism, feminist art and feminist art criticism"⁴, you can hear generations of woman artists/writers howl in despair.

Reitmaier's assessment of the highly restricted space created by the manufacture of a sanctioned template for 'transgressive' behaviour is spot on. Unfortunately I find her argument loses much of its persuasiveness when the work of Cathy de Monchaux is presented as a more expansive paradigm of what a nineties women artist could be. It's in Reitmaier's championing of de Monchaux that the dangers of a backlash against 'yba' become apparent. Far from critiquing the more ridiculous rhetoric of funky, vulgar British art, we instead are presented with what amounts to little more than a reactionary retreat.

In sighting de Monchaux as a corrective to Lucas and all the 'Bad Girls', Reitmaier proposes that de Monchaux's work "will purposefully disallow the reduction of the female and contemporary artistic femininity to an essential Bad Girl Stance".⁵ However, I find it more likely that one limiting essentialist conception of gender identity is simply replaced by another.

Fundamental to an appreciation of de Monchaux's work is a belief in gender polarity. Reitmaier writes that de Monchaux engages in a "subversion of spheres of male artistic technical facility [that brings] to the fore the hierarchy between male artisan and female crafts person".⁶ Now once upon a time this modernist hierarchy did exist, and lo it was omnipotent. The trashing of 'female' craft skills by the testosterone fueled mythology of 'masculine' technical prowess ruled the roost in many a sculpture and painting department. Now, although they linger on in some art school departments, such dinosaurs are nearly extinct. Artists today simply don't share a belief in the kind of sex role theory⁷ that undermines the perceived success and frisson of de Monchaux's work. Incompetence and technical mastery are traits which can be more



uniformly found across the artistic sphere. To repeat this idea only goes to further entrench such essentialist gender positions. Questions of skill and competence are important in the construction of value in art, but I think what Reitmaier misses is that in partly rejecting the titillation and shock tactics she sees in Lucas' work, she ignores the formalist conservatism central to de Monchaux's success. If in Reitmaier's argument assimilation is equated with failure, then I think she has to acknowledge that de Monchaux, like Rachel Whiteread, is also capable of being

securely slotted into a dominant paradigm for the very reason that in playing off 'masculine' technical skills against 'feminine' craft skills, she keeps faith with a division that maintains gender polarity in the art world.

I think Reitmaier has mistaken de Monchaux's conservatism for radical resistance because, justifiably angered and bored by the hyperbole of 'yba', she has jumped from a backlash position, capable of critique, to a reactionary, knee jerk one. 'yba' is a spectacle of consumption, market driven, over saturated (the use of the catch-all brand name 'yba' tells you as much), and inevitably it is flatulent with inane pronouncements and incestuous bed hopping. But Reitmaier, in offering de Monchaux as an alternative to the excesses of contemporary British Art, seems guilty of hankering after the kind of scrupulous shiny package of ethical moral and artistic tidiness that was thrown up in the eighties by critical postmodernists, then thrown out in the early nineties by the reactionary backlash of 'yba' anti-intellectualism.

"There's nothing wrong with me, I'm normal."⁸

The pushing of Lucas and artists like Tracy Emin and Gillian Wearing as the acceptable face of nineties feminism is reductive. (Though no more than the similar championing of artists like Mary Kelly in the eighties. The closures then on what was legitimate behaviour for women are undoubtedly responsible for the bad girl backlash.) Reitmaier's anger at the rubber stamping of Lucas' persona—"Why on earth should a bunch of male artists and critics find themselves in a position to grant license concerning just what an icon for women, or a particular woman, should be?"⁹—is, within a still male dominated art world, more than a little understandable! But beyond this rubber stamping, appropriation and assimilation there are aspects of Lucas' work which highlight why she is more than a shouting, tit flashing ineffectual laddette.

Lucas' work has been popular and much vaunted by male critics. Reitmaier is correct that the impetus for much of this praise has partly, once again stemmed from the need by those men with art world power to generate an illusory gleam of equality in a masculine art world (looking at this years Turner prize, my cynical side can't help but feel they're working their way through a list—a Scot, a woman, a black). But running parallel with this, I can't help but feel the championing of an artist like Lucas is also predicated on a frustration amongst many artists, critics and visitors on not seeing questions of masculine identity and sexuality articulated within art practice (obviously many gay artists, writers and critics have pioneered mapping this terrain, helping to destabilise gender certainties). That Lucas has affected a masculine front, has played with its tropes, is possibly the reason her work is of interest to men whose own sense of identity is as contradictory, confused and volatile as has been ascribed to femininity.

