Citation:

Gaskin, V. K. & Gaskin, V. (2025) From the East End to the Mall: Issues in Curation, Class and DIY Cultures, 1991-2000 [Online]. Leeds Beckett University. Available from: <https://figshare.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/articles/thesis/From_the_east_end_to_the_mall_issues_in_curation_class_and_DIY_cultures_1991-2000/30712532/1> [Accessed 25 November 2025]. - Link

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FROM THE EAST END TO THE MALL: ISSUES IN CURATION, CLASS AND DIY CULTURES, 1991-2000.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Leeds Beckett University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 14th, 2025.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis was conducted over seven years, during which many life events occurred around me and an incremental growth in my confidence took place. I would like to thank myself for remaining engaged throughout the difficult times.

During my primary research, I was privileged to receive enthusiastic interview contributions from a host of artists, curators and writers with whom I shared a cultural history. Dr Christine Atha, Robin Rimbaud, Michael Clifford, Mark Webber, Tom McCarthy, Rod Dickinson, Philip Ilson, Nick Luscombe, Philip Dodd, Simon Green, Lisa le Feuvre, David Burrows, Simon Bedwell, Steve Rushton, Gavin Turk, Sue Webster, Richard Billingham, David Taborn, Darren Coffield, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, Arwa Haider, Jeremy Cooper, Lois Keiden, Julian Stallabrass. Thanks for the memories.

I extend a posthumous thank you to the late Joshua Compston for teaching me that art belongs first and foremost in the everyday. What I learned during our friendship became a lifetime of inspiration.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, past and present, for their patience, direction and sage advice. Professor Jayne Raisborough, Dr Katherine Harrison, Professor Karl Spracklen, Professor Simon Morris and Dr Sam Holland.

I would like to personally thank a number of cheerleaders along the journey who upheld their belief in my abilities and the importance of the subject. Professor Sue Miller, Jenny Hoy, Berry Wilson, Kay Gaskin, Patsy Gilbert, Lisa Kitto and Lisa Hudson.

I would like to thank my husband, Professor Joe Wilson. You were there when I doubted myself, patient when frustrated and stood behind me all the way.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Roxanne Gaskin-Wilson. Let your neurodiversity be your strength and distinction in life.

Abstract

This thesis examines the curatorial strategies found within the independent art projects and curatorial practices in East London during the 1990s. Specifically, it evaluates the initiatives which encouraged collaborative dialogue and artistic cultures which proposed an alternative model for art practice. Drawing on data from original interviews with contemporary artists, curators and writers, autoethnographic accounts from my time in the East London milieu and my own curatorial practices at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), this research is curated by its author. This study critically examines the cultural democratisation and the rebirth of modernist-inspired forms of self-institutionalisation, which have all too often been sidelined in popular accounts in the art press and wider publications. It examines the role and function of the social event, such as the private view and club night, as a significant popular cultural agent that connected previously siloed strata within the art world and blurred the lines between art and entertainment. It demonstrates that DIY art and curatorial practices were forms of social and cultural experimentation, resolving in a brief yet vital independence from the institutionalised establishment of the art world. These neglected, more critically engaged practices stood in opposition to the 'art headlines' around the Young British Artists (yBa) of the period. It further addresses the liberation of curatorial practice, which was a catalyst for an expanded audience and narrative. Together, these areas of DIY practice proposed an alternative model for the presentation and mediation of art. This thesis concludes that the institutionalisation of DIY curatorial practice during the 1990s impacted a democratised participation in and consumption of contemporary culture, directly influencing art and culture today.

Key Words: Curation, Social, Art, Institution, Club Nights, Reenactment, Scene, ICA, Friendship as Method, Autoethnography.

Introduction

This thesis is a critical examination of new, independent curatorial practices emanating from the contemporary art scene in London during the 1990s. It offers an unprecedented insight into the curatorial strategies devised by the independent art scene active within East London between 1991 and 2000 and later deployed into the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA). I was an active agent there: firstly, as an intern in Joshua Compston's project space, Factual Nonsense and then working at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) to become its Director of Live Arts, aged 27. This period in London's art scene is well documented within the cultural histories of the 'young British artists' (yBa) (Muir, 2009; Stallabrass, 2000; McCorquodale, 1998; Collings, 1997). The construction of a hitherto absent London contemporary art market formed around the conscious branding of this selected group of British artists remains the hegemonic narrative of this period. This was further embedded into the dominant discourse through the political export of British culture under the New Labour mantra of 'Cool Britannia'. Subsequently, the impact of innovative independent curatorial strategies and practices has been largely neglected by academia. Further, its impact on the art institution is undocumented, affording a significant gap in the research on this period.

This thesis explores what I will refer to as 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) practices. These arose from a diffusion of contemporary art activities and cultures emerging from largely artist-led scenes which formed outside of the markets and institutions. Curatorial strategies are a vital area of research because they represent the balance of power in the access to and mediation of visual and live culture (Lee, 2005; Hunt, 2018; Noronha, 2024). The period under review witnessed two fundamental changes in curatorship: the emergence of the professionalised global curator, affiliated with the rapid growth of the London art market and the art Biennale (referred to henceforth as *Biennalisation)* (O'Neil, 2012). Secondly, multifarious approaches to curating the social space / time took place. DIY strategies in 'curating the social' manifest

in the development of prolific and accessible artistic communities, generating a greater drive for the integration of art into the fabric of the everyday. Art as a social practice challenged the conventions of high art and curatorial gatekeeping systems prevalent at the time, affording both a re-understanding of art as an everyday pursuit and as a site for social engagement and belonging.

This refocuses attention on the largely neglected independent scene and its impact on a new set of considerations for the mediation and consumption of art. Further, my own account of reappropriating some of these strategies into the art institution offers a reconsideration of the live programme I curated, which externalised the vision of the ICA and established a social platform for engagement and interdisciplinary curation. This transition fundamentally expanded the reach of the institution beyond the committed few. It connected disparate programme spaces to recontextualise the institute as a social site for hybrid cultural engagement. This directly challenged the conventions of the institute by extending programming into the night-time economy, redefining the credentials of the cultural practitioner to those active in the club and subcultures of the capital and providing access for a new, young generation of creatives to redefine what an Institute of Art could be at the end of the twentieth century.

Context

In cultural terms, the 1990s represented a series of lasts. It was the last days of analogue culture, which privileged print, discourse and real-time human interaction. In turn, this contributed to a stream of independently curated activities led, in the main, by artists. This was the last era of the physical artist community undertaking residency in the streets of Shoreditch and Hoxton. The availability and accessibility to post-industrial warehouses and shops in East London allowed a generation of young artists to establish themselves in large empty spaces with low to negligible rents. This was the last era of post-university/art school social benefits, which allowed many in this new community to reside and develop their

practice within the capital. Arising from the democratising policies contained within the Coldstream Report (1960), art school education became a viable option for a much wider demographic of students, enriching the cultural dialogue with popular and subcultural histories from the towns and cities outside of the capital. Interdisciplinary teaching and studio practice formed communities of practitioners from diverse strands of activity. Signature styles of teaching emanated from individual art schools, creating a form of branding and tight-knit community which transferred into the DIY scenes of the 1990s. Set against the cultural austerity of the Thatcher years, significant policies, specifically extending social benefits to recent graduates, enabled student-formed communities to remain and reside within London upon graduation. Further, the initiative of the Enterprise Allowance Scheme (EAS) (1983) enabled independent forms of cultural enterprise and identity building, this being a catalyst for later independent practices. This constituted a brief moment in which communities of artists, independent of both the market and the institution, rethought what art may be, how it may be organised and who it was for.

1987-1996 witnessed a unique moment in the London art world, affording artists the opportunity to exercise control over their own practice and circumnavigate the conventions and keepers of the greater art world. By the later years of the 1990s, the British art scene had largely polarised into two distinct camps: the commercial, closely aligned with the institution, and the self-determined activities within independent artist-led projects. This division was further evident in the division of the emerging mainstream art press, fronted by the rise of the influential *Frieze* magazine and, conversely, a low-budget, critical discourse which was played out in the DIY cultural press. Both strands served their distinct purpose: the former to generate global attention to the market successes of a new generation of British artists, (later branded as young British artists yBa's) and the latter to pursue a critical discourse around the activities of the independents. Together, this brought fundamental change to the status and mediation of contemporary British art. For the first time, 'the contemporary artist' was not only recognised as a viable profession but one which

circumnavigated the traditional, laboured professional progression routes into the art world, challenging the canons that upheld the art market and the institution. Within a brief period, artists self-branded, organised and curated their own practice, blending outputs from both popular and erstwhile high cultural domains. By expanding the platforms for cultural encounters, a vibrant scene emerged, absent of the gatekeepers and interpreters of the past. This signified a greater democratisation of art, forming a template for new audiences and practitioners through the social integration of culture. Art became a daily practice, embedded within the dialogue and new communities engaged through the social connection. In turn, the institution was ushered into a new territory populated by diverse and 'unqualified' creatives with alternative notions of what could constitute a contemporary culture. Traditional boundaries between areas of practice were blurred, and the authority of the curator as commander and spokesperson of the cultural object became, for a moment, obsolete. When artists asserted their own conditions and curatorial strategies, the institution had little option but to respond accordingly. Resonating into the present day is an institutional accountability to the needs and concerns of a wider public: *cultural participation*. A refocusing on art as a lived experience rather than an elite encounter. Following the groundbreaking example of the ICA's live programme, late-night programming became a common feature of the gallery, combining the curated theme of the gallery programme into a social mix to be experienced and consumed at leisure. Fundamentally, the curatorial will was subsumed as a diversity of voices and tastes and were afforded institutional attention.

My lived experiences of the independent arts scene during my internship at Factual Nonsense 1995-1996 were one of rapid innovation in curatorial practices, which were situated outside and at times in conflict with the dominant canons of art. These DIY activities proposed relatable modes for participation and access to the systems of art for those from a non-privileged background, resonating with my own experiences. They widened the cultural debate to address notions of pleasure, entertainment and popular cultures, affording these hitherto neglected areas sincerity and agency. Ultimately, they underwrote the curatorial

principles I constructed at the ICA, which sought to externalise the institution's curatorial and operational fabric to expand access and authorship. The enriched vehicle of the private view within the independent scene was equally impacting. Primarily a social context for celebrating the exhibition, these events became vital settings in forming the dialogue and connections between disparate cultural agents. Drawing an audience en masse, a communal understanding of a cultural experience was formed, providing an instrumental template for the greater live programme I went on to pursue. No authoritative voice prevailed at the private view, but a lively discourse from a cross-section of the public, both within and outside the official art world.

Within the expanded manifestos of Factual Nonsense, a pro forma was created proposing detailed strategies by which art could be instilled as a golden thread conjoining aspects of the everyday. Whilst utopian ideals, they were revolutionary by proposing a rethinking of art and culture, which thrived aside of institutional and market concerns. That art was so vital it needed to be embedded within the rudimentaries of the everyday was hugely inspirational for the future generations of artists and curators who embraced culture in a non-discriminatory sense and were convinced of its wholesale ability to produce societal change. Whilst these curatorial strategies have been previously discussed in individual practice, they have not been considered as a movement arising from specific conditions. The democratising impact on the role and relevance of the institution and its ongoing reappraisal as a social site has been greatly neglected.

Therefore, within this thesis, I will focus on the curatorial strategies which embrace the social and the everyday and politics of popular culture and entertainment towards a greater sense of authorship and ownership of culture. The introduction of these strategies into the ICA during the first half of my tenure as Director of Live Arts (1996-2000) forms the focus of the later chapters and case studies.

Finding My Feet

Arising from a working-class background in northern England, my formative experiences of art and culture were somewhat limited to the local museums and references mediated from high culture into the popular domain. Record sleeves and t-shirt artwork afforded access to cultures which were rarely targeted at mass consumption. As a teenager in Manchester during the late 1980s, I was fortunate to witness the rise of an influential music scene which, through agents such as Morrissey, John Squire and Tony Wilson, signposted a generation to a visual and literary culture beyond that visible in the everyday. This was the trigger point for my interest, education and later curatorial activities in the arts. Crucially, this background embedded within me an implicit understanding that the popular and the 'higher' realms of art were, in many ways, engaged practices differentiated only in terms of class interpretation. I studied for a degree in history at Durham and then a master's in the history of art at the Courtauld Institute of Art. Both academic institutes I attended had a heavy presence of students who had benefited from cultural education and experience at an early age. Theirs was a formal understanding of culture, one which largely upheld the areas of 'high' arts to the neglect of those found in the popular realm. Their accomplishment in the languages of classical music, opera and art history were fluent and vocal. These formative experiences instilled an understanding of the role of art and culture in the construction and maintenance of the class system in the UK, this being something I have subsequently sought to contest throughout my life.

Upon graduating in 1995, I remained in London due to the provision of benefits payments accessible at that time. This afforded me the time and means to explore the emerging art scene, which was evolving at great speed. Through a chance reading of a Guardian article, I learned of a burgeoning art impresario who resided in East London, Joshua Compston. I undertook an internship at his project space, Factual Nonsense, though only there for a matter of five months, this was an avalanche of education, being positioned at the centre of a burgeoning independent community of artists. The pace and range of cultural

transformation was phenomenal. I was in the eye of a storm, pre-commodified yet established enough to constitute a scene. I had privileged access to the artists and curators who defined this scene and have revived a dialogue with many of these individuals, contributing interviews and materials for this thesis. Upon taking employment at the ICA in 1996, I fully embraced the DIY spirit of East London in the unofficial construction of a new programme of socially based nighttime events. In time, these became sanctified by the institution as part of the official programme, and by 1997, I was appointed as Director of Live Arts.

These experiences emerged from a combination of luck, chance, situation and bullishness, situating my practice unusually between the independent art scene and the institution. The contagion of practices between these sites manifests in the live programming at the ICA from 1997-2000. Not fully belonging to either camp, I embraced the malleability of my position to forge a dialogue between largely estranged cultures. This, in turn, questioned the possibilities of what an Institute of Contemporary Arts might be and for whom it could hold relevance by the late 1990s. I pursued an understanding that the greatest of works were formed not within the purist territory of rigid artistic genre and their governing orthodoxies but could best be found in the messy interplay of cultures. Hybrids, not inbreds.
My insider status, deployed within the official and unofficial camps, gave me a unique perspective on the evolving contemporary cultures and the ability to effect change. Within my role at the ICA I was in many ways invested with the powers of the gatekeeper, with the authority to permit or deny exhibition and define contemporary live culture according to the evolving narratives of performance and live art. This I choose to forego. My experiences in East London confirmed to me that artists were well-skilled at self-organisation and mediation. Further, through their social practices, it was clear that a greater sense of belonging and understanding of culture could be achieved. Given the keys to the institution, I choose to unlock the doors to participation, a calculated risk to reinvest the Institute into the hands of creative thinkers irrespective of prior accreditation. During the ten years I remained

in post, I placed the institute's trust in the hands of a broad range of practitioners to see what may be achieved in the absence of the gatekeeping role. A vastly populated programme ensued with some strands of family resemblance in the club nights, re-enactment genre and single source presentations of performance art, dance and spoken word. Occupying three to four evenings a week, the programme was rich, varied and messy, indicative of wider cultural practice than an overarching curatorial focus.

Today's curatorial practice is a common occurrence adopted by laypeople who arrange their playlist or trainer collections accordingly. As the means of creative production and dissemination infiltrate the everyday, the consumption of culture as a familiar practice has evolved. The conditions and vocabulary with which to navigate this revolution were in many ways formed in the cultural scene of London during the 1990s. Upon reconnecting with many of the artists I worked with from this period, a consensus arose that a unique set of circumstances were at play, and whilst signifying a number of lasts, as discussed, it was a crucial catalyst for change, so very necessary today, which I hope to give credence to in this thesis.

My Approach and Aims

To reconstruct and analyse the period under discussion, I have situated my experience alongside extensive interviews with artists and cultural agents active at the time towards a multi-authored account. I have employed secondary literature active at the time to analyse a real-time reading of the evolving developments in artistic practice, criticism, curatorship and the institution. As a combined methodological approach, this thesis is a curated piece of work.

Though employing an autoethnographic approach, straddling both emotive and analytical camps, 'Autoethnography is a research method involving the description and analysis of personal experience as a conduit to the cultural moment' (Adams et al., 2015), I have

chosen not to prioritise my experiences above those of my interview participants. This is particularly necessary in documenting the emerging DIY scene as I was only briefly at its epicentre. I conducted twenty-six interviews with practitioners and agents active within this scene and the ICA, resurrecting pivotal relationships and friendships active at the time. By combining these lived accounts with my own, I obtained a range of perspectives, creating a unique insight. As I experienced initial unease with the adoption of autoethnography, I have dedicated much of my methodology chapter to interrogating its uses and misuses in constructing a cultural history. By settling on a method of collaborative narrative akin to community storytelling, I intend to achieve a richer and more diverse narrative. Interview materials and personal recollections are juxtaposed with the wider narrative accounts produced during the 1990s. By prioritising the collective voice over pure autoethnography, I aim to generate a more extensive account of the period taken from a range of analytical lenses.

The ethical and scholarly vulnerabilities inherent in the combined use of autoethnography and insider methodologies are debated in detail in chapter two to rigorously interrogate the methods and mitigate against their misuse or lack of credentials. This, I felt, was necessary, for, as I go on to argue, this study belonged in the terrain of ‘we’ rather than ‘me ’- search (Shepherd, Penn, 2023); a collaborative reconstruction of a time and place through an amalgam of voices. To this end, I assumed a dual research position of insider and outsider to account for my combined roles as author, editor and writer (Griffiths,1998). By prioritising the participant’s voice within both the interview structure and the overarching narrative, I have given rigorous ethical consideration to a balanced account. This concurs with the proposition of the ‘Hyphen Status’ (Kamlongera, 2021), a research navigation between narratives, recollections, agendas and memory failure. As I argue in chapter two, an autoethnography of my period would have been woefully insubstantial, averting inconsistency and oppositional accounts to my own.

Research Questions

1: What social, economic and educational factors formed the conditions for an independent artistic community in the 1990s?

2. What were the overlapping independent strategies of the pre-commodified practices of the Young British Artists (yBa) and the East London DIY scene?

3. How did agents in the DIY scene employ the social site as a vehicle for integrating art into the everyday?

4. How did the incorporation of DIY curatorial strategies at the ICA between 1996 and 2000 impact live programming, audience demographics, and the democratisation of the cultural institution?

Theoretical Frameworks

My literature review chapter is largely confined to the overarching subject of this thesis, the evolution of curatorial strategies and the global institutionalised coopting of the social, which I position in contrast to my own practice of curating the social. I draw on a range of curatorial discussions and propositions which accompanied the professionalisation of curatorship and the emergence of the nomadic institutionalised curator figure in the 1990s (O'Neil, 2012; Hoffmann, 2013; Grzinic, 2013). The 'curators' moment' is discussed (Brenson, 1998) as the point when the curatorial voice overshadowed that of the artist, institution and critic to form a period of dominant narratives and mediation methods. The power embedded in the curator is a central focus in my literature, being the pivotal point of distinction between globalised curation and the DIY ethos.

The exhibition '*Life/Live'* (Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville, 1996) and its catalogue essays are a key source for my study. This show undertook a detailed overview of independent art practice in the UK, including artist-run spaces, independent publications and artistic practices which operated outside of the market-led narratives. *Life/Live* identified traits at play in DIY practices, notably the notion of community, dialogue and socialisation. The curation of the exhibition was, significantly, placed in the hands of the participants to consistently reflect the independence of the scene and the diversities of curatorial practices employed. The sociability of the independent scene was dominant in both the exhibition and catalogue as being vital for dialogue and driving towards community. By contrast, a developed globalised art world evolved in which curators pitted their wares against curators and artists against artists in the drive for validation through the market. *Life/Live* celebrated the independent artist on a global platform, which contested the homogeneity of an increasingly corporatised art industry.

A dominant narrative within my Literature Review centres around the publication of '*Relational Aesthetics'* (Bourriaud, 1998/2002) and responses to it (Foster, 2003; Gillick, 2006; Bishop, 2006). *Relational Aesthetics* was a theoretical account of an artistic trend in the 1990s to emphasise social relations and systems within their practice. This was a movement centred on a collection of artists who had been embraced by global institutions and markets, distinguished by their extension of practice into the realms of social agency (Doherty, 2004). Claire Bishop challenges this narrative. As a counter doctrine, Bishop proposed a narrative of '*Relational Antagonism'*, focused on an artist's practice which employs social engagement with marginalised groups to exchange wage for labour. In my critique of both *Relational Aesthetics* and *Relational Antagonism*, I contest they were largely performative and sustainable only within the safe confines of the global institutions, protected by its keepers. As such, they constitute a largely performative engagement with the social.

The importance of *Relational Aesthetics* and its critics for this study lies in the articulation of a sanctified institutional set of cultural concerns that international curators were authoring at this time. As I go on to argue in chapter five, neither '*Relational Aesthetics'* nor '*Relational Antagonism'* afford any attention to the audience nor the ethics of their transactional concerns. The artists concerned were all heavily endorsed on the global stage and financial systems, and the ideologies put forward by Bourriaud, Bishop, et al. are only sustainable within the echo chamber of these systems. In contrast to the diversity of practices, which represented a grassroots form of cultural community and sociability in Life/Live, the London DIY scene, and my curatorial practice, *Relational Aesthetics* and its associates constitute a form of elaborate role play.

Chapter Outlines

The literature review (chapter one) discusses the context and conditions which saw a rapid professionalisation of the role of the curator arising from a 'collaborative turn' (Lind, 2007). 1987 was the starting point with the emergence of the taught postgraduate course on curation and the emergence of the international biennial (O'Neil, 2012). Both factors had a formalising impact on the role of the curator. I argue that the dominant texts produced at this time negate a more fundamental and varied set of independent curatorial practices situated outside of the mainstream. Lessons gleaned from the independent sector concerned with the need for community and socially based dialogue created an expanded notion of curatorship.

Chapter two aims to assess the major narratives around autoethnography as a method rigorously. I assess the role of the autoethnographic researcher in relation to the researched subject and the greater power structures at play. Emotive and analytical autoethnographies are discussed, and the establishment of boundaries between autoethnography and biography are critiqued. The role of the reflexive researcher is considered as its greater relationship to the role of storytelling. The need for the autoethnographic researcher to embody a variety of contrasting dialogues in the construction of the overall narrative is

emphasised and employed within this thesis. This extends the discussion of autoethnography, focusing on the ethical questions arising from insider methodologies and degrees of belonging to the community subject. Issues around personal bias are addressed, and ways to mitigate the extent of bias are acknowledged, though conceding they are accounted for within a wider consideration of the unobtainability of a singular truth in the construction of a historical account (Peniston-Bird, 2009). Linking back to the issues of power balance within the research process, 'friendship-as-method' is proposed, addressing, if not resolving, these greater issues. This I discuss within my interview practice across a range of formal and informal relationships

Within the main body of the thesis, chapter three establishes the socio, educational and political conditions of the 1980s, which enabled the formation and mobilisation of a new British contemporary art world in London. *The Coldstream Report's* (1960) impact on creating an independent art school identity is central. The artist occupation of East London's ex-industrial sites is discussed, though only a cursory discussion of gentrification is afforded as it is well documented elsewhere and beyond the scope of this study. The permissive freedoms of the Enterprise Allowance Scheme and postgraduate access to social security and housing benefits are related through personal accounts. Finally, the importance of East London as a site which generated a community and, in turn, a scene is noted to establish the context for the following discussion on the young British artist.

Chapter four focuses on the early years of what became known as the 'young British artist' generation (1987-1996). By isolating the formative period, I focus on the outlook and attitude of this loose collective and its extensive impact on the creation of a professional field for future artists to enter. Their initial circumvention of the conventions of access to the art world initiated the principles of the self-authorised artist, which had an extensive impact on future generations. The socioeconomic conditions which directly impacted the yBa are discussed, extending into a specific discussion around the doctrines instilled in the teaching styles

operated by Goldsmith College. Employing Simon Ford's influential real-time account of the yBa (1996), I debate the range of 'myths' proposed within his essay, assessing their validity and greater relevance. I integrate interview material from artists who were coopted as affiliated with the yBa scene (Gavin Turk, Richard Billingham, Sue Webster and Rod Dickinson) to discuss their experiences, benefits and resistances. The branding of the yBa as a working-class movement is further deconstructed as an exportable identity.

Whilst I do not endeavour to chronicle the whole of the independent artist's scene during the 1990s, chapter five initially assesses distinct practices of artist-led practices to illustrate the diversity of curatorial activities at play. I specifically evaluate the role of community, dialogue and the social site as common concerns. The following two chapters focus on case studies of key independent practices which were highly influential on the evolution of both the wider scene and my own curatorial practice.

BANK (chapter six) was an expanded discipline formed around three central artists with additional temporary members. BANK operated and spoke as one single voice and operated as the critical satirist narrating the emerging contemporary art scene. Employing media strategies, including a self-published newspaper and a homemade T.V. channel, BANK documented the art world in real-time, albeit through a cynical lens. Their practice as a singular artistic body set the curatorial and thematic agenda to which many artists were invited to contribute. Highly charged and hugely entertaining, the BANK Private View was the key point of mediation for their exhibitions. BANK straddled the yBa and independent scenes yet operated independently to both. Their informal exhibition style and satirical narration identified their practice as unique and impactful on the development of alternative methods of curation and mediation.

Joshua Compston and his gallery/ideology, 'Factual Nonsense' (FN), is the focal study for chapter seven. As two biographies of Compston have been posthumously published, I have

deliberately avoided repeated narratives by focussing on the ideology which governed FN and its realisation and legacy. The focal point is the FN vision to integrate art into the fabric of daily life through the immersion of FN towns and cities, artist-based advertising, funerals and nightclubs. The social was a vital site for cultural integration. It manifested in the curation of three '*fetes*', based on the notion of the village fete, in which artists ran stalls and entertained a diverse body of audiences. By committing two chapters to these case studies, I aim to excavate the unique practices of curation, collaboration and mediation at play.

Chapter eight discusses the extended integration of these strategies into the institution, employing the ICA's formative years as a comparative template and discussion around the institute as an 'Adult Playground' (Reed in Massey, Muir 2014). Sociability and playfulness as methods of mediation were situated alongside a deconstruction of the role of the curator as a gatekeeper during the 1990s. The expanded community of practitioners, many of whom are practitioners of popular culture genres, is then discussed in terms of institutional impact and critical response.

Chapter nine discusses the prominent ICA live programme strand 'club nights', which I initiated in 1997. Employing participant interviews, personal archives and my own autoethnographic accounts, pioneering curatorial strategies in participant and audience democratisation were established, challenging the insularity and gatekeeping of the art institution and impacting globally on a reconsideration of the social function role of the gallery/museum.

Chapter ten reflects upon the programme of cultural reenactment, which began at the ICA, and evolved into a global genre of artistic practice. Tying back to discussions around truth, memory and nostalgia within chapter two, curatorial and artistic risk are addressed. As discussed in the literature review, the discussion around cultural reenactment is reviewed against the backdrop of a global curatorial practice around social relations. I propose that a

greater authentic engagement with audiences was at play within cultural reenactment by necessitating a suspension of disbelief, resulting in a degree of co-authoring of the artistic process. Chapter eleven summarises the thesis findings in the conclusion

Together, this thesis addresses an important omission in the history of curating. It affords vital attention to otherwise marginalised curatorial and artistic practices that emerged from an independent scene of practitioners and their impact on democratising art within the cultural institution.

> “If 1990s art in the UK has left a legacy, it is not just in cautionary tales of celebrity and economics. It lies in lessons about self-organized community and collective activity, however fractious, and in the importance of irreverence towards art’s institutions and pieties.” (Fox, 2013. p.102)

This greater activity has vital importance in cultural presentation and mediation today. As ‘curation’ evolves into an expanded practice of individual organisation and communication of personal data and artefacts, and the tools for cultural production are universalised, the genesis of social curation during the 1990s establishes vital context, methods and strategies for the institution of art to reappraise its relationship with the artist and audience of today. Further class-based gatekeeping is ever-present within arts today creating:

> “a rigged system preventing working class talent thriving in their industries after analysis showed a third of major arts leaders were educated privately” (Bakare, Boyd, Khomami, Vinter, 2025. Online. No Pagination)

affording an urgency for deeper examination of the subject of class and cultural gatekeeping today.

Chapter 1. Literature Review: Curatorial Context

Introduction

The main body of this literature review will focus on the curatorial strategies and contextual debates which were active during the 1990s alongside later reflective consideration. This chapter begins with an overview of the rapid professionalisation of curatorship in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The evolution of 'the uber-curator' will be plotted within the greater accompanying context of the globalisation and 'Bienialisation' (sic) of art (O'Neil, 2012; Hoffmann, 2013; Grzinic, 2013). The term 'uber-curator' is employed by many writers to reflect the seeming omnipresence of the curator in both the creation and exhibition of the artwork by the mid-1990s. In this chapter, I have chosen to adopt JJ Charlesworth's interpretation that the uber-curator stemmed from the "troubling realisation of the potentially unfettered power of the agency of curation" (2007, p.95). As I will go on to argue, curation in the 1990s was fundamentally a game of power politics. Specific curatorial methods established in the decade will then follow, with a discussion on performative curation (Farquharson, 2003; Doherty, 2004; Warholm, 2009; O'Neil, 2012) institutional critique (Charlesworth, 2007) and the phenomenon of the 'nomadic curator' leading to a period which Brenson terms 'The Curator's Moment' (1998) and a self-mythologised evolution of the authorial curator (Kathke, Tomann; Uhlig 2022; Charlesworth, 2007; Heinich and Pollak, 1996; von Bismarck, 2011 and Eleey, 2013). Attention will be drawn to the conditions and debates around the role of the social and participation within curatorial strategies of the 1990s (Doherty, 2004; Bishop, 2006; Nesbit, 2003; Foster, 2004). This will be extended into a review of the narratives and criticisms around Nicholas Bourriaud (1998 / 2002) publication of '*Relational Aesthetics'* (Farquharson, 2003; Choi, 2013; Martin, 2007; Bishop, 2006; Bishop 2004; Doherty, 2004; Charlesworth, 2007).

I will conclude this review by discussing curatorial issues pertaining to both the social site (Roelstraete, 2013; von Hantelmann, Gibson, Holler, et al., 2011; Grzinic, 2013) and cultural re-enactment (Crawshay-Hall 2020; Bishop 2012). This directly relates to the final two case studies in this thesis on the curation of social space and the establishment of the cultural re-enactment genre in which I was active during my employment at the ICA. I will argue that within this body of work, an authentic drive towards participation was at play through the devolution of responsive authorship among artists and audiences. In contrast to the zeitgeist at the time, which elevated the curator and their chosen artists to global fame, my own and independent curatorial practice differentiated through the diffusion of power structures away from the institution and its erstwhile gatekeepers, directed towards the emancipation of the creatives and consumers of the culture.

The Evolving Curator

Any debate around the subject of curatorship in contemporary art is ultimately a discussion around authorship and power relations (O'Neil, 2016). Historically, curate is derived from the Latin 'curatus', the past participle of 'curare', meaning to take care of (Stoppard, 2020). This evolved in the Roman period into the role of caring for the bathhouses and later in medieval times to the designated priest who took care of the mortal soul (Ulrich-Obrist, 2014). Only in the late eighteenth century did the 'responsibility' and 'caring' traits elevate the curator into the position of custodian of the rarified artefact within collections. From this time, the curator assumed a passive authority as a public servant to preserve the past for future generations. This role as intermediatory between the creator of the object of art and the institution formed the origins of the power relations which escalated during the mid-twentieth century (Ulrich-Obrist, 2014). For much of the twentieth century, curatorship continued to be discussed around the terms of power relations and their relationship to institutional production (Fraser, 2005). However, the late 1980s witnessed something of a revolution in British contemporary art (see chapters four and five), rethinking not only the traditional role of the cultural producer (artist) but also of the institution and mediator in turn.

Modern curatorial practice within the art museum was informed by several key directives, such as Winkelmann's theory, which was applied to the Louvre. This theory classified artworks according to a hierarchy and the history of the individual work (Barrett, 2023). This afforded the curator a greater active role in determining the administration of value, education, and morals on behalf of the public. Others, significantly Alfred Barr, founder of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) New York, embraced a more authoritative role again through the implementation of a model for 'the educated consumer' (Klonk, 2009), one instilled with cultural education. This was situated in contrast to the nineteenth-century vision of the spectator as a 'responsible citizen' (Lind, 2013), one who had a reverence for the art object but was not necessarily educated in it. Barr's model became the institutional standard for major museums throughout most of the twentieth century and is significant in terms of curatorship for two reasons. Firstly, it prioritised the exhibition role of the curator, elevating them to the commander of both the meaning and value of the artwork (Klonk, 2009). Prior to this, their role was mainly administrative. Secondly, it placed a formal classification for the museum audience as one which is educated, instilling the assumption that the mediation and presentation of the artwork could assume prior knowledge. This, in turn, ignited the genesis of curatorial gatekeeping by identifying 'the arts audience' as a class discernible by their collective education. Through the deployment of insider languages, cultural references, and devices such as assuming knowledge of the context and history of a work or exhibition, the curator engaged in a largely exclusive dialogue with the educated classes.

The notion of gatekeeping was first introduced by psychologist Kurt Lewin during the Second World War to identify those who held control over food and commodities. It was a practice relating to information control (Bien,1997). Whilst Donohue et al (1972) have argued that the cultural gatekeeper has been a persistent presence dating back to the religious and secular patrons who governed the guilds, the emerging professionalisation of the role and power acquisition of the curator in the last quarter of the twentieth century has arguably escalated

their symbolic capital (Bourdieu. 1983, 1987). Along with their partner in crime, 'the critic', the curator holds the power to confer the act of cultural consecration with the authority to draw the line between the pure and sacred in art and that intended for popular consumption (Verboord, 2015). When aligned with Barr's influential assumptions of an educated audience in need of curatorial guidance, it can be argued that the cultural gatekeeper was originally synonymous with the emergence of the institution for art rather than the later art market, although the latter invariably escalated the power structures further. It has been identified that discussion surrounding the authority conferred upon the curator in contemporary times has its genesis in Adorno's distinctions of art and its administrators and the distinct roles of the artistic and curatorial practices (O'Neil, 2012), which in many ways gave justice to the practice of cultural gatekeeping through its insistence on institute/curatorial voice as the necessary mediator for the masses.

Curating in the 1990s and 'The Collaborative Turn'

Whilst many authors have identified a significant, expanded shift in the role of curatorship in the 1990s (Ulrich-Obrist, 2014; Crawshay-Hall, 2020; Charlesworth, 2007; Warholm, 2009; Doherty, 2004), O'Neil (2012) pinpoints the moment specifically to 1987. This year, he argues, witnessed two significant 'firsts' in the field. The initiation of the first post-graduate curatorial programme in Europe, "L'Ecole, du Magasin" in Grenoble and secondly, the renaming of the art history/museum studies section of the Whitney Independent Study Programme (ISP) to curatorial and critical studies, led by art critic Hal Foster. The ISP program set its mission to explore alternative curatorial forms and conventions' throwing down the gauntlet to institutional canons of curation (O'Neil, 2012). O'Neil argues that this prompted a shift towards experimental exhibition-making practices, of which Harold Szeemann's curation of '*A-historische Klagan'* (1988) is a prime example (Boijmans Van Buningen Museum, Rotterdam). This show is notable for its collating of uncoherent objects

in terms of their style, origin and material use. O'Neil goes on to say that the year 1987 also witnessed an early morphing between the roles of artist, curator and critic.

Within further discussion around the origins of the professional curator at this time, J.J. Charlesworth pays note to the rise of 'institutional critique' in the 1980s, which centred the focus upon the authorial role of the curator in exhibitions such as Jean-Francois Lyotard's curation of '*Les Immateriaux'* (Centre Pompidou,1985). This exhibition was poised at the intersection of exhibition and philosophy, demonstrating how telecommunication technologies were impacting the everyday whilst simultaneously acting as a demonstration of Lyotard's notion of 'the post-modern condition" (Hui, Broeckmann, 2015). This was a notable exhibition which was part of a wave of highly curated and discursive exhibitions which ushered in a new wave of 'Performative Curators' during the 1990s in which the role of the curator was closely aligned to that of the artist in the creation of the overall exhibition (O'Neil, 2012; Farquharson, 2003). This further impacted the institution of art by the end of the 1980s, contributing towards a period of 'New Institutionalism' (Doherty, 2004). In response to the merger of the curatorial-artistic role, the institution adopted a quasi-studio practice in which artists were invited not to exhibit completed works but to develop a project across one or more sites, frequently the social sites in the institution, with no expectation of completion or end product (Voorhies (ed), 2016).

Curating in the 1990s became an expanded practice (Campbell, 2017), one that no longer worked in the service of the artists and the institution but developed into notable personal curatorial styles. (Ulrich-Obrist, 2014). This occurred through the emergence of several strategies. The decade saw the emergence of the 'nomadic curator' (Crawshay-Hall, 2020), these 'privileged agents' who, through the global network of Biennales, moved between territories to redistribute art on a global platform (O'Neil, 2016). This allowed the curator to experiment with the forms and media through which art could be presented (Doherty, 2004). Resulting from their independence from the institution and its conditions, the nomadic

curator embraced a greater production role, collaborating closely with the artist in the execution and postproduction of the work. For some, this evolution of the role afforded the curator not only greater exhibition power but a stakehold in the artistic role itself (O'Neil, 2012; Hoffman, 2013). In turn, this created a superstructure of global, uber-curators who became known and in demand for what we may term a 'signature style'. It further ushered in deep discussion around the subject of collaboration, cultural mutations and the potential for art to transform the social site, under the watchful eye of the curator (O'Neil, 2012).

Much of the decade saw the rise to artist-led exhibitions and projects (see chapter five), it simultaneously witnessed the liberation of curatorial practice, ushering in a blurring of boundaries between artist and curator, the exhibition and its experience. The work of art ceased to be an autonomous object (Kathke, Tomann, Uhlig, 2022), instead melding into the greater process of exhibition and mediation. Some authors have linked this later shift to the greater rise of the '*Experience Economy'* (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) during the decade, with Doherty raising the question as to whether this mimicking of the experience economy model in the act of curating achieved any greater form of connectivity between the exhibition and audience or yet another set of participatory codes to which the audience must conform? I will discuss this further in the review of the literature on *Relational Aesthetics* below (Bourriaud, 1996). However, it has been noted that this period championed the curatorial ambition not just to inform or educate an audience but to create an extraordinary and engageable experience at a time when contemporary art was a highly mediated mass medium (Ulrich-Obrist, 2014).

The 'Uber Curator' and New Institutionalism

The uptake of post-graduate courses in curating as a discipline was rapid in the 1990s. This contributed significantly to the professionalisation of the role, with the expansion of the global art Biennale creating a global platform for curators on an unprecedented scale (Doherty,

2004; Lind, 2004; Farquharson, 2003). Whilst having a transformative impact on the visibility and mediation of contemporary art, it also gave way to a colossal powershift to the authoritative position of the curator as a global tastemaker, determining practice both within and outside of the institution. The platform of the Biennale became the site upon which the nomadic curator's career was made. By employing emblematic styles and themes at the Biennale, individual curatorial strategies were given international reach and demand for the given style was absorbed into the institution. By the mid-1990s, these contributing factors led to something of an apex, the 'curators' moment' (Benson,1998), as a plethora of debates and critiques around curating occurred and stylistic trends became elevated in status to that of the artwork. Marina Grzinic suggests the additional contributing factors to the 'moment' include the over-prioritisation of the contemporary art institution, which amassed something of a conspiratorial relationship with the emerging art market and the wider commercialisation of the Biennial and art fair (2013). This new 'premier league' of 'uber curator' evolved within the 1990s, can be seen as an extreme form of 'self-mythologising' in the guise of experimentation (Farquharson, 2003). Curatorial anthologies became a feature of the time, written in the first person, contributing to the greater glorification of status (O'Neil, 2012). This spectacle, whilst contributing to the visibility and consolidation of the curatorial role, also ushered in a period of insularity among a new breed of educated young curators who had the means and connections to operate on a global stage and who conspired to create a 'super – artistic' subject combining "two bodies instead of one" (Lind in Hoffmann, 2013. p.91).

What is notable by its absence within the literature around 1990s curation is the creation of a new class of curators who afforded independent status through access to independent means. Many who came within or outside of the new postgraduate training in the subject gained privileged access to the institutions and so began a trend in tactical career hopping from institution to institution, network to network and country to country. If you source the career paths of the major international curators, Harold Szeemann, Charles Escher, Hans

Ulrich Obrist, Maria Lind, and Jans Hoffman, a globalised pattern of international exhibition-making aside from short-term institutional appointments or affiliations is a common theme. This trajectory became something of the fast track to the uber-curator league (Charlesworth, 2007; Farquharson, 2003). To access the 'super league' required a certain education and a certain financial independence. This is not to suggest that all came from an exclusive moneyed class, some operated between business and culture to fund their activities, breeding a new strain of "Culturepreneur" (Ford and preneur, 1999, p.96). However, the requisite criteria for membership to the uber-curator class, globally networked, multi-lingual and holding the means to be forever on the move (Farquharson, 2003) suggests exclusive member status. As a young curator myself at this time, I witnessed the ascent of the new global curator phenomenon. It became invariably clear that the emancipatory freedoms of this new curatorial lifestyle required access to means that I simply did not possess without affiliation to an institutional income. The notable absence of discussion around privilege and the curatorial super-league is perhaps inevitable given the tight control that key players assumed through their asserted authority over the cultural narratives and critiques at the time. large swathes of the art world, without much discernment, accepted this new class and their narratives as being 'absolute' (Eleey, 2013). This significant impact on the shape of institutional practice and further the emergence of a globalised super-league of certified 'on-message' artists whose practice shadowed and reinforced the curatorial message (Groys, 2007).

For the institution to compete with the new dynamism in curating, its hand was forced to embrace much of the meta-narratives dictated to it. Through the shared experimental, often socially focussed strategies employed by the A list; Hans Ulrich Obrist, Maria Lind, Nicholas Bourriaud, Jens Hoffmann et al. the exhibition site and institution undertook a major re-purposing metamorphosising into a "Construction-site', 'laboratory', 'think-tank' and distribution channel" (Farquharson, 2003. p.9).

A language appropriated from the business sector and clumsily grafted onto that of the institution gave way to what was later coined by Jonas Ekberg ‘New Institutionalism’ (NI), which sought to liberate the contemporary art site from the embedded cultural canons which once defined it (2003). NI repurposed the art institution as a site for social experimentation and dialogue, fundamentally inverting its overall function from that of passive to active (Doherty, 2004), ushering in the model of a new, flexible institution which can respond, physically and conceptually to emergent artistic practice. Leading proponents of NI undertook senior positions in key institutions central to which were Charles Esche at Rooseum, Malmo and Nicholas Bourriaud at The Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France. They initiated a strategy of long-term institutional partnerships with artists to re-purpose the exhibition site from club nights to performances and peer critiques (Doherty, 2004), deploying laboratory conditions for the creative act above the presentation of the completed object. With Esche elevating the new institution into territory previously preserved for “religion, science and philosophy” (Doherty, 2004, p.3). Celebrated artists proponents of NI, including Jorge Pardo, Liam Gillick and Carsten Holler, were invited by the institution not to exhibit their work rather, through the exercise of their practice, they were to re-position the institution according to a set of engaged social relations with the audience.

It has been argued that New Institutionalism was little more than a reworking of the New Museology movement of the late twentieth century (Robinson, 2020). The latter witnessed an international trend towards the democratisation of the museum site by creating access points, co-authorship with visitors, and subsequently divesting much of the museum’s institutional power to their audience (Hapin,1997; Weil, 1999). The museum’s drive towards greater user-friendliness can be seen as a necessary response to its stakeholders within the public sector, as funding constraints necessitated a greater uptake of the museums’ use by its public through new channels of engagement. Conversely, as Montmann (2007) notes, New Institutionalism was more a response to the ‘re-brand’ of the major public galleries during the 1990s, which had absorbed private sponsorship and

political agendas resulting from the combined evolution of the creative industries boom and global adoption of the art biennale model and the resurrection of the London contemporary market (O'Neil, 2012). This tidal wave of monetarisation into contemporary art afforded the new wave of curators the permissive freedom to experiment with the uses and interplay of the institution. In doing so, the curators' influence and importance expanded even further into the arts ecosystem, mediating as it did between the market and the institute. During the later 1990s, this revival of the art institution began to trickle down to the mid-sized institutions. Artists and audiences became active agents within this greater curatorial policy to expand the institution as a site for discussion, engagement and, crucially, sociability. To this end, New Institutionalism and performative curatorship went hand-in-hand as the new league of curators wielded power both within and outside the institution. Others have noted that NI can be seen as the embracement of independent, 'DIY', artist-led curatorial practice (Doherty, 2004), which, as I discuss in chapter five, was vital in London throughout the decade. Whilst the collaborative and process-based strategies of working were central to both sectors, I contest that the politics and ethics attached to both were worlds apart. NI was a byproduct of the ambitions of a set of globalised curators keen to explode the conventions of cultural exhibition. For them, the institution was an essential territory to both annexe and consolidate their power. Whilst certainly taking note of the close working practices of artists/curators within the DIY scenes, within the NI camp, the dominance of the curatorial signature was systemically foregrounded. The embracement of the temporary, time-based, process-led and open-ended practices which NI championed provided a new axis for dialogue and engagement. However, it is questionable if this expansion of the institutions' moves to greater sociability had any direct impact on expanded audiences for contemporary art as was the aim of New Museology, for NI was ultimately more a strategy promoted by, "Monopolized curatorial groups and quasi-elite bodies of control and management of the practice and theory of curating" (Grizinic, 2013. p.6).

Farquharson (2003) also questions the validity of NI in terms of an expanded socialisation of the institution. He argues that curators engaged in institutional mediation models inevitably result in the privileging and exaggerating of demand for artists engaged in the same area of practice. Montmann extends these concerns, likening the institution of the time as operating as 'insubordinate teenagers' following the curatorial lead, for what was lost because of the NI was the role of institutional critique (2007, p.1). Curation had to be a unified practice and ideologically aligned to flourish in the greater drive towards professionalisation in contemporary art. This was the byproduct of a highly organised global network which championed the same practices, artists, institutions and dialogues creating a cultural homogeneity. Some have put the 'blame' for this at the door of the aforementioned postgraduate curatorial training, which formalised methodologies for exhibition making and interpreting and forcibly ushered in a new practice with consistent similarity (Pedrosa, 2013). However, the greater context of the explosion of the London art scene and its mediated globalisation contributed significantly to a revival of the contemporary art market. As artist Liam Gillick asserted as early as 1992, curatorial decisions are inextricably linked to the market and the commercial gallery. Given the speed and scale in which the markets developed towards the end of the 1990s, there seems to be something of an inevitability to the changing power dynamics in contemporary art.

The most prominent strategy of critique around NI and the 'social turn in exhibition practices' (Lind, 2013), was consolidated in the writings of uber-curator Nicholas Bourriaud and his publication 'Relational Aesthetics' (1998, 2002). As this was central to both the curatorial dialogue of the 1990s and the overt drive towards social connections within artistic practice, a discussion around this subject will warrant the remainder of this chapter.

Relational Aesthetics Debated

Amongst the most contentious curatorial texts from the 1990s was Nicholas Bourriaud's publication of *Esthétique relationnelle* in French in 1998 (Doherty, 2004). The first reference to a relational aesthetic movement appeared in Bourriaud's catalogue text for the exhibition '*Traffic*' (26th January –24th March, 1996), which he curated at the CAPC Muse d'art Contemporain de Bordeaux. This exhibition is notable as it included many of the artists Bourriaud went on to mentor as exemplars of this movement, most notably Rirkrit Tiravanija, Maurizio Cattelan, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick, Vanessa Beecroft and Jorge Pardo (Scanlan, 2005). Central to Bourriaud's thesis and the associated artists was an open-ended practice directed towards the notion of a 'complicit encounter' (Rogoff, 2004) between artist and audience. A collapsing of exhibition distance, which Bourriaud summarises as: "An aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks in terms of the inter-human relations which they show, produce, or give rise to" (Bourriaud, 1998, p.117).

Though something of a 'catchall term' (Farquharson, 2003), *Relational Aesthetics* levied critical attention to an area of artistic production which positioned the audience as an active agent towards the outcome of refreshed human relations. Positioned in opposition to the post-Duchampian exports of London's yBa's and their ilk (Miller, 2016), those engaged with Relational Aesthetics had deeper concerns centred on the loss of arts relatability as a vehicle for dialogue. Martin (2007) links RA directly to the void created by the ushering in of dialogical isolation during the formative years of the Internet. Hal Foster, though largely a critic of RA for its 'happy interactivity' (2003), also conceded that artists may be exploring social relations due to the demise of critical discourse elsewhere (Martin, 2007).

Two works frequently cited as exemplifying the practice of *Relational Aesthetics* are Felix Gonzalez-Torres '*Untitled Series'* (*Portrait of Ross in L.A*., 1991) and varietals originating from Rirkrit Tiravanija's '*Untitled 1990 (Pad Thai)*' (Paula Allen Gallery, New York). In brief, Gonzalez-Torres' work consists of the deployment of 175 lbs of brightly wrapped candy in

the gallery space. The weight relates to the average body weight of a healthy adult male and directly references the artist's late partner, Ross Laycock, who died from AIDS-related issues in 1991. Grief and loss are articulated through the artist's open invitation to the visitor to help themselves to the candy in whatever quantity they so choose from the private view to the conclusion of the exhibition several weeks later (Art Institute Chicago, ND.).

Referencing similar concerns, the opening event for Tiravanija's work sees the artist cook and serve Thai cuisine stemming from his cultural heritage, which is shared amongst the invited audience. The motivation behind this act is to remove social boundaries through the sharing of a meal (MoMA, PS1, 2011). The apparatus and detritus remaining from this opening night form the elements of the ensuing exhibition for broader public observation. Though discussed with some brevity here, both works (and others favoured by Bourriaud) have several parallels. Works under the banner of Relational Aesthetics necessitate and prescribe a set of rules for 'role-play', asserted by the artists and enacted by the viewer. Both works prioritise the private view as the principal site for interaction. Tiravanija's interaction is contained to this occasion, whilst theoretically all Gonzalez-Torres candy could be consumed at this occasion, or this withstanding, the invited audience has the first pick. Further, both examples operate on Bourriaud's 'theoretical horizon' of human engagement within a specific social context, which he cites in direct opposition to the "private symbolic space" of the object of art (1998, p.14). The artwork within Relational Aesthetics no longer serves to envisage utopian possibilities but to propose ways of living and models of action within the real (Bourriaud, 1998). Some have read this as essentially political in nature, challenging the service economies of informational capitalism, an art of the many (Martin, 2007). As critic Hal Foster notably responds in his unforgivingly titled essay '*Arty Party'* (2003):

> "Sometimes politics are ascribed to such art on the basis of a shaky analogy between an open work and an inclusive society as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community, or a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian word." (p.22).

challenging head-on the utopian ideals embedded in Bourriaud's thesis.

Critique of Relational Aesthetics

I will now discuss aspects of the wider debate around social curation, which resulted from the English publication of Relational Aesthetics in 2002. Through its translation, a greater curatorial debate was ignited, debating the validity of the thesis. I will, however, reserve the remainder of this review for a discussion around the symbolic and symptomatic relationship between Relational Aesthetics and the rise of both the globalised art market for contemporary art and the emergence of the uber-curator / biennialisation of art during the 1990s. This wider context, I will argue, conspired to create a pseudo-conviviality and an unauthentic notion of what artist-to-audience discourse achieved within the scope of Bourriaud's conceptualisation. For if Relational Aesthetics, as Bourriaud insists, creates the conditions for "inter-human relations" (1998, p.117), where do the power relations reside when the grammar of the dialogue is preordained by the artist/curator?

Swaths of discussion around art, curation and the social in the mid-2000s (Downey, 2007; Ross, 2006; Bishop, 2005) were triggered by the English publication of Relational Aesthetics as many rushed forward to critique the concepts and logic of its proposal. In its defence, Relational Aesthetics co-opted artist Liam Gillick was quick to negate the flurry of discussion as little more than reactionary and kneejerk (2006 p.97). Inferring something of a knee-jerk response among the fragile egos of the international art writers who were perhaps envious of their success and fame (Gillick, 2006) of the text. Gillick further asserts his displeasure that a group of desperate artists with some shared territory became central to this greater debate, which, in the example of Claire Bishop's counterargument (2006), pitted an alternative set of artistic practices as relationally more authentic in contrast to those coopted by Bourriaud.

The artists within the umbrella of Relational Aesthetics were bound together not necessarily by a tight set of concerns nor even an aesthetic but rather by a curatorial choice on

Bourriaud's part, which bound them within a heavy narrative. For Relational Aesthetics exceeds the capacity of theorising around the practice of social relations, it does, as Claire Bishop asserts, have far greater significance. "He considers it to be a means of locating contemporary practice within the culture at large: relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy." (2004, p.51). As noted at the start of this review, some have argued that it was integral to a greater shift towards the commodification of the experience, which underwrote the evolving creative industries boom of the decade. Indeed, the wider, socio-economic significance which is afforded to RA is at the core of many critiques, particularly as the authentic validity of actual social relations is highly questionable.

Doherty focuses her concerns on the employment of "existing social systems" (2004. p.4) by artists under the Relational Aesthetic rubric. By engaging in the exchange of food, drink, etc., these artists draw our attention to the everyday and infer through their work the transformative power which such actions signify in terms of human relations. This, she contends, is impactful only within the global art circuit. Tying back to New Institutionalism, Doherty argues that the relation in Relational Aesthetics does not extend to the realms of social agency (2004, p.5). Rather, she purports the audiences' function within the relational exchange is little more than that of the actor, directed by the artist/curator, its artifice heightened through the setting of the gallery space (p.6). The artist does dictate the precise terms for the social exchange and enforces the associated narrative and politics as the preferred reading, negating, I would argue, a potential for transformative relations. Others have queried the artist/curator's actual understanding of the 'everyday' itself (Deleuze, 2006). I would argue further that by confining the relational exchange in much of this work to the territory of the institutional private view, an insider conspiracy in the act itself is confined to those very much in the know; Barr's educated few. The rarified world of the international art institution and its patronage is hardly unravelled through sharing a meal or taking candy,

as all parties in the mix know the language and etiquette of performative interaction and subscribe to the curatorial languages prevalent at the time.

As discussed, Hal Foster suggests that the demise of inter-human relations in society is perhaps a catalyst for the artistic address of the social. However, he qualifies this by again addressing the artifice of its address within the art context, which he perceives to be at best redeeming, at worse, “a pale, part-time substitute” (Foster, 2003. p.22). The performativity of the relational within RA is exactly that – scripted theatre. The artists are granted quasi-miraculous powers in their gifting of the sweet or the meal, which within the gallery context assumes the status of the artwork itself. Noodles with a heavy garnish of ‘aura’ are perhaps on offer. This leads to questions about what exactly art is beyond the transactional. The ever-depleted candy pile or used pots and pans which remain for the non-invited audience who follow can only ignite little more than speculation of the actual transactional moment of which they were not a part. For as with many art attempts to imply an understanding and engagement with the everyday, curators and artists on the international career path rarely ever get their hands dirty. As I will go on to argue throughout this thesis, by and large, the art world has a systemic fear of cultural contamination.

This ‘fear’ is further evident in the work of a body of artists which Bishop champions in contention to Bourriaud’s ‘gang’. Arguing that art under the banner of RA is both open and ephemeral and, therefore, void of any substantial aesthetic criteria against which it may be evaluated. That, however good the intentions of the relational artists, this does not excuse them from analytical critique (2006, p.178). Bishop employs this position as a platform to forefront her narrative of ‘Relational Antagonism’, which relates to a body of artists who, through the vehicles of confrontation and a hefty dose of controversy, she posits, propose an authentic and, therefore, a valid set of social relations. Bishops ‘keeping it real’ artists include most famously Spanish artist Santiago Sierra and Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, both of whom, alongside Bourriaud artists, also happen to be contemporary art A-listers in

the marketplace. Bishops' artists notably do not seek relations with their public but confront them through performances and installations often featuring paid members of impoverished communities (Bishop, 2006). Sierra, she argues, engages with a form of "ethnographic realism" (p.70) in his work, which starkly represents a set of social or political conditions through its subjects. The titles of Sierra's work are to be taken literally; '*160cm line Tattooed on Four People*' (2000) paid four sex workers with heroin addictions 60 pounds to have a 40cm line tattooed on their back as the audience watched on. The significance of the fee amount relates to the corresponding value of earned income for performing oral sex four times (Ridsdale, 2016). In '*Ten People Paid to Masturbate'* (2000), ten migrant labourers were paid minimum wage for their duties to highlight the failings of the labour market by exhibiting the extent people will go for so little (Jeffries, 2002). Real and immediate social issues are blatantly flaunted in Sierra's work, leaving the audience as voyeurs, ostensibly debating the ethics of the circumstance they are confronted with.

Within the frame of Bishop's critique of RA, she frames these artists as being at the 'coal face' of participation in contrast to the more passive activities of Bourriaud's camp. Knowingly sidestepping any direct engagement in the ethics of this work, Bishop instead deflects our attention towards the inherent nihilism at play. These works, she argues, rather than pursue any improvement in the status of the employed performer, simply confirm the socio-economic conditions of these marginalised communities (Miller, 2016). If we are to consider the power relations at play within Relational Antagonism, control is clearly retained by the artist, who permits an audience to watch on as he engages in acts of exploitation. To this end, art and the institute become the excusable context in which to conduct social atrocities. Calls of participation are easily unpicked, as Bishop later acknowledges (2012), the artists themselves do not physically engage in the recruitment and discussion with the subjects of their work, providing instead the context and rationale. In this scenario, the curator becomes something of a head-hunter, recruiting according to the brief set by the artist (Bishop, 2012). The subjects sign over their humanity for a negligible sum to titillate the

privileged art world. Whilst these works do give rise to broader critical debate, I am firmly in agreement with Miller (2016), who concludes his discussion on Relational Antagonism with the assertion that however one can debate the conceptual circumstances around the work, this is no justification to permit “the artist the right to behave like an asshole” (p.179).

In the practices of both the ‘Relational Aesthetics’ and ‘Relational Antagonism’ camps, neither can fully claim authentic social engagement. The relations in play are fixed and determined by the artist, underpinned by the art market, ultimately rendering the audience as actors in the case of the former and voyeurs in the latter. Authorship resides squarely at the artist’s feet as the evolved process of the performance or installation becomes predictable and, therefore, safe. For all its radical assertions, risk is very much averted in these works. The curator in this mix asserts their authority once more as conservers, though rather than the object requiring protection within these examples, s/he is situated as a defender of the artists from both the subject of their work and the audience. Strategies such as confining the transactional exchange to the select audience of the opening night preview ensure a protective knowingness between artists and the audience. Within the works set to agitate, the curator serves as the active intermediatory, absorbing the roles of participant scout and broker of the artist’s financial deal, rendering the artists as little more of a voyeur on their own practice (Bishop, 2004).

Curating The Social

The emancipation and globalisation of both the contemporary artist and curator during the 1990s necessitated a critical distancing from both pleasure and the active role of the audience in the discernment of their own cultural experience. The assumption can be made that for this new uber league, forms of pleasure were antithetical to the critical function of art. Art in the 1990s required its audience to remain a mute element so as not to interfere with the emerging power struggles which elevated the curator and artist into mystical realms.

Consumption and engagement with much of this work was anticipated as it operated in the safe and knowing realms of the major institution or geographic showcase.

Entertainment is largely a social practice and, as such, is predicated on dialogue and exchange (Smith in Hoffmann ed 2013). It is accessed and owned by the wider public who operate as curator and critique of a culture in which they firmly stake a claim. Herein lies the tension. Stallabrass recalls the thoughts of Jacques Ranciere (2007) that entertainment and popularism are condemned by the elite as they directly challenge their freedom to govern (Pennings et al. 2011). Thus, it is implied that art may only be experienced via sober critical function and prior knowledge. This is a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of the 1990s art world and central to what keeps that world disengaged from the real world. For as artist Ana Prvacki ultimately concedes, exclusiveness is fundamental to the art market (Pennings et al. 2011). Against the 1990s backdrop of the rapidly expanding and monied markets, it was necessary for a small but significant institution, such as the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), to experiment with mediation models and resituate social engagement at the heart of curatorial practice. Reflecting on her formative experiences of culture, curator Jessica Morgan, recalls this difference in approach, “London’s ICA was a place to hear music, attend talks, see films and experience art. A vibrant, noisy challenging place; it was definitely not run by what I thought of as a curator” (Pennings et al. 2011. p.22) As with Dorothy Morland’s analogous recollections of the ICA during her tenure, it being something akin to ‘a railway station’ in which all were in a constant rush (In Massey, 1997), the reactivation of the social into the ICA’s programme during the 1990s put energy and agency back in the frame.

As I shall go on to argue in the last three chapters of this study, where I reflect on my curatorial practice and wider practices of the artists I worked alongside, the strategies of curating the social we employed actively prioritised authentic cultural engagement. Within the club night programme, the social was the essential methodology employed to disinvest

the institution of its curatorial, exhibiting baggage through mediating artwork as part of an informal dialogue within the greater context of entertainment. By extending access and authorship of the ICA to an erstwhile underclass of creative practitioners, permission was given to rethink the presentation of the artwork and, in turn, the dialogue with the Institute of Arts itself. Within this context, the mediation of art was convened to the will of the audience member who chooses to engage and the terms on which they might do so. Set against the new wave of seriousness in curating and practice in the 1990s, the curatorial strategies employed at the ICA resurrected the notion of 'Self-Government' and stimulus through pleasure, which historically drew very little distinction between the arts and entertainment (Roelstraete, in Hoffmann (ed.) 2013. For as Groys (2007) ultimately asserts, "the best curating is nil-curating" for "the solution seems to be to let the artwork alone, enabling the viewer to confront it directly" (p.48), and I would suggest on their terms. The curator further assumed a production partnership with the artists within the re-enactment programme at the ICA. The direction of the performance was artist-led, not curator-led. At no point in the process was the status of the artist elevated above that of the performer, for both were active agents in the realisation of the work. My role as curator was to produce the work, mediate between the parties, and navigate the ethical discourse that these works inevitably triggered. The mediation methods for the re-enactments employed the popular press alongside the critical art review, with the 'revival of the moment' being the point of sale. Notably, none of these works took place within the ICA's gallery space as the theatre and ancillary rooms of the Institute were utilised. This was an essential element in the mediation of the work to both an art and non-art public, as the artists sought an immediate response to the unfolding experience rather than critical observation and contemplative mood. Further, by abstracting the performance from the gallery space, the artists removed the symbolic definition of the work as 'art' first and foremost. This liberated the experience for the audience to absorb the absolute immediacy of the experience.

To these ends, I argue that cultural reenactment in the 1990s was far closer to the theoretical objectives of Relational Aesthetics and its offshoots. Above all, raw and vulnerable art subsumed the artist and curatorial ego for one of genuine connection between artwork and audience. Charlie Gere reiterates this in his interview with ICA re-enactment artist Rod Dickinson, citing this body of works as “a total desire for authenticity” (in Doherty 2004, p.60). The relational exchange was built on a combined trust between all four parties at play, the artist, performer, curator and audience, with no one party holding the ultimate authority.

As discussed, curation in the 1990s was largely performed on the international stage, where the curator functioned as a conduit between art, the institution and the market. Grand careers were built upon grander narratives of relatability and social context. These discussions were asserted, won and lost only within the fictionalised network of the contemporary art system. This created something of a deviation away from smaller sites such as the ICA to reconnect with its founding mission and, through a form of play, extend creative practice to a wider body of artists and audiences once more.

By reviewing the literature surrounding institutional and globalised curatorial practice in the 1990s, I have established the conditions for the professionalisation of curatorship in relation to the status of the artist and the gallery. This provides an important overview of the ‘official’ position of the curator to be contrasted in this thesis with independent practices. Further, by critiquing curatorial methods of engaging with ‘the social’ on the global stage, points of vulnerability are discussed around ethical concerns and the necessary dependence on the Institutional power structures to execute and validate the artwork. As I will go onto contrast, within my own, and DIY engagement with the social site, by circumventing institutional orthodoxies and, crucially, subsuming the curatorial ego, a greater practice of authentic engagement with the everyday was ultimately achieved.

Chapter 2. Methodology: A Critical Discussion of Autoethnography and Insider Methodologies

Introduction

This chapter examines the greater discussions around the employment of autoethnography and collaborative narrative in academic research. The value and vulnerabilities of an autoethnographic methodology are initially debated to highlight the need to dismantle the historical rigidities in the debate and propose a more flexible structure for the researcher's voice. The fluidity of authorship, complexities of relationships and proximities challenge the traditional 'researcher – researched' convention. Power and privilege are explored alongside the ethical concerns of the narrator's subjectivity. History and the function of nostalgia in recalling stories are reflected upon, and finally, the emotional complexities that friendship relationships bring to this discussion.