The plethora of books on 'masculinities' is evidence

ABOVE RIGHT AND BELOW: Dave Beech: *After the great divide—Oh yeah*



enough that there is widespread academic interest in the topic. While admittedly many of these books are nothing more than conservative attacks on feminism ('off to the woods men, those viragos will never sap my life-force') many reveal that today, probably more than any other time in the last century, the certainties of male identity are crumbling. As Lynne Segal in her book 'Slow Motion' remarks: "the evidence for the increasing intellectual, emotional and physical impoverishment of men today is startling".¹⁰ While of course any such pronouncement of a crisis in 'masculinity' have to be placed against what Segal calls "the great contradiction of our time [namely that] as the twentieth century draws to a close, men appear to be emerging as the threatened sex; even as they remain, everywhere the threatening sex, as well"¹¹, it's hard to escape the feeling, that finally what Homi Bhabha has called "the prosthetic reality"¹² of 'masculinity' is being dragged into the spotlight.

Integral to this "prosthetic reality" and to the contradiction Segal pinpoints, is the symbolic weight that 'masculinity' has ascribed to it. As Segal remarks it is precisely "because 'manhood' still has the symbolic weight denied to 'womanhood' that men's apparent failings loom so large—to men themselves and to those around them."¹³ It's this symbolic weight which has largely been left unexamined within artistic culture. The insecurities, contradictions and ambiguities of masculinity rarely surface within heterosexual, western art in the twentieth century because as in other social spheres "to speak of masculinity in general, *sui generis*, must be avoided at all costs".¹⁴

Lucas' acting out of 'laddish' stereotypically 'male' behaviour can at least be recommended for attempting to look into this "symbolic weight". In works such as 'Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab' and 'Au Nature!' the experience of a feminine voice articulating and representing the brutish reality of misogyny, rooted in a direct social experience, secures the work a power lacking in the more abstract, formalist work of artists like de Monchaux and Helen Chadwick. Similarly in many of her photoworks, Lucas' swaggering laddish front confuses the notion that such behaviour is the property of purely men.

Oscillating between gendered roles, her work thus goes some way towards blurring any simplistic notions of the polar, binary nature(s) of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. Instead of the kind of space de Monchaux offers where the supposedly secure identities of male and female are ping-ponged between, Lucas' works create a space where a kind of gender vertigo is experienced.

Central to the disputes that have raged over 'yba' is a struggle over what is the best methodology for artists to pursue. In the polarised climate of the art world, where one scene is replaced by another, the struggle in the nineties has dominantly been represented as existing between those lining up behind a wholesale embrace of theory and those preferring a practice stemming from lived experience. Lucas' engagement is, unlike say de Monchaux or other previous overtly feminist artists like Helen Chadwick, as equally grounded in the contingencies and vicissitudes of the everyday as it is the world of theory. Lucas has referred to this as working in the space between the ideal and the actual, testing the veracity of theory in the realities of the everyday.

It's no doubt indicative of the artworld that a woman is one of the first to look into the more disturbing and difficult areas of masculinity. Probing the darker recesses of the male psyche have of course been familiar turf for artists in other mediums. Scorsese's trilogy of films, 'Mean Streets', 'Taxi Driver' and 'Raging Bull'; Donald Cammell's 'Performance'; and Beat Takeshi's 'Sonatine', all cover similar ground, frequently in an infinitely more complex manner. In such films there is a deeper consciousness of how labour, power and desire overlap and intercon-

nect in the genesis of 'masculinities'. Of course the professional hubris endemic in the artworld, ensures the idea that artists in other mediums have already covered the ground is left as a scotoma. That art might actually be seriously lagging behind other mediums with regard to such questions as gender, is something little discussed (except as proof, for connoisseurs and conservatives, that it should stick to what it knows).

Other less well known artists like Chad McCail, Deborah Holland and Dave Beech¹⁵, similarly engage with questions of identity in ways which moves their practices beyond the theoretically illustrative work of the eighties. In Deborah Holland's work there is a similar play with the gestures and guises of both masculinity and femininity. Whether she's acting out the classic 'lads' act of assertion, flashing your arse—mooning, or trying on the glamour of a high priestess of celluloid, her work simultaneously uses glossy, seductive attractiveness to 'suck' the viewer into a space where "gender vertigo" disrupts traditional divisions. Chad McCail's drawings and paintings construct narratives which detail instances of infant libidinal desires being suffocated and chastised within the regulatory spaces, such as the home and school. In his scrupulously well drawn storyboards, children can be found looking up their mothers skirts, while adult hands probe the trousers of small children. In detailed worlds which capture all the paraphernalia of childhood, the complex, contradictory elements in the construction of identity reveal themselves.