This thesis engages with a collaborative form of authorship. Equally, it is a personal reflection upon a period of history in which I had an authorial voice and subsequently has a subjective tone throughout. These multiple voices are crucial and sometimes contradictory to those of other authors and my own position. However, together, they constitute a research inquiry which is dominated by insider methodologies. The negotiation of subjective reflection, positionality and personality sets the methodological scene as one that is personal, emotional, open to embellishment and vulnerable. As such it may be considered as an exhumation of several social constructions which now collude to tell a story. It acknowledges that our own recounted experiences are multi fold and contradictory. Further, and crucially, it affords inconsistencies, disputed stories and narrative messiness, which is arguably more honest and critical in its approach but equally more open to criticism than most methodological choices. This is emotion-led research which writes many authors into the story where a commonality of stories is evoked and related to the wider context for personal,

collaborative and academic advancement; my voice is valid, as are my experiences lived alongside yours. This is not ‘me-search’ (Fine, 1999) but ‘we-search’, a multi-authored account reflecting our history, intentions, experiences, and, ultimately, our story. This is the context in which my methodological chapter is situated, and so follows is further discussion on autoethnography, collaborative practice, positionality, memory, power relations and friendship as method.

It is right that at the onset of this chapter, I establish my position as the researcher in relation to the research subject (though this cannot be entirely disentangled from my former curatorial role and subsequent subject of this study). Set within an interpretivist paradigm, my research position is situated between my experiences and the multi-faceted social constructions of the subject in question (Snape & Spencer, 2003). It engages in dialogue with others from the time to establish the parameters of the context and within the interwoven narratives to afford meaning to my significant areas of the enquiry, namely an expanded access to the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and the broader canon of contemporary art culture of the period through the innovations implemented in the live programme. The impact between myself, the researcher, and the social context being studied brings together the roles of narrator, editor, and, to some degree, the author. I choose who to interview, which voices to emphasise, and the final narrative. Though, in all reality, my priorities are not constructed in a silo but in close collaboration with group members who will themselves be making a similar set of choices in their given interview. To this end, I pursue a conflicting methodology founded in inter-subjective dialogue towards an onto-epistemological approach. This entails engaging with what Kamlongera (2021) terms “the hyphen status” that of “being in-between” (p.653). In-between narratives, recollections, personal agendas and a greater time lapse of twenty-plus years. Humphrey, (2002), claims this requires a form of research dualism, attaching oneself to different worlds and social contexts whilst maintaining enough indifference to allow for a critique of the material. However, the reality of flowing between subjective and objective stances is easier said than

done. I found that the inherent conflict relates to my recalling multiple narratives at any one time. Rooted in the ongoing debate on the merits and vices of insider/outsider status. (Brewer, 1986; Denzin, 1992; Griffith; 1998; Merton, 1972; Osbourne, 1989; Styles, 1979; Williams and Heikes, 1993), the polarisation of these positions becomes increasingly conflicted as membership status, authenticity and hierarchy are in a constant state of flux. Depending on the variables in context status (past and present) levels of intimacy, and degrees of friendship spanning twenty years, there is no fixed research position and, therefore cannot be categorised as simply insider or outsider.

Research Design

For this thesis, I conducted twenty-six interviews. They included in-person and video-call settings. In-person safety was ensured through meeting in a public space during daytime hours. Moreover, the interviewee participants were largely derived from colleagues I knew during my time in the DIY scene and my career at the ICA. I called on a number of artists whose careers were developed during the 1990s in London and who were influential in shaping the greater scene: Gavin Turk, Sue Webster, Richard Billingham, and Simon Bedwell. I garnered a critical voice from academics and writers active at the time, including curator Lisa Le Feuvre and writers Tom McCarthy, Steve Rushton, Arwa Heider and David Burrows. To recall the experience of the ICA live programme which I initiated, I interviewed many of the key artists who contributed significantly to the programme, Simon Green, Mark Webber, Michael Clifford, Philip Illson, Nick Luscombe, Rod Dickinson, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, and former ICA colleagues, Philip Dodd, Lois Keiden and Dr Christine Atha. Friends and biographers of the late Joshua Compston; David Taborn, Jeremy Cooper and David Coffield, were interviewed for greater insight into the vision of Factual Nonsense in chapter seven. My interviews were largely semi-structured; however, as I discuss in this chapter, the degrees of pre-existing familiarity and/ or friendship with the participants

afforded the discussion to move into personal remembrances and anecdotes, which positively contributed by providing new insights.

I conducted the interviews throughout the greater part of the research period (2018 to 2024). This resulted from an essentially organic study process whereby new participants were noted in the literature or suggested in prior interviews. The interviews were between one hour and thirty minutes to two hours, flowing between recited questions and more informal conversation and refamiliarization. Informed consent was obtained through participant consent forms. All data gathered was stored and protected with cloud backup and will be deleted upon submission of this thesis in line with Leeds Becket University ethics guidelines.

A Critique of the Primary Debates Around Auto-Ethnography

> "It's called Autoethnography. It's how idiots get PhDs." Campbell, E. (2017. P.16)

As evidenced above, Autoethnography is a controversial methodology evoking critical discussion within academic circles. Evolving from a long struggle for legitimacy in the evolution of ethnography, its offspring, autoethnography, has also been the subject of extensive criticism around its research value and validity. Being the exploration of personal lived experience within the broader social constructs in which the experience is derived, the most cited and agreed-upon definition is:

> "An approach to research and writing which seeks to describe and systematically analyse (GRAPHY) personal experiences (AUTO) in order to understand cultural experiences (ETHNO)." (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011, p.1).

Autoethnography has great value, authenticating lived experience as a valuable contribution to research. Affording a depth of insight and often a unique perspective on a subject, including the autoethnographic account, permits an enriched case study to be debated alongside primary and secondary materials. It does, however, raise important issues around truth, power and ethics (Dauphinee, 2010), which I shall now debate as a means by which to situate my own story within this thesis. Ellis' et al. (2011) definition immediately raises a question, which forms the basis of this chapter: where does the researcher prioritise the use of autoethnography? Further, at what point does the authentic drive for personal narrative compromise rigorous analysis? This division of emphasis, though giving clarity, only generates a further ethical quandary as researcher bias places the 'auto', 'ethno' and 'graphy' in competition for dominance. This is a unique concern for this method and one which I struggled with throughout this thesis. This ethical struggle is the central motivation behind writing the initial part of this chapter.

Coined by anthropologist Karl Heider (1975), he employed 'autoethnography' from the perspective of a group of members within his fieldwork. In his paper, Heider recorded the wide-ranging responses to the question he asked of sixty schoolchildren from the Jibiga and Wakawaka schools in the Grand Valley of Balim, Indonesia. The question was, 'What do people do?' This subsequently generated fifty-plus distinct responses, which he used to record an insight into the socio-psychological position of the community. Though there is a linking of the auto and the ethno in Heiders' study, there is, as Roberts et al. (2002) observe, still a distance and distinction between the self and the subject as 'other' and, therefore, still largely embedded in ethnographic practice. At the end of the decade, Hayano (1979) discussed studies by anthropologists whose studies focused on communities they belonged to. Crucially, as Tetnowski & Damico (2014) contest, Hayano goes on to describe autoethnography not as a "specific technique, model or method but rather a group of methods and techniques used for field research in familiar, everyday setting" (p.3). Within

this hybrid framework, Hayano does put the researcher squarely in the active process of the research and in doing so laid the foundations for the study of autoethnography across many disciplines; Anthropology (Hemmingson, 2009; Reed-Denahay 1997), Sociology, (Ellis 1995), Education (Chang, 2008), Clinical studies, (Hinckley, 2005), Sport and Physical Activity, (Sparkes, 2002) among others. To understand the evolution of this hybrid methodology, it is useful to initially look at the chequered relationship autoethnography has had with more observational forms of ethnographic practice over the past fifty years.

Autoethnography and Legitimacy

> "There is no longer a Gods-eye view that guarantees absolute methodological certainty" (Smith and Deemer, 2000, p.877)

Rooted in the 'crisis of legitimacy' that the evolution of ethnography evoked, the emergence of autoethnography as a methodology in the late 1990s has posed extensive challenges to qualitative research, which I will unpack here. Autoethnography is no one single entity. By acknowledging, inserting and in some cases prioritising the role of the researcher as self into the research practice, the certification of legitimate qualitative research became even further contended. I contest that autoethnography is not a methodology that 'helps itself' when it comes to legitimising praxis. Though I encourage greater honesty around using emotion in research, this cannot legitimise all forms of reflection and narrative as autoethnography. For the absolute importance of the presence and rigour of the 'ethno' and 'graphy' to the 'auto' is crucial. Equally, the methodology needs to be liberated from poor use by some who demonstrate autobiography in its place. "The difference is between telling my story (i.e., autobiography) and theorising my story (i.e., autoethnography). Different logics". (Ettorre, 2017. p.21)

Tagged with all the common criticisms of the social media immersed Generation Z – narcissism, fay, over-emotional, it incites a misunderstanding of the methodology as an un-contextualised confessional. Griffin and Griffin (2019) argue forcefully for a positive association with millennial conduct where:

> "It might, therefore, be useful to understand autoethnography as a quintessentially millennial methodology, preoccupied as it tends to be with the self, identity, and underpinned by existential uncertainty, perhaps even a sense of ontological precarity". (online. NP)

Drawing on Butler (2012), Ettorre cites precarity as an essential aspect of autoethnography and feminist research for its teaching "…not only that we have vulnerabilities and are utterly dependent on each other but also that this dependency, this sense of precariousness is a vital force – a great strength". (2017. p.12). Further, Griffin draws a parallel with research principles in Queer Studies and particularly the "focus on fluidity, intersubjectivity and the particular [which] challenges dominant hegemony and normative discourse" (p.5). The precariousness of the practice reflects the vulnerability of the subject and, as such, establishes autoethnography as a methodology on the margins from which it embodies marginalised narratives.

Far from being a form of academic "selfie"' (Campbell, 2017 in Griffin and Griffin, 2019), autoethnography makes clear methodological strides forward by placing the personal in the public frame where it is exposed, enlightened and even re-learned. As argued by Ngunjiri et. al. (2010), fundamentally, autoethnography is distinct from an autobiography by an understanding of the self through sociocultural phenomena. The biographical narrative is validated by the author alone and distributed by those with faith and interest in that authorial narrative. Conversely, the justification of the personal resides in its rigour when set amongst the community it resides in and must reflect these other voices with equal conviction. Here

we come to the dangers in the polarised discussions around the methodology, those of 'Evocative' vs 'Analytical' autoethnography

'Evocative' Autoethnography

> Research is an extension of the researcher's life. (Ngunjiri et al, 2010. p.2)

It is easy to deride 'feelings' as an impulse, reactive, or even a product of weakness. I would argue that justifying or certifying an emotion is impossible and unnecessary. For a long while, emotion in research has been derided as unreliable. That the history and production of knowledge demand objectivity so as not to let the 'human' infect the research arena is no longer absolute and situated. As discussed elsewhere in this chapter, the rise of ethnography and subsequent splintering into autoethnography places the personal at the heart of the research, giving credence to a researcher's own experiences within a certain time, space or community. Anderson (2006), to clarify diverse practices in autoethnography, made, what I will argue to be a 'crude' distinction between autoethnography which is rooted in emotion (evocative) and that rooted in reason (analytical). Origins of the evocative camp lie in the works of Ellis and Bouchner (2000), who, alongside Richardson, (2000) and Holman-Jones, (2005) and others, have been criticised by Denzin and Anderson alongside the wider Chicago School, who challenge evocative autoethnography as amounting to a desire by those practising it to "change the world by writing with their hearts" (Denzin, 2006, p.6). Evocative autoethnography is, according to Ellis and Bouchner, effectively storytelling (2016). This implies that central to the method is the plot, and the reveal makes the method vulnerable to accusations of embellishing the truth for dramatic effect. To some extent, the authors acknowledge this by consciously placing that vulnerability at the feet of academia itself, that the insistence on the triumph of logic over emotion in the historical construction of knowledge warrants a reaction which is creative in style and emotive in tenor. To this extent, I value the freedoms which evocative ethnography allows practitioners of the subject. The

freedom to step in and out of traditional and non-traditional qualitative research allows what I depict as honesty in my thesis, not only in the story being told but also in my guise as the researcher. My concern with evocative autoethnography resides in the belief that a personal biography's impact on the audience is almost implicitly deep and meaningful. Ellis and Bochner believe that the function of the story being told is to invite readers to enter your experiences and feel what you felt (2014). This does not imply a relational ethnography but an imposition or coercive one to make others feel what the researcher once felt. Therefore, the employment of creativity within evocative autoethnography appears to be utilised as a tool for deceit. There is then the issue of whose biography warrants being told and whose doesn't, which makes it prey to sensationalism. The darker or more elaborate the story you have, the bigger the number of column inches deserved. Or that everyone's story has validity as research if the author decides it to be so. The argument is, of course, much more complex than this. However, the arrogance of the self-authored, self-justified and self-focus embodied within evocative autoethnography fills me with deep unease by flirting with confessional culture with the intention of imposing meaning onto others.

Autoethnography challenges the traditional forms and manifestations of representation and power within the construction of knowledge (Ruiz, 2021; Tierney, 1998). The power structures which were built upon scientific truths, logic and reason have, as a side effect, excluded both 'classes' of researchers and areas of the researched subject which were deemed not to warrant serious investigation. It is no coincidence that both gender studies and queer cultural theorists have embraced the platform to interact with sectors of society and niche activities against the embedded power within heteronormative constructs of power (Griffin and Griffin, 2019). In turn, repositioning the research subject as not the 'other' but the 'us'. Through the re-evaluation of biographical remembrances, that connectivity takes place, and the previously neglected voice gains traction. This opposes the dispassionate position which the researcher has hitherto been directed towards and one which places the power with the researcher at the expense of 'othering' the subject. The criticism here is not that

evocative autoethnography seeks to connect emotionally with a broader audience; this is to be celebrated. However, by placing all focus on the individual researcher's story, a transaction of power inevitably takes place as one biography subsumes and risks tainting that of others - those who do not have access to the academic platform. (Attfield, 2011). It seems this is an inevitable casualty in the pursuit of knowledge, as Foucault reminds us, "The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (1980, pp.51-52).

Analytical Autoethnography

Critical of the evocative origins of autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 1996), The 'Chicago School', championed by Leon Anderson, directed ethnographic research in the direction of a more analytical style, focusing on the apparent lack of rigour which evocative autoethnography poised. Anderson formulated the conditions for researchers to engage with his analytical autoethnography, which he deems "…is consistent with qualitative inquiry rooted in traditional symbolic interactionism" (2006, p.374). In doing so, he re-prioritised the role of dialogue as a two-stage process instead of narrative storytelling as a uni-directional method. The first criterion which Anderson states in his controversial article on the subject (Anderson, 2006) as being essential to analytical autoethnography is 'Complete Member Research' (CMR), by which he means complete submersion into the community being studied. This is akin to the realist ethnographic origins of the method. In his discussion of this criteria, he is keen to note that whilst CMR is vital, the researcher is also a member of the social science community and, as such, embodies more power than those within the group as they engage in field research collection and analytics. To this end, Anderson asserts his second quality, 'Analytic Reflexivity'. This, he maintains, needs to be consistently present not only in the gathering of data as a CMR but embedded in the whole process right through to the production of the text. This requires an ongoing reflective questioning of the motives and actions of the self and the 'other'.

The lack of analytic reflexivity is at the very heart of many oppositions to evocative autoethnography, where self-justification is permitted. He goes on to champion “visible and active researcher in the text” (p.383) but not at the expense of self-absorption; its primary function being to “develop and refine generalised theoretical understandings of social processes” (p.385) as opposed, we conclude, to a form of connective catharsis which acts as a clouding of the meaning and reading of the research. As Rosaldo (1993) states, “If classic ethnography’s vice was a slippage from the ideal of detachment to actual indifferences, that of present-day reflexivity is the tendency for the self-absorbed self to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other” (1993, p.3 in Anderson, 2006, p.386). This loss of sight refers squarely to an over-focusing on the self and non-utilising the self as a vehicle in which to understand the social world better. Finally, we are re-reminded by Anderson of the need for a “commitment to an analytic agenda” (p.387) to gain a greater insight into the social world via the self and place this process under a critical theoretical lens. Does your autoethnographic research, he is asking, stand up to theoretical interrogation? And here we have apples and oranges. Ellis, Bochner, Richardson, St. Pierre, Holman Jones, and their cohort want to change the world by writing from the heart (Pelias, 2004). The writers in the third Chicago School want none of this. (Denzin, 2006)

By placing autoethnography in the lineage of analytic ethnography and, more specifically, social interactionist ethnography in which dialogue and meaning are fluid and evolving, Anderson emphasises the positioning of personal biography within the greater social world to which it relates. To this extent, he has been criticised for reverting to the past processes in the social sciences without critical reflection (Denzin, 2006**),** reviving and reigniting the anxiety of contemporary social science. So, is the polarity between evocative and analytic simply reactivity vs. progression a battle between the radical exploding of methodology by writing the self completely into the text versus the maintenance of objective distance from the human subject?

Ellis and Bochner (2006), as proponents of an evocative autoethnography and clear target of Anderson's rebuff, performed what they titled an 'autopsy' of his essay in response. Their critique suggests emotional detachment, a desire to contain the world as represented, not to experience it as lived: "Caring and empathising is for us what abstracting and controlling is for them" (p.431). Analytic autoethnography is, they claim, realist ethnography wrapped tightly in sheep's clothing. Why bother with the disguise? Is it to curb the enthusiasm of the evangelical autoethnographer and bring the discipline within the fold of the indifferent ethnographer in search of camps, giving the impression of pedagogical insecurity? Rather than address the propositions in Anderson's essay directly, it is tinged with a sense of anxiety that the researcher of the past wants to reclaim those of the future. Though embracing reflection, self-doubt and an aversion to out-smarting, which is common practice, they equally state that evocative autoethnography is progressive and analytical, a firm step backwards.

As I continue to read their autoethnographic critique of Anderson, I develop great concern within the author's argument. By averting debate with rigour as 'defensive', they are failing to clarify how autoethnography, as they employ it, is distinct from biographical opinion. The article is notable for its lack of references to others' work. Instead, opinion takes centre ground. Though this does aid the democratisation of research with the academic and the 'lay-person' sit on equal platforms as co-authors of the social moment, it requires reflection. After all, does all experience necessitate a platform. This is demonstrable in their rebuttal of Anderson terming their work as 'evocative' (even though they use this term) to which they contextualise analytical as "aloof" (p.436).

Reflecting on this debate between evocative and analytical, both positions have weaknesses. Anderson does call for a more realistic agenda, and to some extent, this is a regressive position. Sub-clauses in his position – to be embedded in the community, to embrace creative manifestations of research seem like a gesture of acceptance to the

evocative camp whilst making a clear call to get to go back to ethnography as we know it – conducted at arms-length and analysed with minimum passion, emotion or subjectively. The classical understanding that clear knowledge of the world around us can only be achieved by an objective immersion makes this approach regressive and, by implication, dismissive of more creative approaches despite the methodological caveats discussed above. That said, Anderson does maintain two key calls, the first is for intimacy with the subject. This, I would argue, necessitates a giving over of the self to be effective. Secondly, the text seems to negate the possibility of an 'emotional analysis'. Indeed, both sides seem to be ill at ease with this approach. Ellis and Bouchner see the argument as binary – which do you prioritise, the 'analysis' or the 'story'?

Perhaps this requires a rethinking of the process of analysis in ethnography. Surely, both camps are pursuing a deeper understanding of the social world as lived. Impassioned curiosity is a prerequisite to all autoethnographic endeavours, but not all connections are deep and meaningful emotional connections, and, in most cases, the researcher inevitably flits between a subjective, objective stance, insider and outsider. We are, after all, in the business of "Telling different tales in different ways" (Ngunjiri et al. 2010, p.5). The degree of biography within these tales must be subject to the impact of the experience as lived. Here, I cite Denzin and his call for the embodiment of the subject through a reenactment of the time and event. This necessitates total immersion, but it also requires, in equal measure, a suspension of disbelief. I cannot, in all truth, feel what you felt, and while creative presentations of the account can manifestly deepen our emotional understanding of the subject, it cannot negate all traces of objectivity, it remains that some aspects of othering exist**.**

Immersion in the subject is an open pathway to analysis and an expanded understanding in its broadest sense. Understanding the self leads to the desire to connect and contrast stories, narratives, and experiences, which becomes vital.

Reflexive Autoethnography

In the maturation of discussions around 'researcher as researched', there has been a call for an autoethnography which rationalises aspects of both evocative and analytic autoethnography, Bryan, (2006), Ngunjiri et al. (2010) and Stahlke-Wall (2016) makes a bid for a "moderate autoethnography" (p.1), which, like Anderson, supports creative methods of research and presentation but is resilient in its analysis and academic use. However, this does not moderate the issues. Those who retreat from the alignment of opposites and instead look at the necessity for a collaborative function in autoethnographic research are of greater interest. Taking the principle that all lived experience is social by nature, then telling 'stories' can be seen as a necessary outcome. Norris (2004) discusses 'duo ethnography', in which multiple researchers contrast their biographical experience to explore perspectives on social life through 'intersubjectivity and intertextuality'. Drawing upon Stringer, et al. (1997) discussions on community ethnography, Toyosaki et al. (2009) call for an autoethnography which is both collaborative and strengthens the wider body of that network in its process towards the production of knowledge. By drawing together multiple biographies from within the community, the subject matter is enriched and embedded within the community with no single authoritative voice, a "co-construction of each other's existence" (p.59). This implies research as a form of ripple effect within a community where memories, feelings and legacies potentially ignite those of the other. Though this approach does run the risk of influence between one account and another, it cannot claim to be a truly democratic process. However, it is resonant of a more 'honest' autoethnography in which narratives are generated within the community to which they refer.

To realise a coherent, analytically rigorous and interconnected account of the ICA years, it is vital that embracing reflexivity is an essential part of the journey. Part of this reflexivity is the

embodiment of multiple narratives and the morphing from objective ethnographer to subjective and, at times, evocative biographer. In the construction of ‘our-story’ I must embrace my internal critical friend(s). To this end, my methodology is contrary– multi-vocal, contradictory, and oppositional. We are reminded that a crucial function of reflexive research is to undertake a self-re-evaluation through enduring the process (Megford, 2006). Therefore, by opening my biography, I, by necessity, require an independent, objective voice to challenge my reflections, and here I recall my internal critic. After all, “We are all actors in the society in which we live and interact” (Mendez, 2013, p.285)

To be both voyeur and critic of my own and participant narratives, reflexive practice is fundamental. It sets a necessary platform to host and evaluate multiple narratives. Though I cannot stand aside from myself, hence the acknowledged bias, I can and must engage with my narrative as critically as those I invite into the story. Chang (2008) depicts this network of voices well, defining the intrinsic purpose of the reflexive researcher: “To connect their personal experiences with experiences of ‘others of similarity,' 'others of difference,’ and ‘others of opposition” (p.26). Undoubtedly, reflexive autoethnography requires the researcher to undo what we believe we knew to adopt as much as possible a raw state whereby we can clear enough mental and emotional space to approach the process of research with a degree of clarity and naivety – of the subject and of oneself. Through a flow of dialogues between the narratives and context, a story can be constructed. To recall Bennett (2018), “If we accept that we create the social world inter-subjectively through shared understanding, then society… is seen to be in constant flux, recreated through collective meanings and actions” (p.4)

My role within this study is, I believe, to critically navigate between these truths. Reflexive autoethnography is a valuable method for the recounting and restructuring of cultures and subcultures (Ellis, Bochner, 2010). In their study on the relationship between music and autoethnography, Bartlett and Ellis (2009) discuss the insight which a creator of popular

culture texts has into the process and challenges they have faced in overcoming or, perhaps more accurately, slipping around the back while gatekeepers weren't looking. As a co-creator, I, together with the activity at the ICA, catching the cultural gatekeepers off guard, called for a merging of voices into a story which can only be told by those who participated. The ebb and flow between recollections afford me vital space in which to construct a story. Further, it implies a moral responsibility to reflect all voices through a critical and interpretive lens.

Insider Methodologies

The dominance of academic discussion on the value of insider/outsider status in fieldwork is commended by ethnographers who aim to clarify membership status to authenticate their research. Did they achieve the ideal objective of 'going native'? (Glesne, 1999). Adler and Adler (1987) subcategorise three 'degrees' of belonging: 'peripheral member researchers' who assume positivist credentials by limiting their fieldwork to observation; 'active members' who partially engage; and 'complete member researchers – embedded in the subject's heart. Set largely within the dominant fields of identity and post-colonial studies, this discussion is perhaps useful for understanding the researcher's positionality. This desire to measure proximity and belonging relates to the ongoing research anxieties around bias, subjectivity and compromise, which have long been criticised as impairments on clear knowledge rather than celebrated for their potential to obtain deep understanding and authenticity (see below). To this end, I assume both insider and outsider status in this thesis; here, I acknowledge Griffith (1998) that to claim total insider or outsider status is absurd as both ultimately come into play in any research, being moulded by social relationships and boundaries. Aguiler reminds us, "The insiders' biases may be a source of insight as well of error" (1981, p.26), and therefore bias within my research is acknowledged. Not every participant in the live programme was approached within my research with priority given to those who ran repeated nights over a duration, contributed to large-scale commissions, or generated considerable critical attention at both the time and upon reflection. Further, there is a whole

body of artists who were engaging with emergent technologies at the ICA in the given period who by my invitation, contributed significantly to the live programme who have been deliberately omitted from this study as the origins of this genre of work was born out of ‘official’ curatorial consensus rather than the more guerrilla activity which this thesis addresses.

Within chapter seven, I reflect upon my internship at Factual Nonsense in the months before the death of Joshua Compston. This was an intense period in which a close bond was established. To present an accurate representation, I have referred to Joshua Compston unconventionally as ‘Joshua’ / ‘Josh’ within my autoethnographic accounts. From an autoethnographical perspective, this was a particularly compelling chapter to write. Joshua had a great influence on me during the brief time I knew him, and his death, aged 25, still evokes great sadness. Though I have followed academic protocol through the broad use of interviews and literature on Joshua and Factual Nonsense, as my work is autoethnographic, avoiding emotion would be inappropriate.

My selective researcher bias is evident and further confounded by degrees of formality and informality, which I ascribed to individual participants in this study. I shall debate the values and limitations of ‘friendship-as-method' later in this chapter. However, it is worth stating here that all interview relationships undertaken for this study were not of equal intimacy and formality/informality, predicated on several factors: length and nature of the initial association and if and how a relationship had been sustained in the interim years. Although part of the programme under discussion explored a new area of night/social time in the gallery, there were clear degrees of formality dictated by institutional demands: financial, marketing targets, contractual details and the tenor of the night itself, which were integral to my role.

Perhaps the greatest bias present within my research is my personal curatorial objective; to create a programme which was attractive to a non-traditional practitioner and audience. As I

argue in chapter eight, the ICA in the mid to late 1990s felt like the last stand of curatorial freedoms, echoing the call of its founding mission as an “adult play centre” (Read 1948, in Kusters, Froshaug, Hamilton, Paolozzi, 1996, online. NP). Audience, access and class were not something which I actively discussed with my colleagues, collaborators /artists at the time – it was a personal motivator rather than a mission statement, and curatorial decisions were predicated primarily on conventions of cultural merit, albeit in an expanded form. Indeed, it is evident in reviewing some of the interviews that the introduction of themes of ‘class and access’ was, for many interviewees, somewhat unexpected and unwelcomed, with some appearing defensive when discussing the issue.

The privileged position of the researcher is present to differing degrees in all ethnographic research. As complex as it stands in relation to the nature of this study, I do act as a gatekeeper to the story at hand, prioritising, signalling and editing. Though I have aimed to foreground the participant’s voice, I do dictate the subject focus - my research, my questions, and my agenda. Though I do not assume privileged knowledge of the subject in question, I was then and am now aware that I was immersed in the subject and had an authorial voice. Methodologically, my insider status within the original period and the data gathering and interpretation now add additional complexities, which I address here. Though immersed in the subject of this study at the time, I now revive these narratives with a reflective eye, temporal distance, and as a researcher no longer professionally engaged in the art, club or entertainment world. Similarly, my embodiment of working-class culture has also become distanced.

Researcher and participant subjectivity invariably influence a study's direction, tone and overall knowledge production. From a constructivist research perspective, bias, influence and pre-conception are considered integral to constructing meaning. Within this study, it is important to note that both researcher and participant will embellish their narratives with a heavy degree of subjective bias. What was important to each individual, the impact their

programme had at the time and the resulting legacy will be filtered through what is remembered and what is desired to be reflected now in this account of that period of history. Whilst all contributed to the live programme, there was no central community to which all belonged beyond me as curator and the ICA as a venue. There was no cultural club night genre in the way in which there was a contemporary visual arts culture or live art practice. The different strands of the programme were fragmented according to music, ethnicity or subcultural choices. As such, recollections of cultural significance and impact become highly personal and subjective in their retelling. Artists and curators are inherently selfish. The practice of reflection is one of connecting with one's own creativity and artistic identity. Much has been written about the engagement with self-reflexivity as an antidote to subjectification in insider research (Russell & Kelly, 2002; Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Watt, 2007; Ahmed Dunya, Lewando and Blackburn, 2011; Berger, 2015); its virtues as a method of curbing indulgent excess are much lauded, evidenced by Van Heugten, "[The] researcher's subjectivity must be open to intensive scrutiny. Values, beliefs and personal interests should not only be declared but challenged on an ongoing basis." (2004. p.vii)

Reflexivity is a conscious process of unmasking hidden conflicts and assumptions, ideas and beliefs to emancipate the thinking and action of self, others, reality and context (Kalu 2019; Holmes, Cockburn-Wooten et al, 2005; Hibbert, 2013). So, a tick box of rigour, clarity and even truthfulness is prescribed, though I contend that, at times, this is not compatible with the direction of my research. By reading my autoethnographic data through a reflexive lens, I consider my narrative as of greater value than my participants, who have not been privy to this process. I acknowledge my researcher bias and privilege, and I am conscious of assumptions, ideas, beliefs and so forth, it is valuable to the expansion of the story that these very characteristics also embed the personalities of those who make up the story and add to a richer account of lived histories and creative practice. This said, to subsequently translate this understanding into any form of editorial review is to negate the human origins of this research. Perhaps new understandings of reflexivity are called for, ones that are

divorced from historic Positivist bias. Perhaps this is less about striving towards an objective perspective on oneself and more about seeking the authentic in and amongst personality traits, social conditions and remembered contexts (Lincon and Denzin 2000). To this end, reflexivity within insider research is about honesty, which celebrates an understanding of personal traits, exaggerations, ego, selective reflection and all the quirks of creative personalities, whichever voice they originate from.

Memories, Histories and Truths

Memory as method has long been perceived as something of a 'necessary evil' in recalling linear histories in qualitative research, and as such, remains on the "margins of social science and arts research" (Keightley, 2010, p.60). Moreover, its' perceived unreliability is frequently cited by those who use it as a tool to undermine the rigour of autoethnography as a methodology. Finkelstein goes as far as to brand recovered oral histories through memory as the most "impoverished concept" for academic purposes (2000, p.5), as the passage of time, forgetfulness, and perspectives all inhibit a Positivist desire for certainty, continuity and factual understanding.

Memory is central to recalling social constructs, as the 'matching up' of stories results in something of a patchwork effect. In defence of memory, Peniston-Bird (2009) reflects that the duration of time for the historian takes away sources and certainties in the restructuring of the past. To this extent, she terms the process of retrieving historical accounts as "Recovery History" (p.106), a process which acknowledges gaps, contradictions and inaccuracies in the original account and the historian's interpreting of the account. Others call to distinguish memory from history as independent practices (Keightley, 2010). The former acknowledges inconsistencies, the latter relying on primary sources. Though this may add clarity to the discussion, it does impose a false opposition in that it relies on there being absolute truths in history and further presents history as a science to be proven rather than a story built around moments of action. Further, there are variables within this process of

historical recall, and emotional impact adds a subjective depth to the point in history. Histories are experienced and recalled via the story by those who lived them or those who seek to access and understand them. This situation is further impacted by the emotional conditions of the original moment. So, the reconstruction of the past becomes acute as those emotions are revived, and here, I recall Denzin's (2007) call for reenactment as a key historical tool. Green (1972) reminds us that all experience has different subjective impacts, and the question remains for the historian: Why? Starting with memories as a methodological device affords the social will, to some extent, to self-construct, as all memories are intertwined with the social conditions in which they were formed.

The relationship of memory to society is key to this process of historical recall. The power dynamics of the original time can vary at the time and moment of reflection. To this end, its oral histories and memories are constantly evolving (Nora, 1989) as history transforms through time (Munslow, 2010). Regarding personal reflection, we must start by acknowledging that we are not the people we once were, and we revisit personal stories impacted by time and space. This said, the autoethnographer knows that original narrator better than any observer or researcher ever could, which allows her to reveal narrative truths (Bochner, 2001, 2002). To this end, memory is a conceptual device to abstract from the past and restructure in the present. In so doing, the contemporary social context needs to be acknowledged as the impact of the past on the present is assessed. Therefore, the function of memory is situated in its ability to have traction in how far it impacts the present (Gedi & Elam, 1996) and commemorates the past (Jordanova, 2019). Therein (perhaps) the 'truth' resides. There is, therefore, no singular 'truth' to be sought in this study but beliefs, identities, emotions resurrected, and of course, epiphanies of moments of significance. These are moments of change, development, regression, abandonment of ideas and ideologies, our own self-filtered moments, which form truths as they have shaped and formed our own sense of self. They are, as Ellis et al. (2011) remind us, "self-claimed phenomena" (p.274) and must be assessed within the social and cultural condition in which they were created

and recalled. Here, the recall of epiphanies and their historical conditions form the basis of my study.

Friendship as Method(ology)

Friendship in the London art world of the late 1990s was very much a fluid term. In the cultural land-grab for status, space and influence (see chapter five), friendship often transcended a deep and meaningful 'companionship'. It frequently translated more crudely into 'connections' with those of influence and power. Within this study, I employ friendship as central to my overall methodology where a qualified collaborative ontology is adopted. 'Friendship as a method' was coined by Tillmann-Heany (2003) and has developed through subsequent critical discussion (Tillmann-Healy, 2008, 2009, Kirsch, 2005; Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2013). Rooted in interpretivist foundations and the ethnographic practice of fieldwork, 'friendship as method' highlights the potential for the researcher to gain deeper and more personal insight into the subject and effect what Tilmann describes as a "radical reciprocity, a move from studying them to us" (2015, p.9). As such, it is firmly rooted in autoethnographic and reflective practice. Situated in defiant opposition to the Positivist paradigm, narrative connectivity and discourse are at the very heart of the method.

The 'known' factors and shared histories between researcher and participant may have a defining or restraining implication, conditioned by past and current knowledge, narratives and perceptions of one another. Stylistically, there is an increased unstructured and conversational aspect to the interviews within this study, with backgrounds assumed and agreed upon in silence. Though there seemed to be enthusiasm and, in some cases, a warm delight to take the opportunity to reflect on those days, I remain mindful that this does not negate the hitherto agreed imbalance of power between the researcher and the interviewee (Sassi and Thomas, 2012). Though removing all traces of power is impossible, it is undoubtedly a more egalitarian form of research. To this end, Owton & Allen-Collinson (2013) argue that friendship is more methodology than method in directly confronting the

traditional power imbalances between researcher and participant. I was aware of the career surges some participants had achieved in the interim period, with some achieving what can be called ‘cultural celebrity status’. However, the tenor of the original relationship and, in most cases, the friendship did afford a mutual respect and recognition of the importance which each party played in the past and their importance in the reconstruction of that time within this study. Here, I wish to be clear about my use of the term ‘co-authorship’. Participants and I were all connected by an untraditional view of what art and culture are. We were happy to abandon those larger canons of art knowledge for the cause of experimentation. This was new territory. The enacting of the programme was collaborative, and in a true pioneering spirit, friendships were formed through that feat itself. Yes, I was the ‘curator’, and I ultimately agreed to access these ideas and audiences, but the development of the programme was ours, and, therefore, the telling of the story must be, to some degree, ours too.

Friendship as a method comes with its challenges. Garton and Copland (2010) suggest that the resurrection of prior relationships inevitably breaks with narrative convention. Indeed, the awkwardness of ‘catching up’ after ten to fifteen years created something of a false intimacy, atypical of the structured interview protocol. The search for common ground and re-establishment of connection to the past is established discussions on the mundaneness of ‘growing up’, kids, jobs and then the congratulations on accomplished creations and achievements. This creates a more instant familiarity and the reinstatement of a connection between friends and allows, to some extent to bypass the current researcher/participant roles as we soberly reflect on the chaotic actions of our younger selves. There is the exchange of in-jokes, moments of communality, extraordinariness and epiphanies - anecdotes which tie us to a time and a place and aid in the resurrection of the memory. These are key features in the exercise of friendship as a method which makes the gathering of content easier but makes the reconciliation of the participants within the final story a far greater challenge. Whose identity is attributed to what part of the story? Then there is a new

dynamic at play that of researcher and subject – we are all aware that the object of the dialogue is publication, and therefore, a degree of editorial is inevitably integral in the final execution of the story.

Several scholars have dwelled on what they see as the potential for betrayal in disclosing interviews given by friends (Brewis, 2014; Hodkinson, 2005; Fraser and Puwar, 2008). The intimacy and tendency to blur the professional and the private within the dialogue between friends, by necessity, leaves the researcher with a residual ethical concern around exposure and disclosure. What was told to me, 'The researcher' and what to me, 'The friend'? This is perhaps of greater ethical concern to those researchers whose subjects are of a sensitive or covert nature and where welfare implications may result. However, it is pertinent to all who engage with friends as sources for research. During my interviews, all participants were given the option for anonymity; none wanted this. Indeed, to the contrary, all wanted to be credited for their involvement in creating the period. Critical reflections on third parties – other players in the scene who were not interviewed were a common feature and a potential source of controversy. One participant asked to look through his final interview transcript for accuracy; all other participants consented to my use of the material as recorded. For me, the ethical question was not just what was included in the final discussion but also what was omitted, aspects of the conversations which were perhaps crucial to the participant's reflection but less so to mine. This is an issue felt by all who conduct qualitative research. However, when it comes to friendship as method, the stakes are inevitably higher. To this end, the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched must be acknowledged irrespective of egalitarian aspirations on the storyteller's behalf.

Nostalgia

In his study on the psychology of Nostalgia, Routledge et al (2006) reminds us of its etymological source, which, when literally translated, refers to a "yearning to return to one's place of origin" (p.975). Adapted to this study, one conjures up romantic notions around the

self-construction of identity to repurpose oneself within a culture or subculture (Thornton,1995; Bozilovic, 2006). If we view the ICA live programme in question as a 'scene' (see chapter eight), then our membership of that scene sees the inevitable tussle for hierarchy via subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995), and reflective nostalgia is an ideal mechanism to evoke narratives and identify roles and authorship therein. This 'Freudian' yearning to return to the time, scene, and subculture is partly a testament to the importance of the time and the necessity to revisit, not only socially and culturally but personally. It was a time of change, and we together were agents of that change. Routledge's study concludes that nostalgia requires a predominance of self among significant others: "Nostalgia doesn't simply remind people of a past filled with social connections. It makes them feel connected and motivated to connect" (p.981). As a call for action, nostalgia re-energises reflection to highlight those moments of importance, epiphanies. To this end, social connectedness and personal belonging go hand in hand. Seeking out the safe spaces in one's history, where identity is formed and connections made, the methodological premise for engaging friendship as a method and embracing reflective nostalgia as a tool for recreating the story of the individuals and the culture they made together. With all acts of collaboration, the vulnerability arises in the co-construction of identity. That one's identity depends on others within the culture and agreement on the 'rules of belonging'. Therefore, when resurrecting friendships through nostalgic tropes, one is also placing one's identity up for scrutiny and agreement by others within the group.

Though nostalgia is commonly employed to deride an immature connection to a time and place, it also functions as a positive emotion when "One typically feels sentimental, most often happy but with a tinge of longing" (Wildschut et al., 2006. p.844). In their study into the psychology of collective nostalgia, Wildschut et al. discuss the importance of identity within the group, a form of self-verification of the importance of the evoked time. Echoing Routledge's call to return to a moment of origin, this calls into question whether this study period was in some way self-validated. Here, nostalgia functions as a mechanism for a state

of willing suspension of self-belief. If something is discussed and romanticised enough, it becomes a reality in which fictions sit alongside facts. Though there is some truth to this, it should also be acknowledged that it is a common trait within all sub-cultures and scenes, where identity is self-constructed along with the terms and conditions of formation and identity within a given moment. The re-engagement to that time, through collective nostalgia, is essentially a mechanism to connect with those emotions and to re-construct the many-faceted identities and features of the time in question.

Nostalgia plays an essential role in cultural life. It fills a very human need to sentimentalise and selectively reflect on a period of importance in one's life. Cohen (1995) asserts that community is overall a purely mental construct, which in turn enables meaning. In this context, personal stories, by necessity, become cultural stories (Manning & Adams, 2015). Through collating and reflecting on a series of personal recollections, the drive to a single narrative should be averted as each has their own story to tell. The reconstruction of the original counterbalance's nostalgic tropes as versions of the same time are contrasted with one another to create a non-linear map of the moment. Svetlana Boym's work on Nostalgia (2001) places it in the past and as a necessary part of the present and future, which works against the twentieth-century drivers for historical progress. In her account, nostalgia works as both a sideways and future perspective, where the needs of the present recall moments from the past to shape the realities of the future and, to this end, contains a utopian function. She further seeks to clarify two types of Nostalgia: 'restorative' and 'reflective'. The former implies that there is a need to reflect on a utopian moment in the past, which was in one way or another, transformative (Reynolds, 2011). This perhaps, is the current usage of nostalgia where we reclaim a part of history in a dewy-eyed attempt to fill a contemporary hole. The second nostalgia, reflective, provides a different reading and one where I place this thesis.

By calling to doubt the notion of absolute truths (and historical ages), reflective nostalgia embraces "shattered fragments of memory and temporalises space" (Boym, 2001. P.49)

Here, Boym writes emotion back into the conversation on nostalgia by exploding the myth that longing and critical thinking are natural opponents. By deconstructing the past, which we long for, we can rebuild the moment with more honour and rigour than the neat packaging of history which we are fed. To this end, we ‘take responsibility’ for our own nostalgia. My aim in this study is to reconstruct the past via the fragmented memories and artefacts of the period to recreate a story with contemporary agency. A question I put to all that I have interviewed for this project is; Could what happened then happen now? This study's key function is to cast many lenses on the past moment to gather deconstructed remnants, which will be rebuilt for future analysis. To this end, my study is about longing and swimming in nostalgia.

Holland (2004) reminds us that all personal dialogue is in one form or another, emotional. I was, after all, asking individuals to reflect on periods of three to ten years of their lives and, indeed, the most emotionally charged of times, their ‘youth’. (For clarity, my definition of youth may extend beyond the conventional one of late teens or early 20s. For me personally and some of my participants, it lasted until our mid-thirties and has residual traits today). It was a common and combining feature that all I encountered through the ICA programme and beyond had an acknowledged and agreed passion for hybrid culture – this, after all, was our common ground with all its resonances in music, fashion, subcultures and art. The emotional engagement evident in almost all interviews assured me of the integral importance of the time, not just for me but for us. As a technique coupled with the commonality of friendship as a method, it escalated into the detail of the interview, to the deep and the meaningful with ease. My initial trepidation around reconnecting with the past was quickly side-lined by the enthusiasm amongst my participants, who gladly reflected on their contribution to the programme and its contextual significance from their perspectives. Re-calling Denzin (2007), the lack of formality and preliminary introductions, coupled with a reflective nostalgia, afforded a conversational form of re-enactment through the re-telling of the story. Phrases like “Do you remember when…” “What about the night that…” formed an immediacy to reconstruct the narrative past. Both parties were quickly re-situated in recalled

moments from which an ease of storytelling ensued. Our current circumstances: moving of cities, baring or not of children, engagement with the conventions of 'middle age'…, whilst mutual by experience, were not the common bond or interest within the interviews. This proved to be a great asset in quickly accessing the depth and richness of the dialogue. These were not, overall, current friends – our shared experience was rooted firmly in the past, and current circumstance was a trivial part of the interview. Further, an adult perspective on a youthful and often impulsive period afforded greater insight into the value of the time than I anticipated. The tone was enthusiastic and conversational. When re-engaging with members of a community after a lapsed period, it is important to acknowledge the significance of this vacuum. Though some of my participants are still engaged in art, music and club cultures, it would be nonsensical to view the actions of youth through the eyes of the now middle-aged. The maturation of the often impulsive and opportunistic actions of the programme in the late nineties affords a potential for interwoven accounts and inconsistencies, which culminate in the collective remembered legacy of the period. It is, however, important to acknowledge that we are not the people we once were. Our social and cultural conditions have changed substantially.

Research Ethics

Though the ethics of autoethnography have been debated, I will now examine the ethics germane to autoethnography as a research method. Priority of voice and the elevation of one story over another, though a researcher's prerogative, has a more complex turn when the researcher's narrative is entwined throughout the story. This can lead to cases of 'Narrator Privilege' (Smythe and Murray 2000. p.329). Where having the omnipotent perspective on the cumulative text, the researchers' objectives govern, or at least taint, the analytical process. After all, a neat and cohesive story scans much better than one full of contradiction and no clear conclusion. A real risk in reflective autoethnography is that neat and clear outcomes may not be found. That oppositional, ideological positioning may awkwardly sit side-by-side without resolution. This goes against the scholarly grain, though

the road to enlightenment has not been without its contradictions. Should the autoethnographer, therefore, consult and extend analytical and editorial access to the text? Though this would seem to appease 'Narrator Privilege', it does not ultimately achieve a research goal and would call into question all analysis as being the privilege of one or the other. We must be honest, and I hope I have been throughout that a degree of privilege has taken place as I assume the role of the researcher. I am reminded that my job as a researcher is not to reflect what my participants say but to interpret this material – what do they mean? (Smythe & Murray, 2000). Indeed, if we acknowledge that the researcher's role is to interpret the narrative collated critically, then privilege becomes a necessary part of the overall process. This does not allow the researcher absolute interpretation power as she must remain reflexive and address the story and person as one. Doing so makes the moral obligation to truthful reflection more central to the process.

The final ethical player in the mix is that of the reader of the text. Once written and published, then the author/scholarly privilege transfers to that of the reader as their interpretive lens comes into play and a story is made anew. Over this, we have no control. This is perhaps more pertinent to autoethnography than other methodologies; Dauphinee reminds us that "autoethnography opens space for the reader to see intentions…It opens up a deeper form of judgment. This is its ethics" (2010, p.813). By representing the subjective self alongside the biographies and narratives of others, one is doing so with all the intentions of transparency and openness. That this ethical stance translates through the text to the reader is naïve, to say the least. By putting stories into the wider world, one is acknowledging and inviting the critical reflection of all who care to read them and at this point, the author relinquishes control and ethical responsibility.

Chapter 3. Setting the scene: The 1980s, Recession, Deindustrialisation and the Sanctuary of the Regional Art School

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the indirect impact of specific Thatcherite policies which enabled the rise of the London art scene during the 1990s. Utilising legislation, primary and secondary interviews, autoethnography and literature, the socio-conditions from which the greater cultural scene arose will be established. Specific measures in education, social benefits and enterprise enabled artists to remain in London, congregate and form the self-authored independent practices that formed both the yBa and DIY scenes discussed throughout this study. Further, it allows us to situate the 1990s art world as both a market and branding phenomenon within a specific set of historical conditions, which has been underplayed within the literature.

The positive impact Thatcher's eleven-year reign (1979-1990) had on the formation of both the 'young British artist' (yBa) movement and the 'Do-it-Yourself' (DIY) scene garners greater significance than almost any other socio-political factor impacting the time (Walker, 1987). Whilst Neoliberalism took a stranglehold on an increasingly polarised society, what may be deemed 'anomalies' in the Conservative governments' policies proved to be vital lifelines for artists and creatives. Funding streams and access to higher education became an increasingly viable and attractive option for many of those traditionally neglected by the political right. In an expedient move to reduce the soaring unemployment figures, the government inadvertently created the conditions for creative young people from an unusually wide range of backgrounds to congregate at art schools and, in doing so, expanded the authorship and ownership of art.

Deindustrialisation

The mass deindustrialisation of the UK during the 1980s led to a loss of an estimated 65% of manufacturing employment (Graham & Spence, 1997). Whilst largely impacting mainly the North of England with the closure of major industries and manufacturing plants, it also significantly impacted pockets of the Capital (Overman, 2011). Hoxton, in East London and the surrounding areas, were deeply affected by the collapse of the manufacturing industry, which accounted for occupied floorspace in the area falling by 14% between 1978 and 1983, translating into almost 23% of former industrial space abandoned (Hackney Borough Plan 1984, in Harris, 2012) and seemingly valueless (Rayner, 2018). Cheek by jowl with the City of London, this once hub of manufacturing became destitute, devoid of culture, leisure and social investment. Pockets of residents remained in the north of Hoxton in the estates; however, it was noted at the time that community bonds were increasingly frayed as unemployment and displacement took hold (Harrison, 1988). The pubs, strip clubs and Victorian music halls were the only entertainment remaining, restaurants and bars were non-existent. Leisure and entertainment were a luxury afforded by a few. People did not voluntarily go to Shoreditch or Hoxton from the rest of the capital for the two-fold reason that there was little to go for, and once there, it was deemed dangerous indeed you were hard pushed to get a taxi driver to drop you in the area (Dama, 2014). Even by 1996, when I worked in the area amongst a rapidly forming art scene, the tension between the indigenous cultures and the new occupiers was palpable. Artist and Charlotte Road Shoreditch resident Gavin Turk reflected on his experiences of the area during the mid-1980s: “There were people selling or giving away socialist worker party newspapers and British bulldog kind of fascists. So, there were sort of skinheads and sort of fascists like parked on the end of the road… Brick Lane was already by that stage a Pakistan and Bangladeshi-controlled street with these people at the end.” (Interview, 2024). At the cross-section of Charlotte Road and Hoxton Square lay the Bricklayers Arms, a traditional pub with a snooker table, darts board and an uneasy co-existence of residents and art folk. The Bricklayers Arms was a crucial

meeting place between the communities old and new, with the owner, Vicki Pengilley, rightly claiming that the pub was the social hub which ignited the Shoreditch scene (Guardian, 21/11/03). In many ways, though by default, in that there was little competition, she was right.

There had been a drip feed of artists and creatives moving into East London dating back to the ‘Godfathers’ of contemporary British art, Gilbert and George, who took up residency in Fournier Street Spitalfields back in 1964, paying a monthly rent of £16 (Gilbert & George in Shaw, A. 2017). However, the evolving art community of the 1990s emerged alongside a broader creative start-up scene who were also attracted to the area by large spaces and low rents. Fashion photographers became a feature of the area as large warehouse spaces transformed into studios on an epic scale, symbolising something of a nostalgic nod to East London’s former glory as the textile centre of the world from the 19th century (Raynor, 2018). However, the artist’s residential occupation of the area quickly formed a community of practitioners. This occupation brought the areas of Shoreditch and Hoxton in from the cold to be a vital part of London’s cultural economic revival following the recession of 1989.

Another crucial factor in the formation of the East London art scene was indirectly bequeathed by the Thatcher government (Young, 2017). The funding of higher education via maintenance grants and the opportunity to claim the ‘the dole’ and housing benefit after graduation was fundamental to enabling artists from working-class backgrounds to continue their practice in the capital. This income stream afforded artists’ time; time to work, time to discuss, time to collaborate and time to socialise, all principal factors in creating the scene. As artist Simon Bedwell recalls: “It was possible to get buildings at almost nothing rent, the dole was around, and it meant that a whole load of art students had that 5-10 years between leaving art college and having to knuckle down” (Interview, 2023).

It was a lifeline for many who, having gained a free art school education, could now become an artist for real, working and refining their practice within a community. This economic freedom was further extended to those like me who wanted to forge a career in the art world. My internship with Joshua Compston at his East London gallery/project space Factual Nonsense (1995-6) was only possible due to the benefits system which allowed me to stay in London. My five months in Charlotte Road exposed me to an emerging art world, which was colossally impacting. In my interview with curator and contemporary Lisa Le Ferve, she defined this period as being a “different economic moment” (Interview, 2021). With unemployment in the year of my graduation (1996) residing at 8%, the options of either claiming benefits (macrotrends.net) or getting an unskilled job were fundamentally the two initial doorways on offer. This afforded many of us the time for a period of consolidation and engagement with culture, a new optimism. “Either signing on or because you had a terrible job, you were thinking of amazing things you wanted to do, and you would make them happen” (Interview, Lisa Le Feuvre, 2021).

Inspired by the transformational rise of the young British artists in the late 1980s and the global gaze of the art world falling on London after decades in the wilderness, a real feeling of opportunity was afforded to my generation. Not an opportunity offered up by the canons of the established art world, these remained ridged as ever, but a brief period of positivity within which you can define yourself, whoever you were, for in the ‘Wild East’ of London, there was something of a conceptual goldrush afoot.

The Enterprise Allowance Scheme

Undoubtedly influenced by the neo-liberal sensibilities of the 1980s, the drive to disassemble the infrastructure of the old art world and create an alternative scene fuelled a wave of creative entrepreneurial spirit. With little to lose and time and space on tap, reimagining a space for art and creativity became something of an epidemic. A significant origin of this was again ironically, Government policy in 1993 in the form of the Enterprise Allowance Scheme

(EAS). Set against the riots of 1981, when unemployment reached 2.5 million and 30% of young people were out of work, this new policy was designed to generate new business enterprises. Within the borough of Hackney alone, the speed of unemployment among school leavers was astounding, rising from three young people for every job vacancy in 1979 to 138 chasing each job by December 1981 (Harrison, 1988). The options for many were limited: long-term unemployment or, for those who had done well at school, a fee-free education, to which was briefly added a third possibility, enterprise. The EAS, which ran for just eighteen months, had the basic requirements, that an individual had been out of work for eight weeks or more and had £1000 in savings (Young, 2017). Budding entrepreneurs were given the opportunity to apply for a one-year subsidy of £40 per week (equivalent to £160 today) to realise their business idea and directed towards self-sufficiency. Remarkably, 18 months after enrolment, some 65% of beneficiaries were employed in their stated business (Greene, 2002). The creative sector was quickly seduced with a roster of now-established names – Tracey Emin, Jeremy Deller, Alan McGee / Creation Records, clothing brand Superdry and Viz Magazine – owing their brand success, in part, to the initiative. Engagement by the creative sector was something of a surprise to the architects of the scheme. A Leading Civil Servant behind the enterprise allowance, Sir David Trippier, later recalled:

> “I remember going to Newcastle to visit some EAS shop units, and all the units were occupied by people in the cultural and design industries. I recall thinking, 'This is really, really good”. (Gunnell, 2011. Online. NP).

The possibilities afforded by the EAS were genuinely impacting, particularly among creatives who were hoping for a moment of consolidation. Arguably a catalyst for the explosion of the creative industries in the late 1980s (Barker, 2016), this scheme afforded creative individuals the freedom to explore the potential of their vision. The uptake among the artistic community in 1983, for example, is estimated to be around 10,000 (Young, 2017). Further, the success of the scheme gave a tinge of optimism to many by unleashing the possibilities of self-

definition. Artist David Burrows cites the EAS and the dole as the key factors in enabling him to practice in London in the 1980s after graduating from Goldsmiths (Interview. 11th November, 2019) with the only alternative being to work around the clock or sign on.

The Reform of The Art School

The regional art school was a feature of most cities and towns in the 1960s - 1980s, revived by the radical 'First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education', commonly known as The Coldstream Report of 1960. The report initiated the new award classification of one-year Foundation Course and three-year Diploma in Art and Design (Dip AD), the delivery of which was to be self-determined by each institution. "Within the simple structure that we propose, art schools can construct their own courses free of complicated rules" (Coldstream Report, 1960, online NP). The introduction of the Foundation Year was a vital shift in the revitalisation of the art school, replacing the art A' level, students were encouraged to consider their work not by technical accuracy but as an evolving practice, something which former Foundation student Dr Christine Atha recalls as:

> "Experimental in flavour while still teaching workshop skills, drawing and colour skills. The outcome was a properly developed and presented portfolio to take to interview." (Email, 23rd June 2023).

These factors colluded to encourage something of a ground zero for higher level arts education in the UK, allowing each institution to develop its own style and flavour, building individual reputations. Naturally, there were some directives in the report; the prerequisites to undertaking the Foundation Course were five O' Levels, three of which were to be 'academic' and of which one needed to evidence English language ability. However, within these entrance requirements, there was one crucial caveat:

> “Students of outstanding artistic promise who are capable of taking a Diploma course but have not obtained the proposed minimum educational qualifications should be eligible for admission to courses and, if successful, should be awarded the diploma.” (Coldstream Report, 1960, p.3).

This out clause not only broadened access from all backgrounds but also credited artistic skill as being of comparable value to academic achievement. The impact was immense. In a 1972 review of the Graphic Design Dip AD course at Brighton College of Art, it was concluded that there was a correlation between students who had failed their Dip AD and those who had entered the course with the highest O’ Level results and that third-class Dip AD awards went to those with the highest A’ levels (Hywel, n.d.). Though perhaps a reflection on the weaknesses of the 11+ system, this out clause fundamentally opened access to art schools for those formally excluded from higher education. A wider demographic of creative young people saw a new opportunity, not just the school leavers from the working and lower middle classes but also people of colour and the rise of the mature student (Aspinall, 2014).

The Coldstream Report imposed a compulsory academic module into the Dip AD, ensuring that art history would be a fixed element accounting for a minimum of 15% of learning time. This was to be taught alongside a programme known as ‘Complementary Studies’. In his reflections on the latter whilst a student at Brighton College of Art 1961-7, James Hywel recalls Contemporary Studies as something of a ‘lucky dip’ of subjects, ranging from science experiments to introductions to philosophy, the choice of the subject being determined solely by the interests of tutors. Undoubtedly, among the seemingly mixed bag of lecture topics, the important strand was the teaching of critical and theoretical context for studio practice, which had an important impact as it elevated student practice into broader intellectual arenas (Hywell, ND.). It introduced and encouraged theoretical and critical approaches to practice, rethinking art education as an intellectual and practical pursuit.

The independent art school, which emerged in the 1960s and into the 1980s, provided an additional social function to Britain's towns alongside access to education, which was the origin of a new social scene. Frith and Horne, in their influential book 'Art into Pop', describe this scene as: "a place where young people, whether students or not, can hang out and learn [or] fantasise what it means to be an artist, a bohemian, a star" (1987, p.21). Within our interview, artist and academic Steve Rushton echoed the motivations of many of his peers in the 1970s and 1980s, recalling he went to art school to be a pop star (2023). Dr Christine Atha, herself a former 1970s art school student (Leeds College of Art 1971 – 1973; Hull School of the Arts 1973-76), points to the Complementary Studies programme as the breading ground for the ensuing social and collaborative experimentations which have become a legacy of the time (email 23/6/23). The social scene of the regional art school, in many ways, laid the foundations for the generation that came to define the DIY art scene of the 1990s. Unlike arts education today, which is governed by the UK government's statistical prowess in the Creative Industries league tables prioritising subject expertise over collaborative practice, the regional art school was a fluid territory where art forms from sculpture to music were offered to the students to experiment with. Further, the former distinction between high and low cultures became obsolete. This formed something of a 'readymade' prototype for the cross-artform practices of the 1990s and 2000s. Whilst the inter-disciplinary 'art event' itself was nothing new – Dada, Situationists, Fluxus, happenings of the 1960s - the exploration of practice beyond the subject lines, bleeding from the visual arts into performance and pop music, design, and media (Savage, 1991) led to a blurring of the aesthetic lines and gave rise to hybrid and socially based practices rooted in popular culture. Recalling Central St. Martin's in the 1970s, then-student Malcolm Le Grice cites impromptu concerts by fellow students Pink Floyd and Bruce McLean's band 'Nice Style' which was self-defined as 'live sculpture' (McLean in Le Grice, 2011). This was a breaking genre greatly influenced by the practice of former St Martins students Gilbert and George. These hybrids in culture, in some cases, lasted just moments, in other scenarios, they were

the seedbed for the development of major art genres, particularly Live Art, as I will later discuss. The importance of its legacy is undoubtedly the self-authorisation of what art is, being playful, collaborative and ambitious.

For many students, pop culture was the first introduction to an alternative society distinct from that they were born into. In the mid-1970s into the 1980s, there were dominant themes prevailing in popular music, which can be summarised as being political, angry and indifferent to cultural hierarchies as punk and post-punk infiltrated the music scene. It is perhaps unsurprising that almost a third of the UK punk musicians had been students mainly from the arts (Frith and Horne, 1987). Art and pop were interwoven and embedded within the art school system, as was their attitude and outlook. A working-class consciousness was feeding into the dormant cultures of the 1970s and 1980s questioning the structures and institutions which preserved and protected the arts.

Against the bleak backdrop of 1980s Britain, art schools began to reject the foundations of modernism. In his reflective essay on the 1980s London art scene, artist Liam Gillick considers the art school system of the time and the wider condition for young artists looking to establish their careers. In his essay, ‘The Last Great Era of Low Self-Esteem’ (2018), Gillick recounts the crucial transitions in society which lay the foundations for the 1990s reinvention of the conditions of culture. Alluding to the impact of the early days of cultural theory via the Birmingham School on art students (Hall, 1973), Gillicks paints a transformative picture, “1980s London was dirty and depressing. A new generation of artists reacted to the mood of the time by screwing with cultural hierarchies, decoding and recoding cultural material until it was no longer clear on which side they stood” (Gillick, 2018. P.56). Though this was quickly co-opted by the art world system, it did afford a moment of genuine revolution amongst a generation that formed the 1990s scene. Art education had been officially ‘authenticated’ with the introduction of art degrees replacing diplomas in 1972, and together with an expanded student base in terms of class and race, there was the

development of a critical consciousness which challenged the dominant canons and structures of art. This diversification of the art school demographic introduced a broad realm of references drawn from popular culture and lived experiences into both debate and practice as Liam Gillick asserts:

> "The generation of artists educated in the 80s had already played with hierarchies of culture before entering the advanced art education system. Art students had a critical substructure and processing framework outside of the accepted hierarchies and logic systems, which rendered them a point of resistance to the destructive antisocial project around them." (2018. p.58)

As discussed, popular culture in the 1980s triggered connections between art and pop, which so often led back to the art school origins. In the lineage of Roxy Music, John Lennon, David Bowie, Joe Strummer, Peter Townsend, and Pink Floyd. The list is seemingly a roll call of musical innovators; many students went to art school with one objective, to form a band. Accessing popular music via the album sleeve or glam aesthetics of the 1970s, the fusion of cultures made real sense and one that was relatable across the classes. However, for those from working-class backgrounds and comprehensive educations, music equated freedom from the immediate context and soon became a political tool to challenge division.

Upon discussing the subject of the merging of art and music in art schools during the 1970s and 1990s, Brian Eno cites the drive to question the medium as being the connective factor (Eno, 2013 in Potter, 2022). This may account for a combined drive for experimentation in both genres in these decades' influencing the mindset 1990s art scene. This resonated with participant Steve Rushton in what he terms "an artistic sensibility in the production of pop music", forming something of a binding force between the two practices (Interview, 2023). The layering of sound and paint, the process of erasing and refining, created a fusion within the creative process. Strong communities of artists, designers and musicians were formed at

art school, which consolidated around two key sites: the studio and the social space. As described by artist Bob & Roberta Smith, the gift of the art studio was akin to Virginia Wolf in providing a ‘room of one’s own’ (Barnett, L., 2011). Privacy and space to develop your work were a luxury afforded to many students from the working and lower middle classes. The studio space eased into the social space with late-night access to the building and little regulation, enabling students to mix, discuss, and socialise. Debate, discussion and a strong political consciousness drawing on post-colonial and class identity were hotly debated.

This suggested ‘revolution’ in the status and qualification of culture was confirmed in most of my interviews with artists and curators who studied at that time. Citing a range of popular culture influences from punk rock (Simon Bedwell), The Velvet Underground (Mark Webber, Robin Rimbaud) and the birth of late cultural night TV programmes and independent film screenings (Mark Webber, Steve Rushton). For many of that generation, their formative introduction to art and culture was via the record sleeve and magazine publications, notably *The Face, Smash Hits* and *‘Q’*, together with the birth of the then-radical programming of Channel 4 (1982). The reviewing and discussion of contemporary culture via popular media was a new and accessible platform which placed art on a more open stage, posing questions on what and who it is for. On a more tangible level, the provisions of the local authority leisure department offered a further reformative pathway, what curator and broadcaster Philip Dodd describes as an “aesthetic of scarcity” (Interview, 2020). This was a limited but vital provision for many working-class people outside of the capital. Local libraries and galleries became a sanctuary for those seeking a way out of being the next in line in a lineage bound by geography and family identity. The looming inevitability of familial repetition was a key motivation for many I talked to. Curator Lisa Le Feuvre cited her childhood as being without qualification for class status. Born to teenage parents on the Isle of Wight and living in her words in ‘a continual soap opera’. For her, art was political, and politics meant change, escape and freedom from the known, which she accessed through the local library, a space which became a surrogate babysitter for much of her childhood. (Interview, 2019)

Growing up in a post-industrial northern town in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a general atmosphere of resignation and loss. Inspired by the emerging Manchester music scene and having found a new best friend in the lyrics of The Smiths, I caught the bus each weekend from Oldham to Manchester in my mid-teens, emulating the indie habits of the older, cooler kids in Affleck's Palace and Piccadilly Records. I would wander into Manchester Art Gallery, where I was seduced by their pre-Raphaelite collection telling tales of abandonment, yearning and innocence. In many ways, the pre-Raphaelites were the ideal entry-level art for a young girl from Oldham: an extra dose of hormones just when you don't need them. These were formative experiences, finding Jackson Pollack via The Stone Roses covers and romance on the gallery walls, these were new spaces I could access and construct an early identity and ongoing engagement with the arts.