Dave Beech has attracted a certain amount of vilification for his most recent work. It's perhaps none too surprising that his acting out of classic tabloid male fantasies have been taken as revealing his own desires (the combination of the rabid thirst for autobiography, with a dose of North London ignorance and snobbery about a Warrington male have seen to that). Finding images of a man sitting in bed supposedly after a three in the bed romp, or lasciviously looking up a woman's skirt, those artworld ostriches with their head in the sand have dumbly accused him of misogyny. This is instructive; when artists like Beech attempt to draw attention to the very "prosthetic reality" of masculinity Homi Bhabha pinpointed, the reaction is often one which prefers to deny the existence of such fantasies. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Such 'vulgar', 'brutish' fantasies don't sit too well in our increasingly bureaucratic and responsible artistic culture. Failing to fall into line, to rationalise, control and regulate the darker matter of identity (this censorious climate is reminiscent of the chastising of women in the feminist movement who refused to dump their enjoyment in fashion), his playing out of wayward, insensitive fantasies dents the notion that such incorrect behaviour can be fixed.

It's been rather too common to talk about masculinity as an homogeneous entity to simply equate masculinity with male dominance. The violence endemic in hegemonic masculine culture, the strenuous steering away from anything which might smack of weakness or inferiority, is frequently spoken about as something which both sits relatively easily with the majority of men and is empirically true. It's alarming how often essentialist conceptions of male identity rear their head, how some characteristics are regarded as 'naturally' belonging to men. However, beyond all the bogus flagwaving about 'yba', 'Cool Britannia' etc., artists like Holland, Beech, McCail and Lucas have engaged with questions of gender and sexuality in a nexus where the pleasures *and* pains of the everyday, the popular, intersect with those of theory, in practices which go some way to destabilising such certainties. If a backlash evolves into a reactionary u-turn, the possibilities opened up in the last five years for a more expansive discussion of questions of identity will be jettisoned. I'd rather not go back to the old school.

Notes

- 1 Robert Garnett (1998) 'Britpopism and the Populist Gesture'. Published in *Occupational Hazard*, p. 24, published by Black Dog publishing.
- 2 Ibid. p. 20.
- 3 Heidi Reitmaier (1998) *What are you Looking At? Moi?*. Published in *Occupational Hazard*, p. 118. Black Dog Publishing.
- 4 Ibid. p. 122
- 5 Ibid. p. 125
- 6 Ibid. p. 126
- 7 Bob Connell describes sex role theory as being "linked to a structure defined by biological difference, the dichotomy of male and female—not to a structure defined by social relations. This leads to categoricism, the reduction of gender to two homogeneous categories, betrayed by the persistent blurring of sex differences with sex roles. Sex roles are defined as reciprocal; polarisation is a necessary part of the concept". 'Masculinities', p. 26, published Polity 1995.
- 8 Chas in Donald Cammell/Nicholas Roeg's *Performance*.
- 9 Heidi Reitmaier, *What are you looking at. Moi?*, published in *Occupational Hazard*, p. 122.
- 10 Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion Changing Masculinities Changing Men*, published 1990 Virago. Introduction p. 2.
- 11 Ibid. Introduction p. 1. Some quick statistics illustrate this. In Britain 96.2 % of all major companies are controlled by men. Globally 90 % of all political representatives are men. Concurrently of course, as a consequence of global and national economic restructuring, men's unemployment is rapidly growing, in Britain male unemployment outstrips that of women. The incumbent effects on those men denied access to the "symbolic weight" of masculinity i.e. breadwinners, find themselves suffering higher than average ill health and depression. The suicide rate amongst young men is particularly indicative of this.
- 12 Homi Bhabha, *Are You a Man or a Mouse?* quoted in Lynne Segal *Slow Motion* published by Virago 1990. p. 23
- 13 Ibid. p. 2
- 14 Ibid. p. 22
- 15 All of these artists have or will be exhibiting at the Collective Gallery, Edinburgh.