Many of my interviews revealed a recurrence of shared epiphanies; the very idea that you could be an artist…for real…as a job! Never on the options list of the school careers officer, Artist Sue Webster recalls her wonderment at encountering the background of her former partner/collaborator, Tim Noble:

> "Tim's older brother was an artist. He'd been to the Royal Academy, so he was considered a proper artist by Tim's parents. Tim's parents were artists; they were an artist family, and he was destined to be an artist, there was no two ways about it." (Interview, 2020).

Sue's father, by contrast, was an electrician, and she depicts how her parents put every obstacle in her way not to go to art school. This again was a recurrent theme in my interviews with many members of the 1970s and 1980s art school world who challenged the social norm by becoming the first generation to go into higher education (Sue Webster, David Burrows, Steve Rushton, Simon Bedwell, Philip Dodd, Mark Webber, Iain Forsyth and

Jane Pollard, Simon Green, Richard Billingham, Christine Atha, Robin Rimbaud and myself). The prospect of social entrapment encouraged many to unconsciously ‘jump class’ into higher education rather than pursue a local profession. From the perspective of our working-class parents, for whom the counterculture of their youth was viewed as a middle-class indulgence, art and culture were quite reasonably considered something of a luxury or a hobby at best. There were no recognisable ‘creative industries’ to enter, entrepreneurship was, in many ways, the luck of the few, and culture was scarce outside of the capital, the municipal gallery and rep theatre notwithstanding. Against this, the notion of going to art school was perceptibly delaying the dole queue for three years. So, for those who did pursue the art school route, not only were they turning their back on their social conditioning, but they also had a greater achievement to evidence through their decision. This, in many ways, ties us back to Liam Gillick’s notion of a new class of art students who were driven to impact culture with their lived experience at the expense of the greater canons of aesthetics. It was angry art; it aimed to dismantle the hierarchies of the art world and, in turn, laid the intellectual foundations for a re-thinking of art and culture in the 1990s. If the art system you inherited is no longer fit for purpose – then perhaps, you make it yourself?

This space for social mobilisation and reinvention was a strong motivation for personal and societal emancipation for a new breed of creativity. Those with, “Little cultural capital, but whose social awkwardness…seemed to have some kind of creative potential” (Frith & Horne, 1987. p.80). Arising from Metcalf Art School and Sunderland College, respectively, on completion of their BTEC and Foundation degree, future artist partnership Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard asked their tutors the same question; ‘Which is the best art school in the country? Each was given the same response, ‘Goldsmiths’, with the caveat ‘but you’ll never get in.’ (Interview, 2018) Against adversity, they were offered places, however, on arrival, they encountered what they termed “Their own class struggle” (Interview, 2018). Following the meteoric rise of the Goldsmiths bred London Contemporary art scene in the late 1980s (See chapter four), there was fierce competition among students for profile, recognition and

representation. Iain and Jane signed up for the ‘Art and Art Theory’ degree course, which pure fine art students derided as a second-class option. Iain summarises, “From the student’s point of view, it was like they’re not bleeding for their art” (Interview, 2018), reflecting an internal social hierarchy which art schools had acquired by the 1990s. The art school became a site for those who identified at the margins of society; they were encouraged to mature into an ‘actual artist’ defining their own individual practice, identity and status.

Whilst independent thinking and self-defined practice were encouraged in the art school system of the 1970s and 1980s, the theory was slowly being rejected, and its actual relevance was under question. As suggested earlier, widening access to art schools brought lived experience to the table, which questioned the relevance of theory. Though not eradicated, it was becoming increasingly marginalised as art historian Stallabrass maintains, “Artwork that wore its theoretical grounding on its sleeve tended to speak only to those who had read the right books.” (2006, p.86)

The de-regulation of art school education following the Coldstream Report gave the authorship and identity back to each school. This led to institutional identity being formed by the tastes and interests of the academics who taught there. Often drawn by the theoretical underpinnings of the school’s discourse, there became cliques of tutors debating and fine-tuning a philosophical position. A famed example of this was the impact of Art & Language (A&L) at the Art School in Coventry between 1969 and 1971, where three members of A&L (also teachers at Coventry Art School, Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin) established the controversial Art Theory Programme. The impact of this course is still considered to be an epiphany in the history of UK art schools (Dennis, 2016), inciting, amongst other things, a radicalisation among the student body and the disbandment of the object set against a growing political consciousness. In response to their perceived anti-intellectualism in the teaching of art in higher education, A&L expanded their influence

across many art schools at the time through their journal ‘Art-Language’ where they enforced the necessity of academic rigour for the new Fine Art Dip. A.D., and in many ways, initiated a schism between colleges that embraced A&L’s position and those who championed self-directed practice. Dr Christine Atha, as a student at Hull School of Art 1973-1976, recalls the impact which Art and Language had in tutorials, which would turn into near brawls between those who embraced the teachings of A&L and those who dismissed it (Interview, 2023).

To some extent, it seems that a student’s (dis) engagement with theory by the 1980s was something of a lucky dip, dependent largely on where and by whom you were taught. By the late 1980s into the 1990s, there was an almost wholesale abandonment of theory as the market-led art economy took hold of the British art scene at an alarming rate in the hands of the yBa’s and their champion Charles Saatchi. Renowned gallerist Karsten Schubert discusses this pivotal moment in real time in his 1994 interview with ‘everything magazine’, “Put simply, the market is running everything now and theory is irrelevant” (Rushton, everything, 1994. P.7). The recession of 1989, which bled into the early 1990s, created a vacuum to redefine not only what and where art was situated but also who had a place at the table. Time, space and visibility were all up for the taking as the 1990s scene began to take shape.

From SoHo to Shoreditch

East London in the 1990s was a pre-gentrified territory ripe for creative co-option. While there was no open invitation to participation as such, there were few obstacles for those who wanted to engage. The role of artists as urban developers has frequently been intertwined within narratives of gentrification, be it New York in the 1970s, Berlin after the collapse of The Wall or East London in the 1990s. Artists' reimagining of the former industrial site has unquestionably impacted rising property prices and an influx of new money and residents. This cycle, it seems, is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy culminating in the displacement of the original artistic community itself (Rayner, 2018; Yablonsky, 2015; Harris, 2012). The

parallels between 1970s Manhattan's SoHo and East Village and that of East London in the 1990s warrant some consideration here. Both were sites of abandonment and neglect, which followed a significant period of deindustrialisation. Both the site and remaining communities seemingly side-lined from the political consciousness of the day and, in the spirit of market failure, were allowed to decay into waves of crime and degradation without much attention. Standing in sharp contrast to the cultural affluence of New York's Chelsea and London's Notting Hill at the time, creative opportunity attracted a new underclass of artists, the newly empowered generation who rose from the reformed art school system.

The embarrassment of urban debasement was also a great attraction for the wealthy individuals who were tiring of the Notting Hill art scene, and who began to mingle in the pubs and warehouse parties of Shoreditch and Hoxton providing a reciprocal arrangement of patronage for access to some form of the 'authentic'. Gavin Turk recalls jazz evenings run by Joshua Compston in Factual Nonsense as a significant trigger in the rise of a night-time economy in the area. Trying to pinpoint the artist occupancy of the East End is impossible with a clear trickle of residents in the early 1990s. Author and landlord of the future Factual Nonsense building, Jeremy Cooper recalls his own initial occupancy of 44 Charlotte Road:

> "[I] bought the freehold of 44 Charlotte Road for £65,000 in 1986 from Billingjheimer Ltd, a feather dealer, and moved into the top two floors, one of which I obtained residential permission, the other studio." (Jeremy Cooper Interview, 2024).

Cooper elaborates further that he was the only person living on his side of Charlotte Road for some time, with a fine art printer and architect being his only residential neighbours. By 1998, Gary Hume and Sarah Lucas were squatting in a corner of Hoxton Square (Rayner, 2018), with fellow artists Gavin Turk, Cedric Christie and Gordan Faulds also taking residency in the empty live/workspaces (Cooper, 2024). Like many who followed him, Jeremy Cooper cited his overriding motivation to move to the area as being both cultural and

economic. "…the desire to live in a socially undefined non-residential area, where I could function inexpensively as a full-time writer." (Cooper, 2024).

Within his account of the 1990s East London art phenomena, Art Historian Julian Stallabrass employs the term 'urban pastoral' (1999) to highlight artists' depiction of urban idyllic, fetishising notions of working-class ephemera and behaviours to sensationalise a vision of everyday life. Specifically, the "Framing of it, similar to earlier forms of pastoral with sheep shepherds and their virtuous simple lives led by high art practitioners" (Stallabrass, Interview, 2022). There was a fantastical revelling in and colonial acquisition of icons of 'small pleasures' engaged in by the 'traditional' East End folk. As Harnack suggests, "…the "simple but honest" working-class population forms the background for the "real, authentic urban life of the middle classes" (2014, p.48).

For decades London's art scene had been firmly established in the Cork Street area of London's West End, expanding into Notting Hill during the 1970s. However, the impact of deindustrialisation and the opportunity of space after the recessions of the 1980s ignited what can be seen as something of a 'Matta-Clarke effect'. Artist Gordon Matta-Clarke's occupation and reimagining of the disused New York Lower East Side in the 1970s transformed post-industrial buildings into sculpture. His practice in social architecture further evolved through the opening of a social project, his artist's café 'FOOD' in 1971. Though an operational café space, the real function of 'FOOD' was as a meeting space for artists and residents and the cultivation of dialogue. Located at the corner of Wooster and Prince in downtown SoHo, FOOD has been aptly likened to a "makeshift family", a radical gesture at a time when class and social divisions dominated the New York dining scene (Feinstein, 2018). Matta-Clark extended his interventions into a practice of cultural-social relations, some focussed on the discourse of sharing a meal ('*Pig Roast*, 1971 and the festival '*I cuisse de Bouef'*, 1975), others dance parties (performers with dancers '*Open House'* 1972) and an early adoption of graffiti art ('*Graffiti Truck'*, 1973). Matta-Clark cites a greater

urgency to infiltrate culture into the wider community at the time for the purpose of mutual gratification:

> “Art in society in our community, is an incredible dilemma… if you can work with people in addition to working out your ideas then that can become an interesting ingredient in the art.” (Gordon Matta-Clark in Rusi Kirshner, 1993. P.392-3).

New York in the 1970s was on the verge of financial collapse, and crime was rife, akin to East London a decade later. Such was the economic pressure that post-industrial spaces held. It was a wasteland which became fertile territory for artistic innovation and in the hands of Matta-Clark for both artistic and social enterprise on a ground-breaking scale. Through the breadth of his activities, he was raising questions about the ownership of public space and saw a transference of power from the authorities to artists and residents as a vital step to regeneration. Laurie Anderson a member of Matta-Clark’s collective ‘Anarchitecture’ recalls the period:

> “Back then, people who had plans were idiots. Like New York, we were all broke. We thought of ourselves as workers, conquering someplace inhospitable, and we had a real sense of place”. (Kimmelman, 2011. Online NP)

The parallels between the artist occupation of SoHo in the 1970s and that of Shoreditch in the late 1980s into the 1990s are clear to see. Jeremy Cooper identifies both the similarities and differences between the scenes during our interview:

> “There are parallels between Ed Ruscha and Claes Oldenburg designing food for a Southside café in New York and Gary Hume giving helicopter rides in a semi-derelict East End Street in London. It’s also true that Matta-Clark and Co were active in

> supporting the Women's Movement and Gay Rights, whereas public politics was not of central concern to Hirst, Emin etc." (Interview, 2024)

Within my case studies on Factual Nonsense and BANK, their curatorial practices around societal transformation via culture resonates with the Matta-Clark effect.

Within the respective time frames of the New York and London scenes, artists and creatives were the first to reclaim neglected industrial spaces and transform them into 'live-work' spaces. The political and economic conditions dictated the twenty-year gap between them. Philip Dodd accounts for this in terms of geographic development: "You couldn't have done it in the '70s because London in the '70s wasn't global" (Interview, 2021). The notion of a global art market was only beginning to emerge by the early 1990s, and it had been led by the international growth of local markets in America and Europe (Harris, 2012; Garnett, 1998). The New York precedent and its inevitable effects were something of a subconscious template for some of the early residents of East London. Gavin Turk in our discussion inferred a greater self-consciousness regarding the construction of an artist's scene, citing the occupation of SoHo as something of a "template" (2024). Artist and early Shoreditch squatter Paul Daly (1988) also recalls the time:

> "In 1980s culture and sub-culture, squatting was a way of artists, musicians and writers finding buildings that were derelict and left unused in what was still post-war Britain, inhabiting them and creating fully functioning communities and starting some of the brands, bands, artists and businesses that are now household names across the UK and the world". (Daly, online ND.NP).

They were followed by a stream of artists and creatives in the late 1980s who were attracted by the cheap space and community. Many artists recall their migration east as an economic necessity; "We (with artist Tim Noble) moved to Shoreditch out of necessity because it was

the cheapest place to live in London and got the biggest studios; it was a no-brainer" (Sue Webster Interview, 2020). Moving into the former showroom of the estate agent Stirling Cooper, Webster recalls installing a shower and toilet and fiddling the electricity of the next-door meter (Interview, 2020). Simon Bedwell, founder of BANK gives his insight into the exchange of space for cultural capital, "…estate agents realised artists' names looked good on their profile – without that what you're calling the DIY scene couldn't have happened." (Interview, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the art scene in the 1970s to the mid-1980s in London was largely uneventful, with a prevalence of international artists being represented by the blue-chip West End galleries and little light shone on homegrown talent. The impact of repeated recessions culminated in the great recession of 1989, which proved formative in creating the conditions for both the yBa's and DIY practices to flourish. Experimentation across art forms, the blurring of art and popular culture and a political sensibility fed directly into a culture of artists rejecting the mainstream systems of representation and exhibition to define their sites and work as a holistic practice. In contrast, the self-styled yBa's led a frenzy for those seeking wealth and fame. Hurriedly seeking a formula which was headline-worthy and replicable, there became a tipping point in the London art scene: "You were either on the rollercoaster with Damien or you were not" (Burrows Interview, 2020). The art world was becoming clearly polarised and membership to either camp became expedient.

Through the deployment of interview participant insights within the greater historical narrative, a personal insight into the impact and benefits of social, economic and educational reform from the Coldstream report to the initiatives of the Conservative government is created. This chapter creates a co-constructed narrative that illustrates the personal effect that these measures had on some of the main constructors of the East London art scene. These first-person accounts afford access to personal experiences of the reformed art

school system, the merging of high and low cultures and the greater social dialogue which formed within these spaces. Gavin Turk and Sue Webster testify to the desire to belong to a greater artistic community, alongside the greater gravitational draw of vast spaces and economic access to the area. Further, the development of micro-communities of artists in the post-Coldstream art school embraced many first generations of higher education students, breaking down social perceptions of their relevance. Many participants collaborated that access to the benefits system and greater initiatives such as the Enterprise Allowance Scheme were transformational in their individual pursuit to become professional artists upon graduation. Through garnering the recollections of early residents of what became the East End scene, we gain a deeper understanding of personal motivations and experiences directly impacted by earlier legislative changes, co-constructing a more authentic account of the time.

The cycle of artist gentrification, which I refer to as the ‘Matta-Clark effect’, affords insight into the relationship of geographic transformation to social transformation. The artists’ desire to utilise art as a social tool was clear in the artist gentrification of SoHo as it was in the East End a decade later. As I will go on to discuss in detail, particularly within the case study of Joshua Compston and Factual Nonsense, the integration of art into the fabric of the everyday was invariably linked to the cultural occupation and revitalisation of deindustrialised landscapes, and its impact widely felt.

Chapter 4. The yBa's: The Contrivance and Commodification of a DIY Culture

> "Their stance was Sex Pistols, but they were making their first moves in a Duran Duran world." (Aspen, P., 2022, online. NP.)

Introduction

Aspen's quote efficiently summarises the evolution of a commercially successful generation of artists, who, though informed by the educational and political conditions discussed in the previous chapter, quickly morphed into a globally celebrated generation. This chapter will focus on a unique set of circumstances which determined that a group of art students who graduated largely from Goldsmiths College in 1989 became the instigator of a contemporary art boom in London through a determined drive to deviate from the curatorial and institutional conventions which validated artistic practice. By creating their own exhibitions, brand identity and narratives, which were frantically consumed by the media, their evolution from the social, educational and economic conditions of the Thatcherite period, as will be discussed created a vacuum for a group of artists and art stakeholders to occupy (Roberts, 1996; Ford, 1996; Stallabrass, 1999). I will debate the inconsistencies within their engagement with much of the political idiosyncrasies of the time whilst simultaneously professing a self-determinism, which ignited an explosion of Do It Yourself (DIY) activity and curatorial strategies. Whilst the yBa quickly became a manufactured entity, their self-authored genesis was vital to the emergence of the greater independent scene during the 1990s. As testified by some of the research participants in this study, the yBa began as a DIY scene, which by the mid-decade became polarised into two camps; the 'successful' and 'unsuccessful'

entrepreneur (Interviews; Rushton, 2022; Bedwell, 2023). In order to understand the latter position, the former first needs consideration.

To avoid repeating the media-led narrative, which summarises the yBa's as something of a unique and dynamic cultural force, I will focus this chapter on the early construction and manipulation of self-identity, which informed the popular depiction of the group. By observing a drive for popular engagement via the deployment of motifs of working-class British life, the yBa constructed by the mid-1990s, mass aggrandisement and globally exportable brand identity. The specific conditions within the depleted London art world of the mid to late 1980s will be evaluated and considered, alongside the artificial manufacturing of an art scene by key individuals with a vested interest in the construction of a singular 'British' art identity and market. I will argue that the interplay between Goldsmiths College, the patronage of Britain's greatest collector of contemporary art, Charles Saatchi, directors of depleted art institutions and the early pioneers of London's contemporary art scene formed a curious if an involuntary conspiracy to shape the market and export the yBa's as a critical and vital art commodity.

The Socio-Economic Origins of the yBa

To understand the emergence of the yBa phenomenon, it is important to acknowledge the conditions from which they were formed. Socio-economic recovery had been slow following the early 1980s recessions (1980, 1982), and an active commercial scene for contemporary art in the capital only really came into play by the early 1990s (Fox, 2013; Roberts, 1996). Against this backdrop, there were, however, specific tendencies within education and politics which can be seen as vital in enabling the yBa collective into being. (Adams, 1995; Roberts, 1996). This cohort initially gained good visibility via their enterprising student warehouse show 'Freeze' (1988) during their second year at Goldsmiths. Within eight years of the show, the machine underpinning this group of students had transformed a bleak capital into a raging art scene at the centre of the global gaze (Adams,1997).

British contemporary art in London was of little significance in the 1980s, with American and European markets dominating the institutions and auction rooms (Stallabrass,1999). The recession-torn decade in the UK could ill afford the luxury of a contemporary commercial art market, nor indeed a museum of modern art, a staple feature of a serious art capital. With just ten commercial galleries trading in contemporary work at the end of the 1980s, the London art scene was largely irrelevant to both local and global markets (Fox, 2013). By the time of '*Freeze*', there had been over a decade of significant underinvestment in the UK's arts and cultural sector (Fox, 2013; Roberts,1996; Stallabrass,1999). The principal agency for change was refocusing the 'Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts' (ABSA) into the heart of Tory cultural policy. Their agenda was clear from the very start: less subsidy and more private investment in the arts (Billington, 2013). Moreover, the strategy of appointment to the ABSA was noteworthy in its affirmation of its mission. Firstly, with the personal placements of Tory stalwart Sir William Rees-Mogg and Luke Rittner (founder/director of the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts in 1976), as chairman (1982) and Secretary General of the Arts Council (1983), respectively. Following Thatcher's election victory in 1979, with almost immediate effect, the Arts Council allocation from the central government was cut by £1m (1980 figures) with subsequent real value cuts throughout her premiership (Billington, 2013). By the time the young British artists were embedded within their London art schools, the agenda of private subsidy was firmly established and was central to their employment of self-enterprise. Writing in the Arts Council annual report of 1986/7, Rees-Mogg, whilst acknowledging the cuts in cultural funding as a concern, is quick to rally the party line:

> "Nevertheless, the response of arts clients to the stringency of funding has been enterprising… new concentration of private sponsorship which has continued to rise, on better marketing at the box office and on relations with local authorities." (Arts Council 42nd Annual Report 1986/7, NP.)

Ritter, in the same report, announced organisational changes in the Arts Council, including the establishment of a new Marketing and Resources Department, with a key mission to better the finances for both artists and art (Arts Council 42nd Annual Report 1986/7). Set against the backdrop of a depleted arts sector and the political enforcement of cultural self-reliance, the generation who became the yBa's were well-versed in the need of personal resourcefulness.

Writer, John Roberts keenly observes an astute mindset among the group, claiming they are neither cynical nor naïve, but a group of individuals with a clear focus on addressing what he terms "the bleak inertia of this age" (Roberts, 1998, p.62). Julian Stallabrass concurs for this generation of artists were having to combat "that whole legacy of Thatcherite philistinism" (Interview, 2022). Though the implied struggle was easily conceded within a few years to fame and finance, it is important to qualify this reading of an overwhelming pioneering spirit with the fact that the yBa's were at the same time a semi-subsidised generation, preceding the lure of patronage. As discussed previously, many key players in the future yBa circle were beneficiaries of the Enterprise Allowance Scheme (EAS). Rachel Whiteread recalls the impact the scheme had on her practice:

> "I don't think they ever intended to support the arts, but it ended up being quite successful, and in terms of being a business, that was true for me too. I started doing my own accounts and just carried on." (in Dickson, The Guardian, 26th July 2023. Online. NP.)

Whiteread's account suggests the scheme not only allowed for creative enterprise but also introduced the rudimentary of business management. Similarly, artists Jane and Louise Wilson pinpoint the EAS as the single mechanism by which they could move from the

Northeast to pursue their joint Masters at Goldsmiths College and subsequent invitation to the yBa party (Dickson, 2023).

The student group that became ‘The yBa Generation’ were the first art ‘movement’ to be branded as such in their own time (initially by Michael Corris in *Art Forum*, May 1992). This in turn, dictated that the narrative surrounding them had to be tightly defined and export ready. Such was the media noise around these artists (Navazo-Ostua, Aladro-Vico, Bailey, 2021), quickly coopted by a patron of insatiable proportions, Charles Saatchi and his marketing machine, that in a matter of a few years, a bunch of graduates were defined not only by name but by their net worth and omnipresence in the auction room. The story of the yBa’s, as told, is a Thatcherite utopia: a self-starting, ambitious youth circumnavigating the conventional structures of the art world and giving the finger to the romantic notion of politely waiting to be ‘discovered’ by the gatekeepers of artistic institutions. During my interview, Gavin Turk identified this as a significant feature of the time:

> “…now, because things were slightly twisting, changing round, suddenly younger artists where galleries had to be quick because younger artists were kind of, you know, getting all taken up and hyped”. (Interview, 2024)

This grouping of artists, together with those who were later absorbed into the yBa branding, dictated the terms of what was art, what was possible, what was visible and, crucially, what value it held commercially. Steve Rushton, former editor of critical art magazine ‘everything’ in the 1990s, recalls the urgency of the time. “The YBA discourse was very dominant. Even at the time I was thinking this is how this time is going to be accounted for in the future is already in a way set, the directions already set” (Interview, 2022).

The Myths of the yBa

Writing prior to the *Sensation* show, critic Simon Ford (1996), reconciled the yBa era into a succession of mythologies (which he proceeds to unravel). His analysis affords an understanding of what became the 'hallmarks' of this well-defined brand. Ford begins with the 'creation myth' in the guise of the Freeze exhibition. This show was organised and curated by then-student Damien Hirst and featured sixteen of his contemporary fine art colleagues from Goldsmiths College. Showcasing the disparate creative outputs of the students, the famed notoriety of this show was less in its aesthetic achievement and more in the seemingly miraculous entrepreneurial set of circumstances from which it materialised. Hirst was the leader figure from the start and was a phenomenal, charismatic chancer. Whilst at Goldsmiths, he had a part-time job at the prestigious Anthony d'Offay Gallery, which afforded him access to key art world contacts and networks. Early access to this client base was one of several vital lifelines which connected Hirst to the key arteries of the London art world, contributing to 'Freeze' becoming noteworthy within its own time. Taking over an empty London Port Authority building at Surrey Docks, the space was transformed into a white space of epic proportions in the then-industrial wastelands of East London. It was revamped, run and manned by the students on rota from 6th August to 28thSeptember. Many writers have subsequently acknowledged that the show had little audience in its lifetime (Cooper, 2012; Ford, 1996; Stallabrass, 2000). Its narrative significance as the DIY catalyst for a chosen group of ambitious art school students, soon to be the generation of the yBa's, is, in fact, largely a historical afterthought. Whilst significant establishment players did view the shows (Nicholas Serota, Norman Rosenthal, Richard Shone), this resulted largely from the associations and networks engineered by Hirst and the tutors at Goldsmiths College rather than the accumulation of a critical mass. The artworks were of varying interest, with Matt Collishaws' *Bullet Hole* (1988) arguably being the stand-out piece. Indeed, there was little that was new or particularly exciting about the self-organised show, hailed for its subversion of the mechanisms of the art world, except for the scale of its achievement. Ford signposts us back to the Salon des Refuses of 1863 as a historical trajectory of independent artistic initiatives outside of the gallery space, with milestone

movements, including Dada and Situationism, having more purposefully operated outside of the system as a means for greater political and class change. Gavin Turk also refers to this heritage as being “Slightly Dadaistic. There was a kind of slapstick feel to stuff” (2024), depicting something of a self-conscious performance at that time. What made this show significant is that it situated youth, scale, ambition and a ‘can do’ mentality back into the UK art scene, a statement of self-authored success. Subsequent self-curated warehouse exhibitions inspired by the SoHo template as discussed, which involved members of the Freeze Show included Modern Medicine (March 1990), Gambler (June 1990), and East County Yard Show (May 1990), and so began a wave of self-curated exhibitions and events across the capital. As artists became curators and property developers, cultural institutions and agents flocked to colonise a piece of the action. Spinning straw into gold was the defining feature of the time.

Further ‘myths’ that Ford challenges include that of the patron/father figure in the form of Charles Saatchi. Having amassed a significant collection of European contemporary blue-chip artists during the early 1980s, the negative impact of the 1989 recession on his advertising agency (Saatchi and Saatchi) meant that he had to quickly sell much of this work at a profit. According to Bickers (1997), between 1989 and 1992, Saatchi sold over two hundred works, generating over fifteen million pounds. He was then still looking to invest in art but looking closer to home and at a grassroots level to amass on a grand scale. Bickers convincingly argues that Saatchi did not only look closer to home due to financial necessity but as a conscious attempt to generate and contrive a London contemporary movement of his very own. This was compacted by the scarcity of contemporary art dealers and collectors, the lack of a London market and his seeming ability to sprinkle a fairy dust of undeniable marketing prowess which made names and fortunes. Saatchi saw the opportunity to manufacture a market, dictate its pace and fine-tune its public brand via the energy of those who became the yBa generation. Much has been discussed about the role that Saatchi played in the organisation and export of the yBa’s as a cultural product which

does not require mention here (Stallabrass, 1999; Ford, 1996; Navazo-Ostua, Aladro-Vico, Bailey, 2021; Gaywood, 1997). What is important, is his role as a crucial player in the commodification and absorption of this bunch of radical students into the blood flow of official cultural life, despite their initial attempts to circumvent the systems. Gavin Turk recalls his experiences of being mass branded as a yBa's with some despair:

> "Suddenly, we're all sort of branded with this kind of, this frame, but it doesn't really go any distance to kind of look at what everyone's actually doing, what actually the concerns are. And in a way, like how art is being kind of made by the artists. Like what really are they trying to do?" (Interview, 2024)

Saatchi was not, however, the solo operator as he has subsequently been depicted. As I go on to argue, there was not one man's coup of a generation of artists but rather a greater collective push to regenerate the London art scene into global relevance. Further vital myths in Ford's essay allude to the 'leader myth' of Hirst as a maverick compiler, seller and showman for a 'movement', conjuring energy and vital financial interest into the vacuum of the 1980s desperate art market. Absorbing the media-savvy American razzamatazz of the likes of Warhol and Koons, big, bright and relatable themes of life, existence and inevitable death, Hirst displayed a vital neo-liberal zeal for enterprise. Whilst myth and embellishment are identifiable in retrospect, what cannot be disputed is the speed in which the 'do it yourself' endeavours of a group of students became a cultural feeding frenzy of unprecedented portions. The yBa's operated more along the lines of a gang than an organisation, with members drifting in and out of prominence, new gang members admitted and a clear leader-figure in the guise of the flamboyant Hirst. It is interesting to observe that at no single moment was a claim for his leadership status attempted. The social hierarchy was set in Goldsmiths and perhaps due to the strength of his drive and vision, or that he shouted the loudest, the gang's identity became identifiable upon Hirst's terms. Within a matter of a few years from graduation, they dictated their own story in prescriptive detail,

hurriedly making headlines whilst simultaneously seducing the art world's gatekeepers and patrons who fought to get on board the ride. The tabloid media was transfixed, from the gutter press headlines to the stalwarts of the orthodox art press; love them or hate them they were impossible to ignore (Gaywood, Ford and Stallabrass, 1996). The media manipulation of the yBa as one of raucous self-indulgence is, ultimately, just that, manipulation.

Chasing the Saatchi Dollar

Whilst the yBa story has been so highly refined and rehearsed, becoming an impenetrable 'truth' foreshadowing success after success, the trajectory was not quite as smooth. As Aspen observes this would be, "As if Johnny Rotten has said after his group's first concert at St Martins' School of Art, that he wanted to play Wembley" (Aspen, 2023, online, NP.). There was, however, some reality within the narrative. The Saatchi dollar became the most converted patronage for a whole generation of artists, and one unannounced visit from 'the man' frequently led to whole collections of work being bought and, subsequently, for some, careers and fortunes made. Equally, once dropped by Saatchi, a career and reputation could be extinguished. The relationship between Saatchi and Goldsmiths made the art school the most coveted admission ticket to this bright new world as artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard recall from their own time at Goldsmiths:

> "At Goldsmiths in the early '90's, there was literally one person everyone was trying to follow – Saatchi; everyone was trying to pre-empt what does he buy, y'know? How can I sell to Saatchi because that's how I get a career." (Interview, 2023).

Sue Webster pinpoints the day Saatchi appeared at her Rivington Street studio (with former collaborator Tim Noble) and bought their exhibition of 'Shadow Sculptures' as being 'The' moment when the duo were elevated from known London artists of no real income into wealthy international artists in demand (Interview, 2020). For other artists, however, it was more of a novelty than a trajectory. Rod Dickinson, who sold work to Saatchi and featured in

Sarah Kent's review of the Saatchi collection of new British art (Shark Infested Waters, 2003) recalls a famous pattern of thriftiness which Saatchi displayed in buying work by young artists which he went on to resell for staggering sums:

> "It wasn't very lucrative – he used to buy stuff for next to nothing – but nobody goes into art to make money I think? I didn't so whether I was or not selling things – that wasn't really relevant. In fact, selling something to Saatchi wasn't about the money it was about the kudos. It would generate interest and visibility." (Interview, 2020).

Whilst this overwhelming spirit of spontaneity resonates with my experiences of the London art world later during the mid-1990s, it becomes problematic in that it diminishes critical reflection, tending to fictionalise the time in a digestible package. Gavin Turk aligns the branding of the yBa as an echoing of the branding of the 'Neo-Geo' American artists tagline of the 1980s, a movement which Saatchi again quickly latched onto, presenting their first show at his gallery in 1988. Installation and conceptual art were established across the Western art world, and sex drugs and rock n roll were well-trodden trope in the UK and USA post-punk era. Big, glossy sculptures and entry-level conceptualism had expanded the market for contemporary art exponentially across the oceans. Though this is not to undermine some works of significant critical credibility, Hirst's '*A Hundred Year*s' (1990), Emin's *My Bed* (1998), and Lucas's *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992) were groundbreaking, what on reflection seems to be the significant impact and lasting legacy of the yBa's is their collective positioning– an attitude riddled with enterprising values to create your own opportunities, curate and mediate your own work and circumvent the art world systems.

Traits of entrepreneurship and media manipulation – a reciprocal arrangement –had been well established in the art world (dating back to Dada, who used its power to confront the political and institutional establishments which dominated the time) (Gaywood, 1997).

Conversely, the front runners of the 1990s British scene have consistently been criticised for "a-politicism, at best, and being crypto-Thatcherite in their entrepreneurialism" at the very worst (Fox, 2013, online NP.). This notion of a self-certified career path sidelines what was also of significant consequence from this period, this being a greater diffusion of power and access within the structures and audiences for art. The East London scene, which I encountered in full swing by the mid -1990s, was akin to a small child's party, playing pass the cultural parcel with each player in the mix lingering in their acceptance and transfer of the parcel, wishing the music to stop for them. This said, access to the party was an open field irrespective of class background. You didn't have to 'qualify' to be there, you simply turned up. The yBa players at the start of the 1990s were of marked difference to those who came to form the new art establishment in the second half of the decade. Institutions, artists, theorists/art schools, critics, and dealers had not yet established a sense of order and hierarchy. The institutional control of the past was, in simple terms, bypassed by new entrepreneurship before inevitably being re-commodified back into the auction halls and institutions of art. This created a brief but vital window of optimism and opportunity for experimentation with the fundamental conditions of art.

Add a Sprinkle of Goldsmiths Fairy Dust.

Also crucial in the mobilisation of the student cohort into the yBa generation was the interplay between the key figures at Goldsmiths, notably Hirst and other fellow students, together with their tutor, Michael Craig-Martin and Department Head, artist Jon Thompson. Collectively, the tutors embedded a market-led vision and purpose within the school, something which seems quite improbable now, given the current business model of higher education in the UK. "Our idea was to completely renew the idea of art education, which was very much Jon's agenda. We were going to re-invent British art education." (Noble, R (2001) NP.). This statement by Craig-Martin is an important insight into the pedagogical and intellectual freedoms which were rife in the art school systems of the 1980s. It was a system

focussed on enabling change and the professionalisation of the degree experience without the burden of external regulation. Tutors like Craig-Martin could bring their substantial experiences of the wider art world and markets and 'train' students to be ready for business, both stylistically and in terms of resilience and attitude. Though employability is an essential metric for the valuation of Higher Education today, it was revolutionary in an art school at this time.

As discussed, the reforms to the art school system had a decentralising effect which afforded a significant degree of independent pedagogical and cultural styles. Many tutors at Goldsmiths were themselves practicing artists and it was perceived as a desirable, quasi-philanthropic career path to pursue for many tutor-practitioners. During a Guardian interview, Craig-Martin cites the late 1980s as the end of an era for artists to gain regular income from teaching, citing this as significant in the commercial/entrepreneurial motivations of Hirst et. Al (Jeffries, S. (2011). However, to gain a wider picture of the formative conditions of the yBa, it is necessary to examine the teaching of art, theory and networks at Goldsmiths in the late 1980s under Craig-Martin and other artists' tutelage to reconstruct the conditions in which the students were formed. Two distinct features of Goldsmiths stand out: Firstly, a proactive drive towards a culture of participation and peer criticism amongst the art students and staff, creating strong and lasting networks, which is evidenced in the early yBa community. Secondly, a conditioning of the essential skills and acumen for participation in the art market embedded from enrolment. Repeatedly, Craig-Martin, downplays his role in the formation of what became the yBa's, citing instead the unique bonds within this student group, which he claims as being 'self-starting, co-dependent and crucially a network of disparate styles and media' (Guardian interview NP NA). Arguably this formation of the interdependence between this cohort of students would not have seemed possible if it were not for Craig-Martin's abolishing of genre-based practice in the school. Rather than being divided up by medium, students entered their degree course with the directive to play with their practice, play with each other's practice, support, critique and crucially theorise about each other's work as it

evolved over three years. Medium and material were to be tested rather than homogenised to define the student's style throughout their degree. Notably, Craig-Martin, being mindful of the cultural-political climate of the late 1980s, assumed the position of 'informed enabler'. Students, it is noted, were treated as potential artists from the day they walked through the Goldsmiths door (Wroe, 2006). Artist David Burrows adds great insight into the business imperative at large in Goldsmiths during this period:

> "I was in Goldsmiths at the same time as doing some BANK stuff and I remember Gerard Hemsworth said to us all one day – he's our teacher – "You should all have accountants", and most of us thought that was hilarious because I knew at least two people were fiddling the dole - working and signing on." (David Burrows Interview, 2020).

Goldsmiths was renowned for its reassertion of teaching cultural and critical theory to the art students and for greater critical debate. This served two key purposes: to solidify individual artists into a peer-critical network, as discussed. However, of greater significance perhaps, it embedded that network into the minds of significant dealers, patrons and curators via the personal networks of the artist/tutors operational at the time. Being taught by significant and well-networked artists such as Richard Wentworth, Yehuda Saffron, Jon Thompson, and Michael Craig-Martin afforded this talented and enterprising cohort introduction to London's contemporary art world's inner sanctum. The inner circle, in turn, had a vested interest and need to put the Capital back on the cultural map. Jeremy Cooper (2012) recalls a case in point when an upcoming Austrian art dealer, Karsten Schubert, left the Lisson Gallery in April 1987 to set up his own gallery. Within a year, Schubert was invited by Craig-Martin to preview the 1988 graduation show, from which he acquired notable works by Ian Davenport, Michael Landy and Gary Hume for an exhibition in his gallery space later that year. Craig-Martin, whose own cultural status was running high in 1988 due to his solo show at the Whitechapel Gallery, championed the drive and creativity of this distinctive cohort of

students. However, as Cooper argues, this seeming act of gross generosity was embedded into Craig-Martin's worldview, one which proved infectious. "The tutor's personal conduct …his faith in creative difference, his treatment of paintings as work, (and) the complete seriousness of his personal dedication to art" (2012. p.20). This ethos, of generous proportions, undoubtedly rubbed off on the students. In an interview with The Guardian Craig-Martin recalls what he terms an unprecedented generosity among the group, which extended to artists being visited by a collector and then signposting them to the studios of others. It was clear that the tightness of the network and its interdependencies was significant in the formation of a perceived self-made movement which was easy to acquire.

On one occasion, Craig-Martin recalls going to Charles Saatchi's house and being taken aback by the scale of his blue-chip contemporary art collection, (possession of which was largely unequalled in London at the time). The collection included the major American players, Judd, Koons, Warhol, etc. So vast was his personal collection that it went on to form the basis of the monumental Saatchi Gallery at Boundary Road. The scale and importance of the Saatchi Gallery to this generation of artists is acknowledged by Sue Webster and others. It was unprecedented in its vastness and content, undoubtedly fuelling many of what became the yBa's to make work of great ambition and proportions. Moreso it was a statement of outlandish confidence in the future of London as a contemporary art market, significantly paving the way for a plethora of iconic cultural centres in the capital and undoubtedly highly influential in the generation of the Government's backing of the plans for Tate Modern. For this and subsequent artist generations, it was a cathedral of possibility standing in stark contrast to the depleted state of publicly funded London's arts institutions at the time.

The Goldsmiths Effect

In my interview with Goldsmiths trained artists, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, they considered the possibility of forging a career as a contemporary artist as the key legacy of the yBa's. Unlike other movements being defined by their aesthetic style, the attitude it would seem, was the inheritance the group bestowed onto future students. This generated an almost frenzied drive for notoriety and wealth generation in the much-coveted studios of Goldsmiths College:

> "What Damien et al did was suddenly to present the idea that you could, coming off the back of just a BA, be *an artist*. Before that it felt like you at least needed to do an MA and more than likely come from a privileged/wealthy background. That was a big deal. Of course, the moment the superstars started to emerge it didn't have the same resonance." (Interview, 2023).

Pinpointing the few years after *Freeze* as presenting the unique conditions to allow an art student to assert themselves as a professional was a revolution of democratising proportions. I firmly recall the playfulness of this time in London, where ideas came into being and were acknowledged as culture seemingly before the paint itself was dry. It was, in some ways, a competitive atmosphere but underpinned by this greater ethos of cooperation, collaboration and mutual authentication. During my time working in East London (at Factual Nonsense 1995/1996 and Spitalfields Arts Trust 1996) when the hierarchy of status was yet to be finalised, creativity was rife. Leaving a seemingly nightly private view, topped up by free Beck's Beer, a wander down the streets of Shoreditch would allow you to stumble upon a piece of performance art or a warehouse party. At this unique time, the door to the party was very much open, and the usual bouncers were not in tow. The scene was something of a convivial land grab open to all who went for the chase.

During my interview with artist Sue Webster (2020), she reminisced on the contagion effect of Hirst's '*Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*' (1991). Having

been informed that a recent Goldsmiths student had not only placed a full-scale shark in formaldehyde but that it was being exhibited at the prestigious Saatchi Gallery on Boundary Road created an excitement manifest into something of a ‘road to Damascus’ moment:

> “This artist had put a shark in a tank and called it art! And it was in this gallery called the Saatchi Gallery and we were like, “What the fuck!” and we were quite happily messing around making sculptures out of junk and being free and whatever, making no money, and this news came and we were like… it kind of woke us up a bit…” (Interview, 2020).

The very notion that a newly graduated student had the wherewithal to present a full-scale dead shark as art and shroud it in the language of death and mortality was a radical gesture, but more so, that this same young artist could persuade London’s leading patron of contemporary art to not only commission it but to endorse it by exhibition in his gallery was unprecedented. Though essentially a ‘readymade’ of grand proportions, the shark and its context was the spark which ignited generations of young artists to forge a self-defined career as artists and, for some, the chance to rise to the top of the game within as little as ten years of graduating.

The yBa: Playing Politics

Having been the subject of self-conception and micromanaged into an engageable brand identity during its infancy, the story of the yBa's has shed less significance on their real legacy: a defiant instance that contemporary art was a real, successful and, above all else, an accessible trade. In a bid to maximise their media impact, the yBa dialogue was embedded within a narrative centred on their relationship to and engagement with the motifs of class politics. They embraced the everyday as a radical gesture and wove pop culture as a golden thread throughout their branding. This was not a cultural observation of the everyday which they sought to project, but rather a conscious endorsement of working-class

identity. This had the net effect of de-mystifying the channels of access into the art world and, for a brief period exposed the class structures which fought to segregate art away from mass culture. Historically the class relationship between artist and market is, as humorously summarised by Steve Rushton within our interview as being simply ‘the poor people tend to make the art and the rich people buy it’ (Interview, 2022). The ramifications of this resonated clearly within the packaging and the artistic output of the yBa’s who in their collective reign 1988-1996 operated as a network who were raucous, fast living and confrontational to the maxims of the cultural establishment. Upon analysis, many key members of the group originated from the working classes of the cities and suburbs. Gary Hume and Keith Tyson had both left school in their mid-teens with negligible qualifications to offer. Hirst emanated from a broken home in Leeds with a series of shoplifting convictions to attest to his youth. Sarah Lucas emerged from a council estate near Holloway Road, Michael Landy from a similar background, and famously, Tracy Emin was left in a childhood of poverty in Margate after the disappearance of her father (Zurakninsky, M (2008)), whilst others were from more secure and middle-class backgrounds (Sam Taylor-Wood and Rachel Whiteread). Whilst some members of the group proceeded to explore artefacts, stories and imagery arising from their class background (Emin, Lucus, Billingham), to be discussed later, it is a reasonable assumption that given the extreme polarisation of the classes within society by the end of the 1980s that class progression was a conscious or subconscious driver for some members of this collective (Dickson, 2023; Ford, 1996).

Analysing the positionality of the yBa gang, Grenfel and Hardy (2003) employ Bourdieu’s theory of field, placing the dual drivers of artistic creation and economic aspiration creating the structures of their field within the economic and cultural vacuum of the late 1980s. The conditions were rife for cultural mobilisation and the internal co-dependencies of the Freeze artists rapidly beckoned key agents from within the cultural hierarchies to enable this movement. As philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu asserts, the generation of status through the production and acquisition of cultural capital calls for a reordering of the social hierarchy:

> "To impose a new producer, a new product and a new system of taste on the market at a given moment means to relegate to the past a whole set of producers, products and systems of taste, all hierarchised in relation to their degree of legitimacy." (Bourdieu. 2016, p.160).

Cultural and economic capital was equally necessary for the formation and exploitation of the student group into a recognised 'movement'. Through their co-dependent interplay within the field and their initial indifference to social ranking, the student body who became the yBa's were instantly viable as a prototype. Echoing stylistic precedents which had traded well in the auction houses, they framed themselves squarely in the systems of art which they professed to defy. Grenfel and Hardy's paper spotlights three key early supporters of Hirst's work who they claim formed the perfect combination of habitus to enable their economic and cultural rise. Firstly, providing access to the crucial institutional network was Iwona Blazwick. Her cultural capital extends to the ICA, Henry Moore Foundation, Tate Liverpool and Tate Modern. The second figure in the triumvirate of capital, art dealer Jay Joplin, through his privileged upbringing, provided access to financial networks and investment through which he engineered himself to represent several of the key artists. Finally, their Goldsmiths tutor, Michael Craig-Martin, possessed cultural capital via education, his international artistic practice, and his influence as a key player within the London art scene of the 1980s. Together, they provided the key foundations of enablement, which Hirst initially required to access a more powerful field position.

As noted earlier, 'Freeze' had a negligible impact in its own time. The anomaly is the fact that three pillars of the art establishment, Charles Saatchi, Nicholas Serota and Norman Rosenthal, all attended the show at Hirst's behest. Rosenthal, legend has it, was picked up by Hirst in his old car at 8 am and driven to the show with the set deadline that he was returned to the Royal Academy for a 10 am meeting. Their attendance at a student show

seems incredulous in retrospect; their motivations, however, can be speculated on. Cultural impoverishment in Britain was certainly a real factor, which Michael Bracewell amusingly compares to the late, great daytime TV show 'Supermarket Sweep' due to there being a plethora of empty trolleys yet to fill (2000). The art establishment had an imperative to shop close to home. All three of the Freeze VIPs were conscious of the dominant styles in the American and European art markets and recognised echoes of this styling within the curation of Freeze. The sheer bombast of Hirst's achievement in self-curating a vast warehouse show, again an American legacy, was equally attractive and indicative of a collective drive and ambition with the ability to achieve the unthinkable. This will have ignited interest from the establishment as an assertion of confidence to be embellished.

The Grit and Grime of the yBa

The branding of the yBa has been discussed in terms of its relationship to the media, (Preece and Kerrigan, 2015; Zaniol, 2016). However, a key element of the identity of the yBa was their wilful embellishment and flaunting of a quasi-working-class grittiness. This is symbolic of their declared belligerence to circumvent and, by implication, undermine the establishment and the gatekeepers of art. If, for example, we look at the portraits of the artists presented in the *Sensation* Exhibition Catalogue (1996), a moment acknowledged as the pinnacle of the yBa's fame as a collective mass, we see a contrivance of working-class devices which frame the catalogue photographs of each individual artist. All are portrayed in black and white for added edge; we see Richard Billingham, Simon Callery, Chris Ofili, Abigail Lane, Paul Finnigan and Johnathan Parsons all casually dressed and lighting or smoking a cigarette. Brothers Jake and Dinos Chapman are kicking a ball about in the street. Richard Patterson poses on the balcony of a council tower block in a Union Jack jacket; Martin Maloney sits on a park bench with a Staffordshire Bull Terrier, embellished in a studied collar; Mark Francis is playing darts, and several of them sit around in a local pub. These images could be lifted straight from a Shane Meadows film. Affording the status of rock stars by 1996, the 'working-class' credentials had to be reinforced with a heavy hand to

ensure public relevance. The fetishisation of and by the artists in this manner was a clear strategy, a method of ‘keeping them real’ and subsequently relevant to the media circus surrounding them. As noted by Brook Adams within the Sensation catalogue itself (1996), the depiction of working classness was, by this stage of the artist’s career, presented with a degree of blatantness, largely devoid of sensitivity, humour and social bonds.

Class was a key method in the construction and export of the yBa’s, who fulfilled the ‘sex and drugs’ fantasies of the moneyed classes whilst simultaneously being invested in the escalation of the value of their cultural product on the international market. Legge,(1999) terms this façade quite aptly as “a cartoonish class war” played out by all parties to the extreme and all being complicit in the fallacy. The photographer behind the Sensation portraits was Johnnie Shand Kydd, stepbrother of Diana Princess of Wales, who we are informed after selling 19th-century paintings in Bond Street, “…began taking photographs of his artist friends and those in his social sphere” (Legge, 1999) This insight attests to the close and active co-dependency between the classes in the mobilisation of the yBa machine. With their ‘fags and pints’ in hand, the yBa’s imposed great cultural capital and access to a fabrication of authenticity, which the art world establishment bought into (Olah, 2021; Legge, 1999). Working class motifs were consistent features. Emblematic of this, Sarah Lucas repurposes the greasy spoon as female sexuality in her work ‘Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab’ (1992), Tracey Emin, in her autobiographical reminisces, blends scenes of sex behind the bike sheds and near-fatal attacks on a dinner lady in the chaos of her promiscuous youth. Rachel Whiteread's epic work ‘Ghost’ (1993-4) preserves the tiny proportions of an East End terraced house reminiscent of the Blitz.

Perhaps the starkest depiction of the conditions of class is Richard Billingham through his photographs of his own poverty-stricken and highly dysfunctional family. Alcoholic father, morbidly obese and tattooed mother, numerous cats and dogs situated in the confines of a council flat, Billingham spares nothing in these documents of his family’s everyday life. Rows

between father and mother, father passed out beside the toilet seat, stodgy meals eaten on laps astride a cat or two, the reality of Billingham's childhood is stark and highly compelling. More than any other artist in *Sensation*, Billingham's work is conflicting and polarising in its brutal working-class honesty, one which John Molyneux claims presents challenging consequences for the viewer navigating a subject matter of solidarity and sympathy or one open to exploitation. (1998). Molyneux himself leans to the latter. When I interviewed him, Billingham described his experience growing up during his teenage years in the tower block as being in a ghetto – a tower block only populated by an 'underclass' of residents with problems. Art, he recalls, was something he kept secret to avoid ridicule from those around him. "They'd take the piss out of you, you know, they'll just keep calling you Picasso or something" (Interview, 2024). Billingham has no concerns about other *Sensation* artists (nor artists in general) utilising working class motifs – the more representation of working-class culture he believes is inevitably a good thing. Billingham cites the example of British Director Ken Loach's films based on the lower classes of British society despite his own middle-class background. Though Billingham himself can see the gaps in the creative narrative compared to his own lived experience, he believes that for the broader public, they convey an authenticity of reality in a narrative form which has sufficient conviction. Later in our conversation, I questioned if he had any concerns about the perception of his work by the middle classes, whether there is any degree of class tourism or othering amongst the art world audiences. This he refutes, seeing it as a necessary part of the exhibition process where the artists no longer control the image or perception, but he further believes none have laughed or ridiculed the subject matter over the years. "You know, you put things in a gallery, isn't it a bit like a church, you know, they're sort of protected" (Interview, 2024).

Myself, I am not certain of the actuality of either position when addressing Billingham's work. I suspect many an atheist within the Cathedral. It is, after all, his own reality to depict whilst conversely clearly a potential vehicle for voyeurism when placed on the white walls of the art world. What is undeniable, however, is that when endorsed and presented within a

‘cathedral’ such as The Royal Academy, Billingham, along with his co-exhibiters, demonstrate an inevitable dependence on the establishment classes for the ratification of their work. When personal biography is central to your aesthetic, a critical distance is created that overrides emotion and empathy. Billingham’s extreme experience of belonging to an ‘underclass’ makes his work one of photo realism and autobiographical in nature. He doesn’t see his work as political in any way but as an honest depiction of biography. This is compounded by the fact that at the time of taking, they were for personal consumption, research images for paintings at art college. Their exhibition value and class perception are perhaps for others to be concerned about. His embracement by the yBa fold he recalls as only positive, one of kinship and belonging with a further layer of cushioning from his gallerist (Anthony Reynolds), who he cites as mapping out his career for him, leaving Billingham to do what he loves best, making the art.

For others, there was a drive to justify their emancipation from their backgrounds via celebrity and wealth from the depiction of a grim and greasy working-class life can, at best, be a subtle form of nostalgia for something no longer existing within their present life. It does not equate an engagement in a discourse of class struggle. In her analysis of the rife embodiment of working-class motifs by the yBa generation, Nathalie Olah draws a line between depictions of working classness in the yBa’s and that in the work of artists George Shaw and Mark Leckey. The former she defines as class betrayal via their ‘corporate greed and collusion’ (2019). In contrast, she cites Shaws’ sympathetic paintings of the Coventry council estate where he grew up and Lecky’s reminisces of the role that music and subcultural identity had in working-class communities as personal journeys of grief and loss, a redundancy from a decade of Conservative politics. Alongside other cultural commodification of class celebrated and exported as signifiers of British success and affluence. As Olah (2019) surmises, the reported glamour of the ‘Cool Britannia’ era was a very long way from most of the people in Britain at this time. It was a London thing, and that said, it was located in the quickly co-opted areas around Hoxton Square.

Conclusion

Whilst I have previously discussed my own experiences of a short-lived landgrab of democratising proportions in the early 1990s, by the time of *Sensation* in 1997, the winners in the game were firmly established in the corporate boardroom. The game and social order re-instated. During my interview, former Director of the ICA, Philip Dodd, goes one step further, citing the yBa's as a Saatchi moulded reactionary movement with most now card-carrying Tory Party members. This is corroborated by Tracy Emin's vocal pro-Tory campaigning in 2011 (Brown, 2011). Situated alongside the gritty lyrics of Britpop and fashion's embracement of 'heroin chic', the depleted working classes were to be repurposed into a charming 'cheeky chappie' idea of British class reality, which when mediated through the lens of self-determinism was a successful if comical depiction of both Britishness and class, exported globally on a scale unknown since 'The Benny Hill Show.' (Olah, 2021) Angela McRobbie (1999) reads this as a conscious downgrading of art by this group of artists, as both an anti-intellectual and anti-theoretical stance. By taking the perceived imagery and beliefs of working-class life as mediated through the tabloid press, they go on, she asserts, to adopt and present it wholesale, devoid of socio-political critique. A byproduct of this is that "the singularity of art begins to dissolve" (p.8). Others have seen this as an inheritance of philistinism from the Thatcherite years. Stallabrass, Roberts, Garnett and Beech debated this position fiercely during the early 1990s in the pages of the art press of the time. Garnett goes so far as to summarise the yBa as the "voice of the philistine" (1996, p.39). Others writing at the time have sought to dislodge the arrogance of this position: "The accusation of anti-intellectualism has to be accused itself of anti-intellectualism: it closes itself off from unfamiliar modes of intelligent behaviour" (Beech, 1996, p.5)
Politics as a central concern of the art world was a feature of yesteryear, no longer a badge of honour for those who had sought to think their way towards liberation, theory led art was a moribund practice which had been absorbed into the institutions and, therefore, the art establishment

This perceived lightness in the work of the yBa has become one of the key sticks with which to beat this generation with en-masse, though not without some justification. The ideas and aesthetics of the yBa were minor factors within the wider circus which grew around them. However, this depiction often ignores the vast media celebration of this work, providing a genuine point of access for many to contemporary art and culture via a narrative of the everyday. Over 300,000 people attended Sensation in 1997; queues were around the block (Wolfe, ND). Whilst the body of the Royal Academy ratified the work as 'great art', the relationship of the audience to the work was conducted largely via the relatable language of the everyday. Whilst not suggesting that the role of art criticism was anything bestowed upon the working classes at this time, a language of yBa culture did not require the usual translators to be understood and had mass appeal. These works were discussed and critiqued alongside the popular music, fashion, fiction and British aesthetics at the time without the need for interpreters nor intermediaries explaining why it is good for our health.

As with many aspects of the early formation of the yBa's, there has been a tendency to obscure the early period with slick, utopian narratives. Saatchi, Jopling, Maureen Paley, Karsten Schubert and other key players in the early construction and mediation of the yBa's did not, of course, just happen to cross these artist's paths. They were actively enabled and championed by many of the teaching staff at Goldsmiths as discussed. Contemplating the real significance and impact of the *Freeze* exhibition and its successors (specifically *Modern Medicine* and *Gambler* 1990, curated by Hirst, Carl Freeman and Billee Selman), critic Robert Garnet has since observed that:

> "These 'DIY' shows were not an attempt at a 'Young unknowns Gallery' agenda, however, but were a successful attempt on behalf of the well-connected, scene-sharp young artists to circumvent the conventional process of becoming a professional, exhibiting artist". (1998, p.15)

The yBa's greatest legacy was not their art but their initial autonomy, which infiltrated the wider scene. Self-organised and global in their vision they self-curated and mediated their flagship exhibitions of a grandiose scale whilst just students. A master class in self-belief, community and independence inspired a greater wave of artists to forge their own path. Though a socio-political construction, it is impossible to claim the yBa's as a DIY operation after Frieze. They were highly organised, integrated and crucially enabled by the system they professed to deconstruct. Privileged access into the hierarchies of the art market was an unprecedented advantage, and without which it is arguable, they would have become just another group of graduates: the unsuccessful entrepreneurs.

By focussing on the formative years of the yBa and their DIY strategies, this chapter establishes the significant overlap and influence that they had on the wider cultural scene of the 1990s, with a legacy lasting today. Graduating artists took themselves seriously as professionals who could expediently garner greater visibility and critical response by creating their own systems and structures of art. The institution and the curator were deemed unnecessary, at best a laboured hindrance for a generation of artists who wrote their own rules. As I will now go on to discuss, this became an infectious practice which, for those who did not garner the same market returns as the yBa, instead inspired a wave of experimentation with the situating and curation as new communities formed and independent practices emerged.

Chapter 5: DIY Cultures: Art, Life and Society

This chapter reflects upon the formation and activities of independent art projects and curatorial practices in East London during the 1990s. Specifically focussing on initiatives which encouraged collaborative dialogue and cultures, some of which proposed an alternative model for art and society (Interview Gavin Turk, 2024; Jeremy Cooper, 2024). I will analyse key areas of cultural activity and commentary which occurred outside of the 'headlines' and at times stood in critical opposition to the dominant narratives focussed on promoting the yBa to the neglect of, arguably, more critically engaging practices. (Hale in Garfield, 2001; Owen in Garfield, 2001; Fox, 2013; Burrows, 1988; McCarthy, Interview, 2019). I will further address a liberation in the curation of culture, which pre-empted an expanded audience and narrative, standing in sharp contrast to the meta-narratives of Social Relations celebrated by the contemporary art establishment. Together, these areas of DIY practice proposed an alternative model for the presentation and mediation of art, which directly impacted my own curatorial practices at the ICA, as will be addressed later.

By exploring the emergence of a DIY scene**,** cultural democratisation and rebirth of modernist-inspired forms of self-institutionalisation, I will identify grass-roots activity and the formation of a cultural consciousness dominant at the time, which has all too often been side-lined in popular accounts (Manton 2017; Stallabrass Interview, 2022). Specifically, I shall explore the role and function of the social event as a significant active agent which connected previously siloed strata within the art world through the specific function of the private view and events which blurred the lines of art and entertainment. The relationship between DIY practice and the 'institution of art' at this time will be explored. Humour, entertainment and irony as devices employed by artists and artist-curators to expand cultural dialogue will be discussed. Whilst not serving as a chronicle of the history of DIY arts during this period, this chapter aims to give an insight into significantly underrepresented cultural

enterprises, which rallied the call for a new cultural order (Manton 2017; Stallabrass interview, 2022; Rushton Interview; 2022, Bedwell interview, 2023), providing a conceptual overview of DIY approaches to provide the context for the subsequent case studies.

Given the previous chapters' charting of the wholesale branding and commodification of the yBas in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the idea of self-styled cultures independent of the market seems, in many ways, improbable. However, the early 1990s in London's East End, through the co-option of makeshift spaces and diverse cultural ventures, created a unique set of conditions for British art. (Burrows 1990; Yablonsky, 2015; Mantoan, 2017; McCarthy Interview, 2019) in sharp contrast to the booming market-led mechanisms of a universal contemporary art scene. In East London, creativity was in the air and readily accessible. A time in which practices overlapped, traditional and popular cultures informed one another, and art communities emerged as critical networks narrating their own discourse in real-time.

The independent art press played a crucial role in the understanding of DIY cultures and narratives at this time. (Interview with Rushton, 2022; Interview with Bedwell, 2023). Whilst Frieze magazine served as the international face of British contemporary art entwined with the yBa's and the wider 'Cool Britannia' mantras, in stark contrast, the critical positioning of the DIY scene at the time was largely played out within the independent press, much of whom were themselves minimally financed DIY projects. The DIY press was a crucial vehicle for the iteration and exposure of a disparate independent scene (Interview Rushton, 2022). Much ignored by the international art press and mainstream media (Interview Bedwell, 2023; Stallabrass, 1996), these publications formed a vital real-time insight into non-yBa practice at the time and were a key resource in my research for this chapter.

To conduct a critical review of DIY practices, I will engage with the narratives and critiques of the independent art press from the time, together with historical reflections. These will be contrasted with interview material, broader secondary literature and my own reflections on

and engagement with these subjects. I shall begin by unravelling the reductive tropes which have come into popular memory, which depict a time of quick success, rampant ambition, danger, wealth and a political repositioning of London as the centre of the world's art scene. Whilst these are certainly worthy of headlines and generated tomes, this is not the entirety of what I and others recall as truly significant or central to the legacy of the time. (Stallabrass Interview, 2022; McCarthy Interview, 2019; Rushton Interview, 2022).

The substance of this chapter will re-construct something of a grubby and, at times, a fierce battle between disparate cultural agents for space, influence and recognition. DIY practices were forms of social and cultural experimentation resolving in a brief yet vital independence from, and for some in opposition to, the institutionalised establishment of the greater art world.

Artists Running Scenes

It has been suggested that the first artists' DIY project dates to Gustav Courbet's Pavilion of Realism (Burrows, 1998; Batchelor, in Life, 1996). Courbet, angered by the *Exposition Universelle* (15 May – 15 November 1855), refused to display his work and withdrew his fourteen canvasses and presented them in his own pavilion famously built within sight of the Salon (www.metmuseum.org). This, argues Burrows, was not a statement of defeat but a reclamation of authorship over the presentation of his work, making him the enfant terrible of his day. Through this act, the power of the institution of art was inadvertently questioned as a site of competency for the housing, and critique of art, as the artist asserted their own independent voice. Fast forwarding to London in the late 1980s, a whole wave of independent artists projects, interventions, publications and spaces appeared across the capital and continued to expand in scale and influence until the late 1990s. Rebecca Gordon-Nesbit tracks this period via the listing's classifications for independent art projects in the London magazine *Time Out* (1996). In the 1980s, she notes, non-commercial gallery spaces were somewhat crudely banded under the heading 'Fringe'. From 1996, this

transitioned to the more ambitious classification of ‘Up-coming’, and by 1999, the sheer scale of DIY activities necessitated that ‘Up-coming’ be broken down into the boroughs of London, with East London accounting for the lion’s share. Seemingly by the late 1990s, what had started as a series of artists’ DIY self-authored initiatives had become a distinct phenomenon (Ulrich-Obrist and Bosse 1996). As such, 1999 will be stated as the end of the period for DIY projects within this study.

As noted in the previous chapter, the succession of pioneering warehouse shows by those who came to form the yBa generation, set out with similar intentions; to circumvent the mechanics of the art world’s laborious systems and to take control of the means, scale, mediation and display of their own art. The key distinction between these warehouse shows and the greater DIY activities of the late 1980s lay in their overarching motivations. The greater impetus behind the creation of the warehouse shows was to emulate the scale, aesthetic and impact of the New York scene and its local variation in Saatchi’s own vast gallery space. It was a clear assertion of strength and ambition in the face of a depleted arts system (Mantoan, 2017). Their focus was on the mediation of themselves as new, vital players – the selected few who would become the UK art worlds resurrection. By contrast, much of the DIY scene was motivated by the more modest concerns of developing an artist’s community and gaining instant forms of cultural visibility (Hale, in Burrows, 1990). Many wanted to create a viable continuation of the networks, dialogues and support structures that had been established at art school and provide a platform for the display of their own work without the permission of the gatekeepers. (Roberts, 1996; Mantoan, 2017). As Alasdair Duncan succinctly concludes, the ideological distinction between the two ‘camps’ was in essence, one of authenticity. “Whereas Hirst offers attitudinisation, TNBA [The New British Art] offers attitude” (1996. P.17)

Distinction Within the DIY Scene

To position the rise of the DIY in critical opposition to the art establishment in the late 1980s would misrepresent them. Whilst DIY activity has been generally considered as residing further down the food chain in London (Beddoes, Khera, 2000), the impact which the yBa had on the development of independent and critical practice in London towards the end of the 1980s is arguably of greater significance in terms of platforming new and alternative curatorial and collaborative devices. The range of motivations to self-author at the time was almost as diverse as the range of practices that emerged. For some, the simple desire to exhibit work was the sole driving factor. Other artist-run galleries such as City Racing, Beaconsfield, Plummet, Strike and Cubitt sought curatorial independence, functioning as a grassroots venue for up-and-coming artists (Stallabrass, 1999). Some took more of an oppositional and critical stance on the art world from the start (BANK, Pullit, Art Space Life). However, the need for distinction from the mainstream mechanisms of the art world was a clear common thread. Further creating the need for a distinct identity and an underlying competitiveness amongst the DIY community (Timberlake in Hutchinson and Beech, eds. 2005).

Artist-run spaces (ARS) within the UK have historical precedence dating back to the 1960s and arose from the establishment of the artist studio system (Green, 2012). However, the flurry of self-organised art projects and galleries only gained traction from the late 1980s into the late 1990s, when it became absorbed into the mainstream (Jakobson, 2006). The overarching motivations underpinning this scene were a collective sense of urgency to exhibit, driven by the re-invigoration of the art school system, as discussed previously. Jones (2007) identifies the collaborative need of the ARS as a substitute for peer-support networks within the art educational settings. Others cite more degrees of calculation among artists to generate greater visibility within the market by collaborating outside of it (Morgan, 1992). Mantoan (2017) asserts a ‘pooling of chances’ as a contrived publicity method. Or even a purposeful trajectory of mutual back-scratching to form distinctive cliques, “In retrospect,

these were all ways of trying to look like Mother Theresa whilst secretly wanting to be Anthony d'Offay" (Morgan, 1992. P.3). While Patrice Joly perceives ARS as strategies for self-authentication and legitimacy (2013), critic Dave Beech, echoing Morgan (1992), argues that several ARS were being established with the singular motivation of garnering the attention of the market and leading arts institutions (2006). These accusations of opportunism, I would argue, only resonate when viewed with hindsight. The later professionalisation of the artist-run space, transformed it into organised and more commercially orientated operations by the end of the 1990s in London. The initial impetus was rooted more in necessity than strategy, as Burrow's argued at the time, "DIY came out of a lack of experimental spaces, economic situations (and) responses to local hierarchies" (1990. Online, NP). Depleted institutions, moribund public funding for the arts and the availability of disused industrial space were the essential conditions for the emergence of DIY creative activity towards the end of the 1980s, with the calculation of strategy being a feature only of those who came late to the DIY party.

Pioneers of the DIY scene, City Racing (1988-1998) cite necessity as their sole motivation for establishing their project in a disused betting shop and squat in Kennington (Hale, Noble, Owen, Burgess, 2002). "The Gallery was set up originally simply because we weren't getting exhibitions. So, we decided to put on our own". (Mat Hale in 'everything' magazine, March 1993. Issue 7., p.8). The five founding artists behind City Racing felt ostracised by the official systems of art. They set out not to create an alternative gallery but to provide space for exhibitions of art by themselves and other unexhibited artists whose work they respected. Offering open use to the spaces for experimentation and creative development, without the commercial imperative to reflect a market style, City Racing became the template for many artist initiatives that followed. Their lightness of operation was notable with the five members pitching artists or shows to each other and once agreed over a pint at the local pub, all the members supported the ensuing show. City Racing selected work which they found of interest and picked and mixed according to the combined agreement, a process they

concede as being ‘deeply unscientific’ (Burgess, Hale, Noble, Owen, 2002, p.74). This formula bore a degree of informality which became infectious. Visibility was the cultural currency of this model, and many followed in its wake. Conscious of their status as ‘artists’, the collective did not select from submitted proposals and actively discouraged them, citing that they, the members, did not have the authority to select. Crucially, they perceived themselves as more facilitator than curator (Burgess, Hale, Noble, Owen, 2002). This became a significant feature of the DIY scene at this time. Set against the lumbering institutions, booked three or more years ahead, the ARS could react to the cultural climate and give it vital visibility and a critical narrative before the paint was even dry at Tate. This had a twofold effect. Firstly, it highlighted the inflexibility of the traditional institutional system, which could only represent contemporary art from a safety point of critical distance. Secondly, it ignited the vast swathes of cultural experimentation over the 1990s and created a context for the organisation of some of this art. Though open to the potential of cliques, City Racing and those who followed provided a vital and immediate validation of contemporary art practice, which accelerated artists’ careers, some of whom would then be picked up and promoted within the mainstream systems. Whilst the global contemporary institution was weighted down on insular curatorial debating, the London DIY scene exuded creative innovation, inciting independent thinking and debate. This single feature was one of the influential lessons I took to the ICA. After all, how can a site for contemporary art function when working with such heavy bureaucracies, lengthy planning time and the inflated role of the seemingly ‘omnipotent’ curator?

City Racing, along with others: Cubitt, Curtain Road Arts, Info Centre, Beaconsfield (Cook, 2007), were hybrid entities serving as both a vital platform for profiling a community whilst simultaneously providing a support structure and, at times, a safety net for artists fresh out of college. Though they denied it as being an ambition (Burgess, Hale, Noble, Owen, 2002), City Racing provided the prototype for the inevitable evolution of an artist-run space into an artist-run gallery. This was a crucial transition which came to be the undoing of this era. As

greater competitiveness and commercial ambitions became the central impetus towards the end of the 1990s, the independents became more absorbed into the moulds determined by the mainstream (Dickinson, 1998).

City Racing has consistently cited its more conservative stance in contrast to others in the scene (Burgess, Hale, Noble, Owen, 2002; Hale in '*everything*' 1993). They were clear that they did not stand in opposition to the dominant institutions and narratives assigned to the yBa scene (*everything magazine* interviews with City Racing, Vol. 1 Issue 7 October 1992 vol and volume 3 issue 3:4 2001; *Variant* issue 8, 1990). Notably, however, they were open to include members identified from within the yBa scene. yBa A-listers Sarah Lucas and Gillian Wearing were both offered their first solo shows at City Racing in 1992/3, respectively, with several other prominent artists gaining visibility by exhibiting there (Wilson in Burgess, Hale, Noble, Owen, 2002)**.** This retrospectively became a focal point in the assessment of their importance of providing a 'grassroots' platform from which to direct the establishment of tomorrow. Fellow DIY collective BANK went so far as to suggest that City Racing was an independent space for the yBa - a charitable mimicry of the emerging commercial contemporary art scene in London (in Beddoes; Khera, 2000). These 'tastemaker' inferences were inevitably further tainted by the major retrospective exhibitions of City Racing by the ICA (2000) and Tate (2001), institutions who were seemingly keen to make up for lost time. Neither the emulation of the yBa operation nor the desire for inferred kudos by association with the yBa was an objective ambition for City Racing. In his introduction to their autobiography of City Racing (Burgess, Hale, Noble, Owen, 2002), Andrew Wilson argues that "Although it mirrored that of the cultural acceptance of the yBa, City Racing wasn't part of that world but in many ways signalled the complexities at the heart of British art in the 1990s" (p.VI). By exhibiting Lucas and Wearing, City Racings' motivation connected to a greater body of female artists whom they championed (Fox, 2013). They have, however, acknowledged their role as agents to enable unknown artists to enter the mainstream (Hale in *Variant*, 1998). Arguably City Racing was self-aware enough of the

need for visibility in the London art scene, which is evidenced in their collaboration with early ARS adopter, commercial gallerist Karsten Schubert, on a fundraiser for their space in 1998. This event perhaps reflects the exchange mechanisms between the contemporary commercial gallery sector and the independent scene at that time in London. Mat Hale reflects on this:

> "I think his [Karsten Schubert's] interest was to do with street cred, commercial galleries were being questioned by the press, saying that they were boring and that there was this better alternative scene happening in London." (in *Variant,* 1998, vol 2. no 5. p.19).

Upon reflection, City Racing note a point of transition, perhaps maturation in their evolution, when in 1992, they decided not to present their own artistic work in the space again and by virtue, they became, operationally, a mainstream gallery outfit, albeit not for profit.

Other significant players in the DIY scene who pioneered crucial curatorial strategies included Cubitt (1991-pres.) and Beaconsfield (1994- pres.) alongside BANK and Factual Nonsense (to be discussed). Named after just one of several locations which it occupied, Cubitt began and remained a collective venture established around self-organised artist studios and a gallery space directed by the residents' artists who again resisted the mainstream career path. During the early to mid-1990s, Cubitt began to collaborate, inviting its first curator, Matthew Higgs, in 1994 (Quaintance, 2016). This became formalised into a series of fifteen-month curatorial fellowships in 1999, giving the initiative an almost nomadic identity. As the 30 studio holders came and went throughout the years, a broad range of curatorial voices came into play through the fellowships. It initiated a venture in perpetual motion and independent of the trends and artistic fashions of any one time. Within the documentary retrospective 'Cubitt 25 years: An artist-led history' (Quaintance, 2016), former Cubitt artist and studio holder Emma Kay talks about the moment in an Arts Council funding

meeting when they were asked what their curatorial identity was. Given the fluidity of the operation and its multivocal nature, it was concluded that Cubitt's identity as a gallery was to have no identity at all. Like City Racing its raison d'etre was to provide the time, space and support for a complexity of artistic practices and voices. The result was a liberation of the curatorial process from the institutional concerns around cultural canons and historic trajectories dominating the global scene.

Beaconsfield in Vauxhall states its purpose as follows, "[to] Fill a niche between the institution, the commercial and the 'alternative'" (Beaconsfield,1984, online NA., NP.). Evolving out of the artist project Nosepaint (1991-94), Beaconsfield, like Cubitt, became a platform for cultural experimentation with a strong bias towards live and performance art. Employing a laboratory ethos, Beaconsfield identified as a 'Primary research vehicle for both art making and curatorial practice' through their studios and residency programmes (Beaconsfield,1984, N.A). Beaconsfield repeatedly stated the democratisation of cultural practice as its mission. Democratisation not only for the practitioner and their practice but also for audiences to freely access the work and the greater curatorial discussions surrounding it. A left-leaning political stance was part of an overt dialogue surrounding Beaconsfield. Its perception of its independent status being situated in opposition to the institution.

They were not alone in their critical opposition to the institution. Other operations like Pullit, enterprisingly generated revenue from raves to enable their independence (Interview in *everything* magazine issue 3/e3). BANK also took every opportunity to critique the cultural orthodoxies. Some have since argued that the DIY scene somewhat inevitably became institutionalised itself. With encroaching hierarchies of importance and influence tainting the independent messaging (Beech, 2006). However, in its formative years, the ARS was a genuine and impactful clamber for permissible cultural freedoms as Dickinson observed at the time,

> “The original impetus to establish the artist-run space was conceived as an ideological quest to destabilise the hegemony of complacent thinking and create a contextual framework that made art more of a meaningful activity.” (Dickson in ‘Occupational Hazzard’, 1998, p.82.)

Through these (and many other) initiatives, the creation and curation of culture became a liberated practice. Artists were now curators and even gallerists, enabling not only playfulness in the presentation of art but also what constituted art and curation when the exhibition space was handed over to the practitioner. The artist-curator, by the end of the 1990s, was a fixed feature on the London contemporary scene, challenging the authority of the institution head-on.

DIY vs. The Institution

By the late 1990s, the DIY scene was slowly becoming absorbed into the institutional framework (Burrows, 1998; Dickinson, 1998; McCarthy Interview, 2019). Moving from its ideological origins with intent to disrupt the hierarchies and set a new path for critical thinking, the artist-run space embraced many of what it was once resisting by demanding an exhibition profile and re-engagement with the institution (Beech, 2006; Dickinson, 1998). As author Tom McCarthy argues: “I guess periods like that they can’t go on forever they get institutionalised, and this is not always a bad thing.” (Interview, 2019). Though somewhat true, the positionality of the ARS in contrast or opposition to the institution was a key critical debate during the first half of the 1990s. Further, it played a crucial role in the emergence of the whole DIY scene at the end of the 1980s. This “Wild West period” (McCarthy, Interview, 2019) was in many ways the product of the failure of the institution to pay significant curatorial and critical attention to the broader wave of creativity which was fuelling the capital at this time. In its physical and theoretical hefty form and wholesale reliance on public

funding and government agenda, these spaces, entwined with the mentalities of those who ran them, reacted to the media hype and the market at the expense of a greater and more diverse body of work.

Whilst the institution may be forgiven for being excited by the razzamatazz of the yBa, a whole cohort of organised and ambitious practitioners felt side-lined from the party.
The art institution itself by the late 1980s (as previously discussed), was in a famine state, searching for renourishment through the assertion of a specifically British culture. This was further a point of urgency due to the rapid 'Biennialisation' of contemporary art globally, pitting the cultural wares of one country against the next. Britain's exports focussed heavily on the yBa as the sum of our international cultural asset. By proxy, the institutions were gaining back power and influence to drive the discourse surrounding British art around a small clique of artists and were seemingly blinded to a whole wave of cultural activity providing the lifeblood for the capital's culture (Kent, 2003). Set against this background, many artists-run spaces were driven to declare their independence and integrity. David Crawford (Beaconsfield) recalls: "I think setting up Beaconsfield was a subversive act. It is trying to make something that isn't exploiting a fashionable scene and say fuck you at the ICA" (in Burrows,1990. NP)

The ICA was a key target in the tirade of resistance having won the race to nimbly absorb the yBa discourse ahead of its rivals, by offering the then 26-year-old Damien Hirst his first solo show at a major public gallery in 1991. Followed in 1996 by the first solo show of Jake and Dinos Chapman**.** A suspicion of the institution was rife at the time, with accusations of nepotism (Roberts, in Burrows,1990) and the exploitation of a scene (Crawford, in Burrows, 1990). Class positioning was also inferred, with John Roberts of BANK pulling no punches, "You have a gang of (rich) morons running art centres" (Burrows, 1990.). Curator David Thorpe encapsulates the greater independent scene as an "anti-elitist art" (In *The Guardian*. 7th October, 1995). By not only claiming space to exhibit their own work independent of the

bureaucratic systems but also curating each other's work and driving the discourse around art forward multivocally.

Whilst London's institutions and commercial scene were preoccupied with global domination, the 1990s DIY scene gained crucial institutional recognition in the representation of their activity in the exhibition *Life/Live* at the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris, 1998**.** This epic reflection on the UK's independent art scene was a forensic gathering of activities across artistic production, artist-run initiatives and independent cultural magazines and zines that engage with the 'everyday, society and existence' whilst developing unique strategies for survival (Page, *Life*, p.8). Citing localised neglect in Britain, the international curators Laurence Bosse and Hans Ulrich Obrist stated their motivations as being driven by "an urgent need to reflect this phenomenon" (*Life*, p.13). They further identified a binding preoccupation of the British DIY scene as being located in the current realities, society and the everyday (*Life*, 1998), something of a collective social documentary akin to the Situationist style, drawing art and real-life into a cohesive dialogue (*Life*, 1998). The catalogues essays repeatedly position this scene in critical opposition to the institution, situating artist-run spaces "as sites of independence and transgression" (*Life*. p.13). Though these accounts are susceptible to generalisation, it is notable that City Racing, among others, consistently considered themselves as not in opposition to the institution in comparison to other ARS (interview *everything* vol 13- 4). This said*, Life/Live* (1998) did summarise an overarching drive within the scene to converse, critique and enable dialogue across several communities, something which proved to be highly contagious.

I attended *Life/Live* as part of the editorial team behind the magazine '*everything*', who were also included in the exhibition. Central to the independent spirit of the exhibition and scene it strove to depict, each artist, space and publication represented within the show was given ownership of their gallery display and editorial content within the catalogue. Looking through the range of written contributions, a host of voices can be seen from the descriptive, the

branded, the parodied, the ideological and the employment of the verbatim interview. These were all current strategies employed by the wider scene, and whilst not necessarily conscious mechanisms to engage closer with the everyday, they did provide informal narrative accounts of the scene. As discussed within the literature review, the dominant curatorial dialogue was centred around an institutional understanding of social discourse. *Life/Live* was something of a breath of fresh air in that its focus was divorced from both the A-list of globalised artists and the British export of yBa's and served more as a genuine platform to give greater visibility to a genuinely independent scene. The extended appeal for those invited to not only self-curate but to self-narrate their identities was a shrewd move on behalf of the organisers to mirror the participant's activities and afford a distinctly 'hands-off' curatorial approach.

The significance of *Life/Live* was manifold. Attending as a minor player in a critically important yet underfunded and poorly circulated publication, '*everything'* gave instant confirmation that our DIY endeavours were not in vain. '*everything'* had been founded by Steve Rushton and the late Keith Ball in 1992, who like many behind artists led initiatives were studio artists at the Riverside Studios in West London. It was funded from Arts Council publications 'underspend', which basically translated into whatever was left in the fund at the end of the financial year was scattered amongst a few rogue publications as a goodwill gesture. '*everything*' was a combination of satire, verbatim interview and a platform for critical debate around the work being made and consumed at the time. It was holding a mirror up to the emergence of the multiple art scenes, allowing the artist's voice to lead the discussion. The importance of the DIY press in the shaping of the artist-led scene should not be underestimated, with many key players in the mix giving detailed insight to the time. Moreover, its critical significance meant that some from the commercial scene responded to interview invitations, including Hirst's gallerist, Jay Jopling, Interim Galleries Maureen Paley and yBa early adopter Karsten Schubert. Such was the spirit of engagement at the time. Though insignificant in terms of print run compared to the funded UK art press (*Art Monthly,*

Frieze), '*everything*' and its DIY counterpart publications (*Variant, Third Text, New Left Review, Mute*) were all included in the *Life/Live* exhibition as sites for independent contemporary discourse.

Life/Live (1996) took place at what can reflectively be seen as the pinnacle of the London independent scene (Tom McCarthy Interview, 2019; Lisa le Feuvre Interview, 2021). Still self-reliant enough to withstand absorption into the mainstream, whilst developed enough to withhold an active identity as the alternative / other. As '*everything'* editor Steve Rushton recalls the magazine, "…was reflective of this weird dynamic of a market driven economy and an art economy which was funded by the welfare state, and I really wanted to articulate that". (Interview, 2022)

The polarisation of the developed and the undeveloped scenes were at their most vital by 1996, yet it is interesting that it took a major French gallery to take a curatorial overview of the underground scene and draw together the conversations between both camps. *Life/Live* crucially expanded its scope of vision outside of London, including projects across the UK from Belfast and Northern Ireland to Glasgow and Halifax. In doing so, it blew open the political agenda of a London-centric cultural economy, which was in the hands of New Labour, the easily exportable 'Cool Britannia'. The DIY, it seemed, was not only taking place in what was quickly becoming the urban chic of East London's warehouse spaces but all over the nation. *Life/Live's* co-curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist further cited the significance of the DIY scene as a vehicle for collaboration and discourse not only amongst itself but nationally and internationally. By this point, much of the scene was organised enough and nimble in its operative touch to enable collaborations, exchanges and partnerships with similar practices across the globe. "The fusional, globalising and utopian outlook of the 1960s and 1970s is "revisited" in a more fragmentary approach to the different facets of experience" (Hans Ulrich Obrist and Laurence Bosse in *Life* catalogue, p.13)

Though triggering the start of the consumption of the DIY into the mainstream, *Life / Live* was a vital reflection on a diversity of activity which had agency in the 1990s and which was of more cultural and political significance than officially exported culture at the time and is an underrated part of the 1990s legacy. (Yablinsky, 2015, Fox, 2013, Bosse & Ulrich Obrist, 1996, Rushton interview, 2022, McCarthy interview, 2019, Stallabrass interview, 2022)

Art and Entertainment in the 1990s DIY art scene

> "A guy called Picasso is nothing to a Guy Called Gerald." (Legge,1999, p.326.)

As noted at the head of this chapter, the London art scene manifested not only in an explosion of creative activity and enterprise within formal and informal venues but also through the machinations of a vibrant social scene. Outside of the major public and private galleries where RSVP invitations and private dinners were reserved for the wealthy and connected, there was a seemingly never-ending list of private views, club nights and, for the sake of a better phrase, 'hybrid' events, which transgressed between high and popular cultures (Le Fevre Interview, 2021; McCarthy Interview, 2019). Indeed, many contributors who I interviewed for this thesis cited the importance of the social scene at the time, and particularly that connected to the ARS, as a site for occupation from those among the disparate factions of the art world. (Interviews; Rushton, 2022; Dodd, 2021; McCarthy, 2019; Le Fevre, 2021; Stallabrass, 2022; Bedwell, 2023). The ease of flow from a private view to a performance piece to a club night was not, as Tom McCarthy recalls, a series of invites or planned social arrangements but everyday serendipity:

> "It just seemed to be this seamless fluid move - because on a night in Shoreditch you'd go to an opening then you'd go onto another and another place and there might be a DJ or a kind of avant-garde sound art person or maybe they were the same

> person? Or they were in the gallery too. There was a real flow between the spaces. It wasn't like 'ok we'll go to the gallery and afterwards we'll go to a club when we are finished', there was a continuity between these same spaces and same people." (Interview, 2019).

Fuelled by the free drinks at the private view, a wander around the East London streets would almost inevitably resolve itself at a club or party to which you were self-invited and generally most welcome. Together, the cultural and the social were the context in which much of the DIY and artist-led artistic product was consumed. (Roberts, 1996; Guardian, N.A; 1995).

Club and music journalist Arwa Heider tracks the chronology of the art and underground club scenes in East London during this period. The artists came first and took occupation, in turn, this initiated its own social scene, which notably drew audiences from both within and outside the cultural scene. Heider identifies a shared confidence that the early successes of the London art scene had on late-night cultures as a 'heady mixture of excitement, bravado and self-belief' (Interview, 2019). *The Blue Note* (Formally *Bass Clef*) tucked in the corner of Hoxton Square, would combine experimental visuals within a club night setting, witnessing now legendary nights as Goldie's '*Metalheadz'*. Premiering the underground in drum and bass every Sunday night, this club night was the place to hear new music ahead of release (Burns, 2013). This further influenced future club spaces, particularly *333 Club* in Shoreditch. *The Notting Hill Arts Club* and my own practice around club culture, later at the ICA. Recalling the relationship between the contemporary art and clubbing sector, Heider describes the *Blue Note* as a combination of a creative hub and a sweaty dance floor (Interview, 2019). This, again, she relates to the combined attitude of the time in which whatever your medium, art, music, fashion or club, there was a pervasive spirit of 'go ahead and make it happen'.

It is no coincidence that the rave scene and London contemporary art scene broke around the same time, with the rave setting the pace for the art revolution. Artists were not the only people keen to invade the disused industrial detritus of the 1980s and mark a cultural ground zero (Roberts, 1996). A disenfranchised, self-organised youth movement influenced by Chicago house music and with easy access to the drug ecstasy became a unifying subculture which occupied the ex-industrial sites of the inner cities, expanding into the rural countryside (Haq, 2016). The informality of both the rave and the DIY art scene, and in rave's case, the illegality of cultural occupation, was a compelling part of the broader DIY cultural scene. A few prominent visual artists notably took their inspiration from the rave scene (Jeremy Deller, Mark Lecky, Dinos Chapman, Martin Creed, Matthew Wilkinson, Bill Drummond, Wolfgang Tillmans and others). In the case of Mark Lecky, the environment of rave afforded him a genuine community and identity which, he asserts, was lost in the art world:

> "Music has some kind of innate politics to it I think because of who it's made by. Art is essentially middle class, and when I talk about universalism, I'm talking about class, really. Art is still elite, even though that word seems quite dead? it's still a bourgeois pursuit in a lot of ways. Music for me is a way of countering that." (Lecky in Thorpe, 2019. Online, NP).

Interestingly, Lecky cites the lack of politics in the contemporary art scene of the 1990s, this being notably absent in much of the artwork produced. Whilst largely true in the case of the yBa (Roberts, 1996; Stallabrass, 1999) there was an often-undiscussed political gesture being made through the DIY practices in their assertion of independence from overarching curatorial narratives occupying the international stage. While it was clear that the tensions of individual liberty against state control were an overt feature of the rave scene, a greater independence from the bureaucracies of the art world and its elite gatekeepers were the political driver behind the DIY scene.

An emboldened generation of well-educated art students needed to sustain their communities and discourse beyond graduation. Sustained on free drinks and cocaine (the art world's drug of choice), they organised their social structure around the private view opening and party. As discussed previously, both the DIY contemporary scene, early yBa's and rave culture in the UK were successful attempts to confront the social stratification which had been engendered by Conservative policy throughout the 1980s. In his analysis of rave and art activities, Nav Haq (2016) draws a significant parallel between the cultures, that of gathering, and by inference, forming a sense of belonging. The relationship between the need for belonging and social gathering has been well documented (Thornton, 1995) and is characteristic of both the rave and the private view scenes. Though access to both cultures was not straightforward, requiring familiarity with the key networks, once on the list age, status and ultimately, class background were of little consequence. This had something of a democratising effect; anyone who sought to connect could belong. Traditionally, art event invitations were afforded according to an undisclosed ranking system. Those who collected (private sector) or donated (public sector) were wined and dined with compensatory access to the artist and associated cultural capital. For major institutions, there were a plethora of 'Vs' in the VIP lists. First, access for the rich and generous, second for the critical and media networks, third for the arts professionals and then, in some cases, a general opening for the remainder. Rumour has it that there is even a fictional 'Monday night' preview, which is referred to in order to make even the most elite feel a little excluded (Fleming-Brown, 2022). This art-class system is so embedded that major events such as the Frieze art fairs, for example, have an endlessly expanding rostra of events, brunches, previews and dinners for the rich and connected before the ticket-paying masses can even get a look in.

The DIY scene in London actively sought community and discourse (Hale in Burrows, 1990; Hale in *Variant*, 1990; Roberts, 1996). These were the last days of the pre-internet age, one in which even mobile phones were solely a byproduct of city traders, drug dealers and their

like. Conversations took place in person, over a drink, often extending into the club or party space. Some I interviewed see the development of the DIY social scene as a site for discourse as being interconnected with the demise of art theory at this time (interviews; Rushton, 2022; Le Fevre, 2021; Dodd, 2021):

> "Prior to this moment that we're talking about, it was a consensual idea of art. So, you read your theory…you understood your identity politics, you saw the art. It was very, very serious." (Lisa le Feuvre Interview, 2021).

The seeming dilution of culture was a prevalent narrative of the time. Debates around philistinism were fiercely discussed, though even those embroiled in the grieving of a lost intellectual age for the arts were themselves engaged in the DIY social scene. I fondly recall an overheard exchange between two critics at one private view which encapsulates this, it went along the lines of:

> **critic 1**: 'if you'd read those books, you'd understand what I was saying',
> in response
> **critic 2**: 'If you hadn't read those books, you'd understand what I was saying'

Art historian and author of the critical book 'High-Art, Lite' (1999), Julian Stallabrass, reflects on the private view scene as being centre stage for much of the debate in person (and was later played out in the pages of the DIY press. The somewhat raucous rise of the yBa, as discussed, ignited an impassioned response amongst some of the critical fraternity. This party-loving parade of artists were falling out of cabs and into members' clubs and seemingly laughing in the face of generations of artists and theorists who upheld the respectable standards of the art world. (Guardian, NA, 1995). Critic John Roberts, for one, was not impressed, as he detailed in his 1996 essay 'Mad For It', "The truth is, playing dumb, shouting ARSE' and taking your knickers down has become an attractive move in the face of

the institutionalisation of critical theory in art in the 1980s." (p.29). What this new era had bullishly ushered in, however, was a form of art as entertainment through the informal presentation, interaction and mediation of the work. This, for some, presented something of a real problem. Steve Rushton traces the decline of theory (which he contextualises as Cold War structuralist) at the end of the 1980s as one of relevance, or lack of, to the art on offer. When the institution becomes a weak cousin to the art market, silliness and meta-fiction become part of the apparatus to respond to that change (Interview, 2021). No longer was art confined to galleries nor popular culture the preserve of the uncritical masses, the two were now embroiled and played out in an expansive social arena.

At the Curator's Request, Please Refrain From Laughter in the Gallery

Traditionally, the gallery is a place for monkish contemplation – sacred territory since time began. Beyond some radical moments of frivolity, Dada, Fluxus and Situationism, which were excused for their political stances; art and pleasure were not to be mixed. This changed radically in London during the 1990s. The mass subscription is to the notion of 'serious art', discussed by the well-educated serious minders of culture. Artist Simon Bedwell put this down to the need for a serious face when asking for several thousand pounds for "a bit of A4 paper" and the inference of the cultural ignorance of the middle-classes (Interview, 2023). Former ICA Director Philip Dodd identifies a perceived fear of 'cultural contamination' among the curatorial and critical body of the time. The deep concern is that if art and popular culture are to mix, then the seriousness of art (its USP) would unravel a cultural emperor's new clothes. The Avant-Garde, he argues, is instinctively suspicious of pleasure for fear of infection. (Interview, 2021)

Art and entertainment were a deliberate strategy of the time, a way of making sense of the perceived new start for London's contemporary art. Artists were at play, and the new social

scene was built around the private view and had pleasure as its sole focus. Alcohol sponsorship was rife with key players including Becks, Jack Daniel's bourbon and Bombay Sapphire gin. Unlimited alcohol replaced the polite glass of white at the opening night of an exhibition and, in doing so, changed the function of the event from one of critical reflection and status affirmation to that of a full-on party. Alcohol marketers played a crucial role in the perpetuation and expansion of the scene and garnered significant power in the contemporary art social calendar. Beck's lager hired former John Lennon / Yoko Ono PA-cum-sponsorship executive Anthony Fawcett (Lack, 2008). Fawcett frequently held court at the Groucho Club, indulging the yBa inner circle and key gallerists with his charm and endless bar tabs. On a very rare occasion, I found myself at such a gathering, I was aware of the exchange at play. The art elite gave their offering credibility, whilst the beer brand had a seemingly endless chequebook. Riding on the prolific visibility and access to the youth market, a somewhat staid German beer brand was able to project itself as hip and vital to the scene. It is perhaps no small coincidence that the advertising company that relaunched Becks in the early 1990s was none other than Saatchi & Saatchi, advancing it to the number five larger brand in the USA by 1997 (Hays, 1998).

Becks went on to commission limited edition artists' labels for their beer bottles, which were given out at some private views as collectable gifts. From 2000, Becks became the main sponsor of the ICA's youth-focused version of the, by then, sleepy Turner Prize with the launch of Becks Futures 2000-2006 (Hoffman and Bowman, 2006). With further lucrative commissioning of limited-edition artist music, art and design projects, including Becks Fusions and Becks Canvas (Hays, 1998). Gavin Turk recalls the symbiotic relationship of the drink's sponsors and the contemporary art scene, likening the Becks logo to 'a kind of postcard' signposting the event as being certified art (Interview, 2024). It was my experience that much of the art crowd would happily turn up to almost any opening if the Becks logo was present on the invite card.

Private view invite cards became of great significance and, in many cases, an extension of the artwork on show. Much like the club flyer, the need for distinctiveness, identity and memorability meant that great consideration was afforded to the invite. In the pre-digital era, the invite card equated to a sense of belonging within the scene, and there would be regulars who were present at most private views. The role of the artwork in the private view was secondary; people attended for several reasons, but in my observations, the main imperatives centred on free drink (the arts paid very poor salaries), connection and the potential of the after-party. As Garnett observed at the time; “Art is often something you back into when you’re trying to get another drink”. (Garnett, 1995, p.73). In some ways, the receipt of a private view card equated to the current day social media ‘like’. Gaining enough of them, could elevate you to the status of an ‘art influencer’. These events were loud, packed, fun and drunken. There were no bouncers on the doors; it was a free party for those in the know. I will go on to discuss the role of the private view and invite in greater detail within the case study of BANK (chapter six), whose launch events were, for several years, the very pinnacle of the DIY art social scene.

Conclusion

In conclusion, art was at its most vital and influential within the artist-led scene of this period. With few ground rules and a great deal of self-belief, creative collaboration, curation and creation were the lifeblood of the scene. Centred around a vibrant social network, the territory for art and culture was levelled. Invitation to the scene was by personal curiosity, and possibility was around every corner. The DIY artist of this time rejected the social hierarchies and the established class-ridden stratification of the art world with its abiding permissive rules. They formed themselves into micro institutions, rewrote the rule book and allowed a diversity of creative voices to be seen and heard. Through their enterprises, the artist-led initiatives of the 1990s ushered in a very real shift in the systems of power. This scene demonstrated that the conventions of institutional curation as discussed within the literature review, were no longer absolute. Further, a greater sense of belonging and enquiry

into art could be achieved if a social framework was employed to experience art and culture on pleasurable terms.

A compelling critique of the institutional art world and its curator is developed by considering the evolution of the DIY art scene in this chapter. The differentiated stances and operations discussed here formed a greater agitation to the formalities of the professionalised institute and those who governed access. Maverick strategies for curation became rife through the informal and social embodiment of art. The clinical white cube was replaced by run-down former offices and warehouses situated in parts of London yet to make it on the official art map. Artists, not curators dictated access to culture and in doing so aided a greater democratisation of the means of production.

Within the specific case studies of BANK and Factual Nonsense (chapters six and seven) I shall now discuss in detail specific models for the reconsideration of art as a social activity. Banks' irreverence and relentless satire of the mechanisms of the institute and market provided an alternative platform, proposing an alternative art form free from hierarchy. Factual Nonsense, as we will see proposed something of greater ambition: the integration of art into the fabric of the everyday. Whilst largely unrealised (and in some areas unrealisable), both BANK and Factual Nonsense submitted a democratic solution for art, which had a long-term impact not only on my own practice but on the relatable presentation and mediation of art globally. For this, I owe them my deep gratitude.

Chapter 6: ‘BANK’: The Agitators of The Artworld

Introduction

Within this case study on ‘BANK’, I will discuss the employment of pleasure and social mediation of art, primarily through the vehicle of the private view and satirical engagement of mediation devices operating within the art world to assert a critical account of the power systems embedded within it. As discussed in the previous chapter, informality, community and the insertion of art into a social framework were distinct curatorial devices that much of the DIY scene employed. This challenged the conventions of the art system and, in doing so, proposed vital alternative ways of presenting, experiencing and mediating the artwork. The democratising power of the social mediation of culture is discussed in detail here, as informal curatorial strategies are identified.

Alongside much of the DIY practice in London’s 1990s art scene, BANK was a distinctive entity emerging from the social and cultural conditions of the time. (Bedwell, 2023). Through their satire of gallery shows, curatorial excesses, tabloids, and television, BANK was the self-proclaimed editor at large of the art world’s operational and linguistic pretensions. BANK absorbed and digested the emerging strategies and increased professionalisation in market-led contemporary art during the 1990s, only to then regurgitate and spit its vulgarities back at it (Charlesworth, 2013; Thompson in Nielsen, 2021). They navigated and narrated the 1990s art scene in real-time with an attitude that divided opinion. BANK were not around to be liked, they were there to make art and devise new curatorial strategies which presented art as an extension of the entertainment industry. (Higgs, 2000).

BANK was founded in 1991 by John Russell and Simon Bedwell alongside Dino Demosthenous (who left in 1992). They were later joined by Milly Thompson, David Burrows and Andrew Williamson in 1993, while others came and went. As will be discussed, there

were many changes and inconsistencies in the evolution of BANK, including its group membership, but at its core remained Bedwell, Thompson and Russell until its closure in 2003 (Bank, 2001). Named after the site of their first collective exhibition, somewhat unimaginatively, a disused bank in Lewisham – a collective identity was determined from the outset (Bedwell Interview, 2023). BANK was the artist, a singular entity subsuming individual practice, action or ego (Bedwell in Frieze, 2023; Thompson in Nielsen, 2021). To this extent, BANK was the epitome of the DIY, artist-led ethos of this time, a scene within and about a scene (Charlesworth, 2013). Pioneering independent strategies for curatorial and cultural practice, BANK was an art world of its very own making, a meta-artworld standing in isolation and confrontation to the emergence of a London contemporary art scene and market. A collaborative identity and practice were deliberate tactics. Identifying individual insecurities as an initial point of attraction for the members, their combined identity afforded the group tremendous confidence, manifesting in a short space of time into a gigantic ego (Thompson in Nielsen, 2021). Presenting their identity via a number of working-class strategies, principally humour, sarcasm, parody and a punkish 'GRRRRRRRR' sensibility, BANK wielded their authority and authenticity in the face of the art world and its hypocrisies.

Within this chapter, I will explore the key elements which distinguished BANK from other forms of DIY practice at the time. Their positioning alongside the yBa and their self-institutionalisation within the greater art world will be examined. Their role as curatorial pioneers who invited artists temporarily into their fold and wholly on their own terms will also be discussed along with the external perceptions of BANK by artist collaborators and critics of the time. Their employment of fun, silliness, parody and confrontation will be analysed across several of their creative outputs. Finally, the role, function and power politics of the BANK private view are explored through first-hand accounts and personal reflection.

BANK: An Uncompromising Attitude

Any attempt to neatly summarise the ideological stance of BANK is a futile task. As many of the DIY organisations discussed, they were essentially a group of three artists who wanted to own the means of control, creativity and exposure of their own practice. They were, by their admission, a “knarly little gang” (Bedwell Interview, 2023) who had no obvious desires to be absorbed into the wider art circus of the period and, in many ways, manifest in seemingly hostile critical opposition to much of it. BANK were, however, consistently inconsistent in their engagement with the outsider art world. They employed various hyper-personas as strategies to navigate the quickly changing terrain around them and to unpick the weaknesses within. This was their unique charm and strength. Throughout their twelve years, they employed fluctuating identities as a consistent rhetorical device (Bedwell Interview, 2023). Depending on when you encountered them, BANK both loved and hated popular culture**,** were raging Marxists or moderate Socialists, political protesters with a big or small p. These were evolutionary vehicles and strategies for survival. A game which was employed to stimulate the greatest possible reaction. Simon Bedwell contextualises the rhetoric against the realities of their everyday. “We had to make 10 figures out of wood and paper mâché – there was no time to be Trotsky.” (Interview, 2023)

Whatever their stance of the day, every statement, artwork and communication was delivered with unswerving confidence which put many in the art world, constantly on a back foot (interview Steve Rushton, 2022). By doing so they were afforded the time and space to propose a new way forward for artists independent of mainstream conventions. Opposition to the mechanics of the art world was a provocation to a new generation of artists who rejected the theoretical restraint which dictated much of the artistic output of the 1980s. The DIY generation intended to create new systems for the creation, exhibition and consumption of art according to their own terms and conditions (Beech in *Flux* Magazine, 2013). BANK were acutely self-aware. This was evidenced in practically every detail of their operation, even down to their resistance to being depicted as a form of ‘artist collective’, a term

attributed to many artist-led projects of this time. To self-define as a collective was, BANK deemed simply pretentious (Bedwell Interview, 2023) and political in its transference of authorship (*Flux Magazine*, 2013). BANK were, they claimed, more of a 'dysfunctional family' (Bedwell in *Frieze*, 2023) albeit a tightly knit one. However, like many of their declarations, there was little dysfunction within their operation. Slick they were not, that was the role of the mainstream art world, but highly organised, cohesive and driven were defining features of this particular gene pool. Much like punk, their anarchic front was an orchestrated form of anti- professionalism and like many a wayward child, BANK ultimately wanted to belong (Beech in *Flux*, 2013), something which Milly Thompson was later to confess to. "We could see the proliferation of art galleries and their professionalising nature. We enjoyed pointing out the bullshit, but also wholeheartedly acknowledged our own lame aspirations towards being "professional" artists." (In Nielsen, 2021. Online, NP). Bedwell, in our interview, is open to this fact, claiming that if Saatchi had offered them 50k for the contents of one of their shows, they would have quickly bitten his hand off! (2023)

BANK did not go out of their way to integrate. Their role as cultural hecklers left them off many a guest list. Though much like their contradictory personas they cite a social awkwardness being the underlying tension to their inhospitality (Bedwell Interview, 2023). Gavin Turk concurs that BANK were not being invited to the dinners and parties as they were "a little bit too edgy, a little bit too kind of awkward" (Interview, 2024). If we view BANK as something of a subculture within the art scene then their outsider status was arguably something of a necessity. To master the art of parodying the roles and systems of the art world, you had to maintain a facade of alienation. This is where the crucial role of the BANK private view came into play as a curatorial device to generate and orchestrate a loyal following, but on their terms. This cast them at the time as being in an oppositional stance to the extended yBa sensation and its social ramifications. They were peeved they were not invited to the party, but fully knowing that if they did turn up, it would somehow inevitably lead to one almighty fight.

By the early 1990s, there was a new set of social rituals which had filtered down from the official art world into everyday practice. This was a new world in which air kisses down the pub became the order of the day, and a chronic dose of insincerity and pretension seeped in as players jostled for position. Set against this backdrop BANK seemingly hunkered down amongst their network of artists, arms folded, flicking the Vs at whoever passed their door. BANK members have since denied their depiction as being in some ways anti-yBa (Thompson in Nielsen, 2021; Bedwell Interview, 2023). Simon Bedwell, surprisingly within our discussion, goes as far as to praise them for reviving the London contemporary art scene from the beleaguered days of the 1980s. The difference between them and the yBa, he notes, was that they were successful entrepreneurs, and BANK were the failing counterparts (Bedwell Interview, 2023).

Gavin Turk exhibited with BANK in their show '*Fuck Off*' (1996) at the height of the media interest around the yBa, of which he was cast as a leading figure**.** He depicts their perceived opposition during the 1990s as being part of a rejection of its branding, a determination on their part to be outside of any ideological paradigm (Interview, 2024). This again highlights a key inconsistency within their position as they functioned as something of a corporation (Stallabrass,1999), affording meticulous attention to detail in the construction of their own brand and social communique. The crucial difference is that brand yBa was dictated by marketers, whilst brand BANK was a product of their terms and conditions. Milly Thompson identifies a further distinction being that the yBa made 'product' (for a market) as individual artists, by contrast, BANK created shows, functioning as noted as a singular unit – the artist's ego being subsumed to a greater collective confidence. It was less the artists who were assigned the yBa brand that the group had a problem with. It was more the class-based system that had wholeheartedly wooed, funded and consumed them - the curators, gallerists, administrators, PR teams and the like. The rich and entitled were a clear target for BANK, and this became the source for them to be rebuked as envious and oppositional.

They pulled no punches in terms of class. In their parody of the Biennialisation of contemporary art in the 1990s, they curated their own '*Dog-u-mental VIII!!!*' in 1996. The poster ran the slogan "You only hate us because we are working class" (BANK, 2000) - a highly self-conscious strategy intended to "get people's backs up" (BANK, 2000. p.48). Part of my personal attraction to BANK was their seeming inability to play by the rules of the game. This was something I empathised with, any attempts at air kissing back home in Oldham would have most certainly resulted in a trip to A&E. The empty social niceties and enormous swamps of wealth and entitlement which I encountered in the art world were really another world to mine and one I never felt at home with even in my later 'legitimised' role as a curator at major galleries.

The confrontational attitude of BANK was a recurring theme within my interviews. Curator Lisa Le Feuvre, whilst acknowledging their employment of offence as a rhetorical device, maintains that she felt [she was] being 'laughed at' by the group (Interview, 2021). I recall a sense of them being a gang which I wasn't cool enough to be a part of. Artist and peer Sue Webster goes further when reflecting on how polite the contemporary art scene is now, recalling a different climate in the 1990s, "Fucking BANK hated everybody! They hated everyone. Simon, he was the nasty one out of that lot, wasn't he? Simon Bedwell. He was always rude and horrible. Really bitter, yeah, bitter. There was always antagonism between the artists". (Interview, 2020). Within my interview with Bedwell, he also identified Sue Webster and her former partner Tim Noble with a similar disdain. Seemingly some wounds never fully heal in time.

BANK, whatever its front or platform, lived for its art. Through their paradoxical and frequently contradictory strategies, their bombastic confrontation was a key driving force behind the group and crucially became central to their proposition of a new form of curatorial / un-curatorial practice.

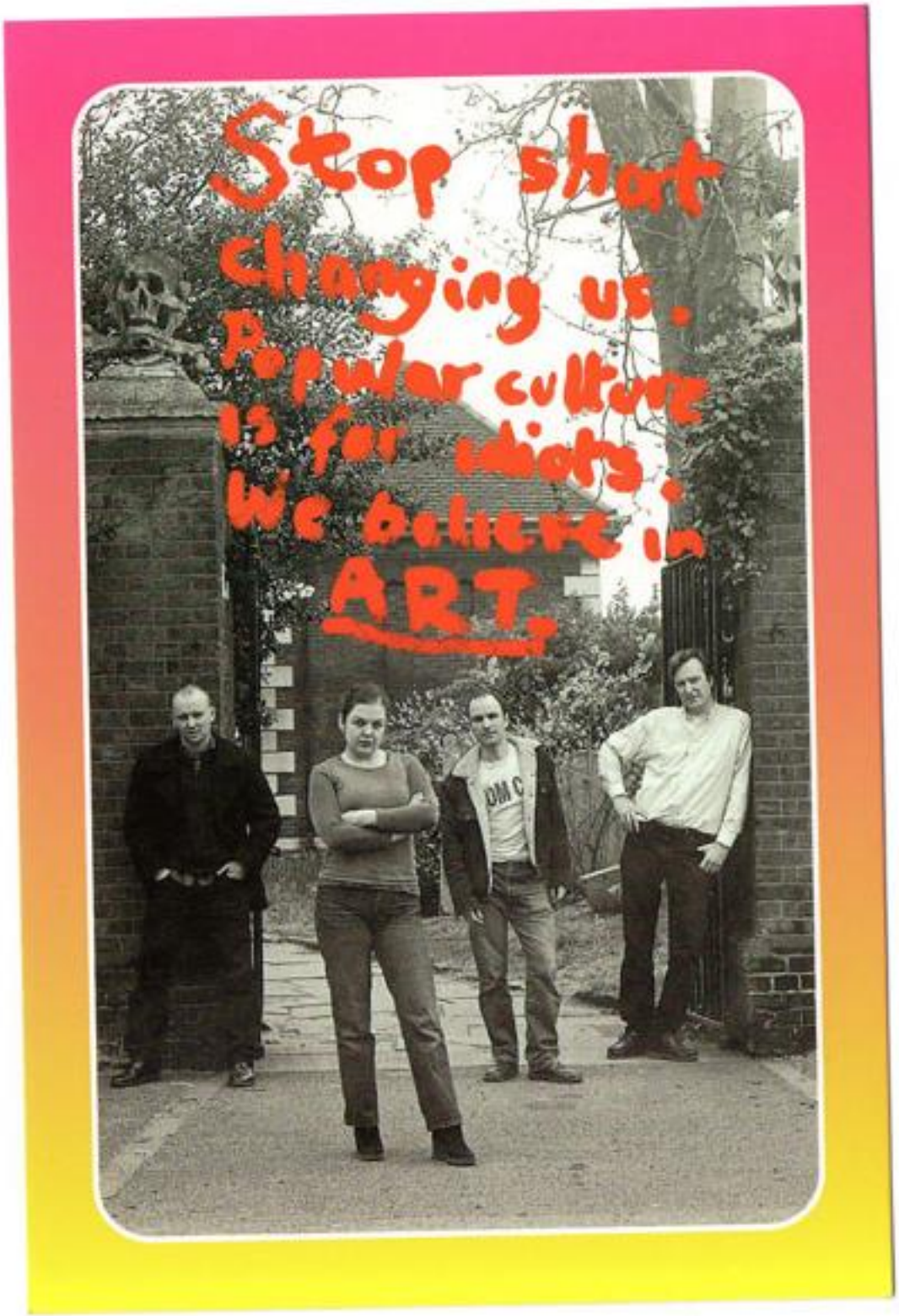

Figure 1. 'Stop short-changing us. Popular culture is for idiots. We believe in art. Solo show Gallerie Poo Poo, London. June – August 1998. www.john-russell.org)

Un-Curating as a Curatorial Device.

For an artist group who fiercely guarded their public perception, BANK were also prolific in terms of the number of artists who they invited into their shows. As a staple feature, a BANK group show had a central identity (devised by BANK), a dominant work or contextual scene (created by BANK) and works by anything up to 30 other artists positioned around their space. By 1995, they had taken occupation of a former warehouse space on Curtain Road, Shoreditch, Burbage House, at the very nucleus of the DIY scene. Resulting from the success of the three shows they made there, *Zombie Golf* (1995), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1995) and their Christmas bonanza *Cocaine Orgasm* (1995), BANK were by now at the very peak of both their creativity and fame (Thompson in interview, Goldsmiths. NA., ND.).

As depicted in chapter three, despite its evolving identity as the epicentre of activity, Shoreditch was still very much a post-industrial wasteland. The physical detritus and fallout from this history afforded BANK much of their physical material with which to create work. Scrap, junk, skip waste and the everyday were the underpinnings of the rough and ready 'grunge aesthetic' which BANK became known for (Bedwell Interview, 2023). When contrasted against the increasingly slick presentations of artwork by their more favoured ex-Goldsmith contemporaries, their work made a clear political claim to independence and self-reliance. Equally, however, it conveyed a greater meaning of access to the means of production; "if we can knock this together in a few weeks with nothing …so can you" (Stallabrass, Interview, 2022). I recall one of my favourite works in a BANK show being photos of small figures made from moulded chewing gum, by the then BANK member David Burrows for *Dog-u-mental VIII*. Their silliness, redundancy and cheapness afforded me a form of affection and empathy with the work. I asked Burrows in an interview where these works originated from. He recounted that, at the time, he was working nights in a warehouse for Central Books. The resulting lethargy

limited the scope and scale of what he could make for the imminent deadline, so he picked up a pack of gum in his front room and made the figures he titled '*Bubble-Gum Heads'* whilst he watched the telly. He then popped them in the freezer and photographed them for the show during his weekends. "That seemed a more relevant way for me to make art as someone who's working in a warehouse" (Interview, 2020). It transpires that the Central Book warehouse was something of a bunker for a critical group of artists, also being the employer of Dave Beech and Mike Nelson. Burrows maintains that whilst art does not have the power to inform the everyday, it can influence the procedure. "It [art] articulated experiences which were more common but not universalised. What collapses is critical distance." (Interview, 2020). This became a vital element in BANKS proposition of an alternative curatorial and cultural model, that when you lose criticality as your starting point the everyday becomes part of the story. (Russell in *Variant*, 1998) Through this, a sense of belonging and relatability may follow.

Curatorially, there was very little direction in a BANK show, replaced by an enormous degree of control and micromanagement (Beech, 2013). City Racing's Matt Hale and Peter Owen cite this as new and radical within BANK's approach to their shows. Whilst foregrounding their work and the theme of the show, they select artists to fit that specific thematic context. Unlike many of the artist-led initiatives of this time, BANK had little interest in building an alternative community for artists along with its necessary support structures. For BANK the artists who were chosen were clearly working for them and together working towards creating the best possible show they could under BANK'S direction (Hale and Owen in *everything* magazine, 2021). Milly Thompson affords a useful insight into the working relationship between BANK and their guest artist. For the exhibition *Charge of the Light Brigade* (1995), the given theme was 'making mistakes'. BANK installed their work, a life-size charging brigade across the expanse of the gallery ceiling at Curtain Road. The guest artists were then invited not to 'interact' with this work but to create work around the notion of mistakes and failure. (Thompson in Interview

Goldsmith's archive, NP., NA.). What they subsequently made was of little interest to BANK if it added to the greater curatorial whole. Relating back to their use of contradictory persona, Dave Beech recalls that he was invited by BANK to exhibit with them as they were "great fans of his work", only to later be informed by David Burrows that it was for his Marxist credentials they wanted him involved (*Flux* magazine, 2013. NP). BANK were un-curating their shows, and their retention of ultimate power was central to this, as they later explained, "We weren't going to allow our ideas for a show to be jeopardised by some other spoilt prima donna artist; so, we were doing what all curators do, only in a more vulgarly visible way." (BANK. 2000, p.26). If the privileged curator in the global contemporary art world was politely manipulating artists to work according to their terms to bask in the ultimate glory, then BANK would explicitly follow, employing as they did their decidedly 'no-frills', 'no compromise' mode of operation.

Gavin Turk gives an insight into the experience of contributing to a BANK show. As an artist in '*Fuck Off'* (1996) he, along with other guests, was asked to contribute to the catalogue by each adding one photograph of a stone. The photos were then duplicated and ring bound and simply entitled 'Fuck Off'. The individual artist identity is temporarily subsumed into the overall branding (Gavin Turk Interview, 2024). When challenged with the accusation of having a parasitical relationship with many well-known artists throughout their collective career, BANK replied with a now familiar rhetoric: "This is crap. They got famous" (Thompson in Goldsmith's archive. NA., ND.). Their collaborative curatorial style has been likened to the creation of a film set (John Russell, *Variant* issue 5, 1998; Turk Interview, 2024). Negating the white cube tradition, elements such as lighting and narrative setting were considered in every detail, from the private view card to the opening night party. Contributing artists were to some degree 'cast' according to their aesthetic, approach or media identity, all of which contributed to, and never detracted from, the overall BANK show. Gavin Turk recalls this staging strategy as his collaborative experience (Interview, 2024), where he was attracted to participate by

being drawn into their overall directorial vision. By taking control of the identity, thematic and physical contextualisation of each exhibition BANK's identity was dominant, with the resulting artworks contributed by invited artists being of little to no relevance other than reinforcing the overall brand. To this end, they were less curating an exhibition but creating a temporary parallel world to be experienced. In stark contrast to the increasingly self-aware and self-institutionalised contemporary art world around them, they proposed a greater democratic curatorial direction in which no one artist or artwork was prioritised within the overall pretension of their emerging corporate identity.

Wit, Sneers and Confrontation

> "A circus is more fun than a church" (BANK, 2000)

As the wider London art world was quickly professionalising and creating an active market, Bank remained a constant, irritable sibling. Poised at the ready to humiliate and parody their pretensions, the tools of humour and silliness became BANK's weapons of choice. You don't have to venture much further than their exhibition titles; 'Sewage lust' (ICA. 1997) or '*Winkle the Pot-Bellied Pig and his Woodland Chums'* (1997), the latter taking place at their exhibition spaces which evolved from being known simply as BANKSPACE, to DOG and resolving on the sophisticated name of 'Gallerie Poo Poo' by 1997, to see this in action.

BANK self-consciously employed wit and sarcasm as a class tool to poke fun at the performativity of the new art world order (Bedwell Interview, 2023). It was also a binding feature which played a role in the longevity of the group as a communal sense of humour is recalled (Thompson in Nielsen, 2021). Infantile antics became their hallmark feature, not only of their critical stance but also functioning as a unifying force for much of their artistic output. Alongside their many exhibitions, BANK established their own media

empire, albeit on a budget. ‘The BANK’ (see Fig. 2) a tabloid newsprint revelled in ‘Sun-sational’ headlines aimed squarely at figures within the art world. ‘The BANK’ was a daily publication which accompanied one of BANK’s most ambitious enterprises, the establishment of *Viper/Bank TV* (20th September -13th October,1996). With a modest Arts Council grant, a camcorder and 15 VCRs, 130 artists were invited to broadcast their work over six hours, six days a week for three weeks in Manchester and London, with satellite transmissions on ‘catch up’ the next day at The ICA, Transmission Gallery in Glasgow, The Viewpoint Photography Gallery in Salford and the Castlefield Gallery in Manchester, not forgetting their local pub, The Eagle, who also showcased the footage (BANK, 2000). Many artists utilised the platform to showcase their working practices, whilst others bought directly into the media vibe. Bob and Roberta Smith, for one, hosted a nightly chat show, which was mainly ad-lib. ‘The BANK’ newspaper accompanied the London show of *Viper/Bank TV* and was the only element which BANK contributed to (BANK, 2000), marking a deviation in their un-curatorial strategy to date. BANK members were the printers, technicians, tea boys and girls, as a hoard of artists experimented with the platform.

Figure 2. The BANK Newspaper. www.john-russell.org

Whilst this was participation on an unprecedented scale, operationally, it remained within the tight visionary grip of the BANK group.

'*The BANK'* became probably the most iconic output of the group. Employing childhood taunts, cheap sarcasm and 'Up Yours Delors' style of headlining, BANK were having a field day. Some of my favourite titles include 'Sarah Kent Stupid Official !!!' (*The BANK*, issue 20) referencing the *Time Out* art critic, "Galleries all Owned by Rich People Shock" (*The BANK*, issue 19) and unusually turning its guns towards a fellow artist, "Patterson: One Idea in Eight Years (*The BANK*, issue 3) targeting Simon Patterson's perceived limited range of ideas. It was remorseless in its honesty and addictively funny through its 13-year-old-hormonal-teen-from-Peckham style tirades. Beyond this, there was an underlying sophistication to their adoption of the tabloid template. The appropriation of

the tabloid tone had to be convincing, and as with all things BANK, their seemingly abrupt rants worked only through extensive attention to detail (*Flux* Magazine, 2013). This was now the 'post *Sensation* era' when some of the market-led art world and its expansive acolytes were smug with money and success. Having received little critical press attention from the major art press (Simon Bedwell interview, 2023; *Flux* magazine, 2013), it was to be expected that they would take the media under their control for a while as a critical tool with which to rewrite the contemporary art story according to their experiences and systems of belief.

This practice of art world ridicule was developed further within their subsequent *Fax-Back* project. Not intended for exhibition at the time it was active (1998-99), *Fax-Back* reviewed, edited and marked out of 10 over 300 press releases issued by galleries in London and New York (Lenz Press, ND). In this project, BANK revelled in the pretensions of the art world's grandiose uses of language. Earnestly sincere in tone and densely referenced, gallery press releases became prime fodder for the group to play with. BANK morphed into the art world's headmaster, underlining the errors, bombastic use of language, and annotating their thoughts and opinions in the margins. Finally, the faxes received a score out of ten and a concluding summation before being returned to their owners;

"A heady mixture of O' level Baudrillard and twee, flowery breathless prose. Makes me feel sick."

Or

"You keep telling us things are important: I'm becoming suspicious".

And

"I fully expect to be bored shitless".

Subtlety was typically abandoned as they joyously waded through the deceits and embellishments of these art world statements. In doing so, they were exposing one of the strongest defences that the gatekeepers of the arts had – language. Keen to inflate the intellectual pretensions of the cultural middle classes, the casual citation of Jacque Derrida or resurrection of the wisdom of Clement Greenburg elevated an often-dull exhibition of art into the scholarly spheres. It was a great reassurance to the cerebral pretensions of the educated classes which Barr had identified, and subsequently a door firmly shut in the face of the proles. Inflated uses of language, along with the intimidating impact of the white cube space, were powerful strategies for exclusion used by the art cognoscente and were prolific in the age of the uber-curator, as discussed. Through *Fax-Back*, BANK obsessively returned this deceit back on the middle-class guardians who, by self-appointment, safeguarded the purity of the art world. Who, BANK asserted through this project, really belongs in the ranks of the ignorant?

Fax Back, The BANK and *Viper/Bank TV* have been noted for their playfulness (Quinn, 2022); however, that is to belie a greater intent. The critical and class-based undertones of their operation as an artist group had largely only been critical of the art world through its use of rhetorical devices and their proposition of a curatorial strategy in which the quality of the artwork was of marginal concern, standing in stark contrast to the curatorial co-option of certain artists and practices on the global stage. This irked those in the art world who were pumping millions into a small band of artists to make the largest and shiniest new art at the time. By 1998, BANK had fully reconciled its status as the "unsuccessful entrepreneur" (Bedwell Interview, 2023) in the greater scheme of things. This afforded them liberty fuelled by a deep-seated sense of injustice to remove the sticking plasters from the system and pick away at their wounds. It was time to get serious and assume a guise, which, whilst satirical, was much more of a confrontation. John Russell reflects on this time:

> "A couple of times we thought it would all blow up, occasionally we have dreams about making it and villas in Italy, but basically, we're fucked, and we know that we are not going to make it at that level. The best stuff we've done is when we have realised, we're fucked" (In *Variant* 5, 1998)

By employing the media strategies of tabloid headlines, TV channels and editor-in-chief, BANK laid arts insecurities bare, affording a slight glimmer of honesty and, by proxy, a way to access and engage with the system. Theirs was an 'aesthetic of relations', which, whilst set firmly on their terms, generated a genuine scene to which one could belong. This was a key learning point that I was to implement within the curatorial tactics I employed at the ICA and served as a mechanism for navigating my way to the table. Though devoid of BANK's seeming uber-confidence, I was certainly emboldened by the case for art creation and curation which they made.

The BANK Private View

As noted, the 1990s art scene concurred with the last days of an analogue world. This afforded a distinct strategy for BANK to employ all communicative tools required in the creation of an exhibition as an in-person dialogue. Their 'back-of-a-fag-packet' aesthetic was an instantly distinctive and highly compelling device which distinguished them within the cultural pecking order. Every detail was considered and collectively agreed upon, which, when applied to a working strategy for over twelve years, is a testament to a deep belief and the cult-like commitments of its members at that time. It has repeatedly been stated by the group that the single most important feature of their operation was the private view night (BANK, 2000; Bedwell interview, 2023; *Variant*, 1998). Their stated reason was the democratising factor of the event, closely followed by the ability to pick up on the latest art world gossip – more irons in their fire (Bedwell Interview, 2023). The private view crucially was an extension of the exhibition itself and of equal, if not higher,

importance (*Variant*, 1990; *Guardian*, 1995). The staging of these events was carefully curated and highly performative. *Cocaine Orgasm* (1995) was a crafted Christmas show which inverted a delightful winter wonderland scene into a simulated drug den of humongous proportions. Trails of white polystyrene littered the staircase, their entrails congregating on a large white rock-like structure in the middle of the gallery, (see Fig.3). Cocaine at this time was rife in the art world and whilst allowing many an inflated ego to talk for longer on their own importance**,** it was part of the party and part of the fun and accessible despite where one resided in the cultural order. BANK were at the height of their fame and it was widely known that going to a BANK private view was the beginning of a very long but joyous night. The invitation to *Cocaine Orgasm* was thematically on point and typically playful, tucked away inside a cheap and cheerful Christmas card (Fig 4) and sent 'with love from Bank' hand signed, of course. It was beginning to look a lot like Christmas and the hoards were out on Charlotte Road.

Art Critic, Gilda Williams recalls her experience of that private view with sheer glee (Williams, G (ND). Intrigued and touched by the seeming personal invitation to the show, her first encounter was at the entrance of the gallery, long before any artwork was yet to be seen. Guests were startled by a band of (fake) paparazzi at the doorway with old-school flashbulb cameras who called your attention and beckoned you to vogue in style. Though bereft of the actual film, the cameras linked up to a monitor at the top of the stairs where you saw surveillance footage of yourself re-entering the gallery (BANK, 2000). This performance piece by artist/gallerist Max Wigram had the dual function of unnerving some of the attendees whilst simultaneously adding a dose of cocaine-deluded self-importance to the proceedings. Having fought off the 'press' and now encountering the show, Williams was immediately hit by its deliberate amateur, un-curated style. The impact of the greater aesthetic on the work by contributing artists was transformative, she noted: "I've seen work by these artists so many times since then… but it's never looked so alive, as good as it did that night." (ND., NP.). This is true, too, of

my recollections of that night. For the bits of artwork's you could glimpse between the gathered crowds, the sprinkling of polystyrene fairy dust drew you into a work of total curation, with every detail intended for maximum impact. The am-dram theatrics of the private view make all the difference to the viewer's relationship to the work. Julian Stallabrass recalls the impact it had on audiences "…an antagonistic group, performatively antagonistic, we would see this art and talk about it." (Interview, 2022) This was akin to viewing art within a nightclub setting: intimate, immediate, disorientating and highly compelling. With conversations and debate shouted directly from mouth to ear at close range, discussion ensued. This was a night out accompanied by a side helping of brilliant art, with every finely tuned detail contributing to the experience. My own encounters with the artwork exhibited were largely on my terms as I navigated the crowds, with no option but to confront rather than muse self-consciously at the work. This presentation of art within a social setting bestowed an immediate sense of belonging and a special connection to the work on show. Lessons learned that night were to later become highly instrumental in the construction of my own curatorial practice, conflating as it did art and the social context.

Situated in stark contrast to the hierarchical frameworks which governed the institutional private view, the composition of attendees for *Cocaine Orgasm* was a mix of the familiar 'free beer chasers' you'd seen three times that week, critics and musers, a few homeless who had come in off the streets, together with a smattering of the official art world who were starting to wake up to the wider DIY scene. As Steve Rushton recalls these private views were more than a party; they were part of a greater sophisticated strategy to ensure that BANK were at the very centre of the DIY scene and the focus of discussion (Interview, 2022). These were events which you could not afford to miss, a place for dialogue and connectivity amongst otherwise disparate factions of the emerging contemporary art world. The night didn't stop when the Becks ran out at the private view. The after party resumed at the local pub – usually the now legendary 'Bricklayers Arms'

on Rivington Street. Whilst the drink continued to flow, the conversation was very much focussed on the exhibition. BANK had worked their magic, they had pulled off a great show together with an opening event of epic proportions and they were for that moment the talk of the town, trumping Saatchi at his own marketing game and undermining the greater curational narcissism. William's recalls leaving the private view and spotting an expensive red sports car slowly making its way down Rivington Street. Its driver – probably en route from the neighbouring City. Its crassness became the target of ridicule by the tipsy private view crowd piling into the road. Was this, she muses, part of the show? The lines between art and the everyday were blurred, exactly as BANK intended. During our interview, Simon Bedwell expressed a real sense of darkness which followed the opening night of a BANK exhibition. The event was over, and the mass audience dissipated, replaced by the casual visitor who now soberly perused the art world according to the conventions of white cube etiquette. The joy had gone, the stunts were over, and BANK were relegated to gallery ushers occupied only by the construction of what would be their next curatorial masterpiece (Bedwell Interview, 2023).

BANK knew the power of art as a form of entertainment. Though it was and remains for many agents in the system the ultimate blasphemy; pleasure, fun and the ultimate entertainment value ushered in a new democracy for culture (Roberts, 1996). BANK didn't especially care for the narratives of 'access to the arts' and 'art for everyone'. This they left to the middle rankings of the Arts Council to muse over. Moreover, '*Relational Aesthetics*' in all its seriousness when set against BANK's practice was little more than a parody of sociability. Echoing more the rave scene, everyone and anyone came to a BANK event. All who came were viable and vital components to a night in which they belonged. BANK cared about art as part of the spectacle, an event of memorable portions, thereby ensuring art became a central element in the construction of the best night out in town.

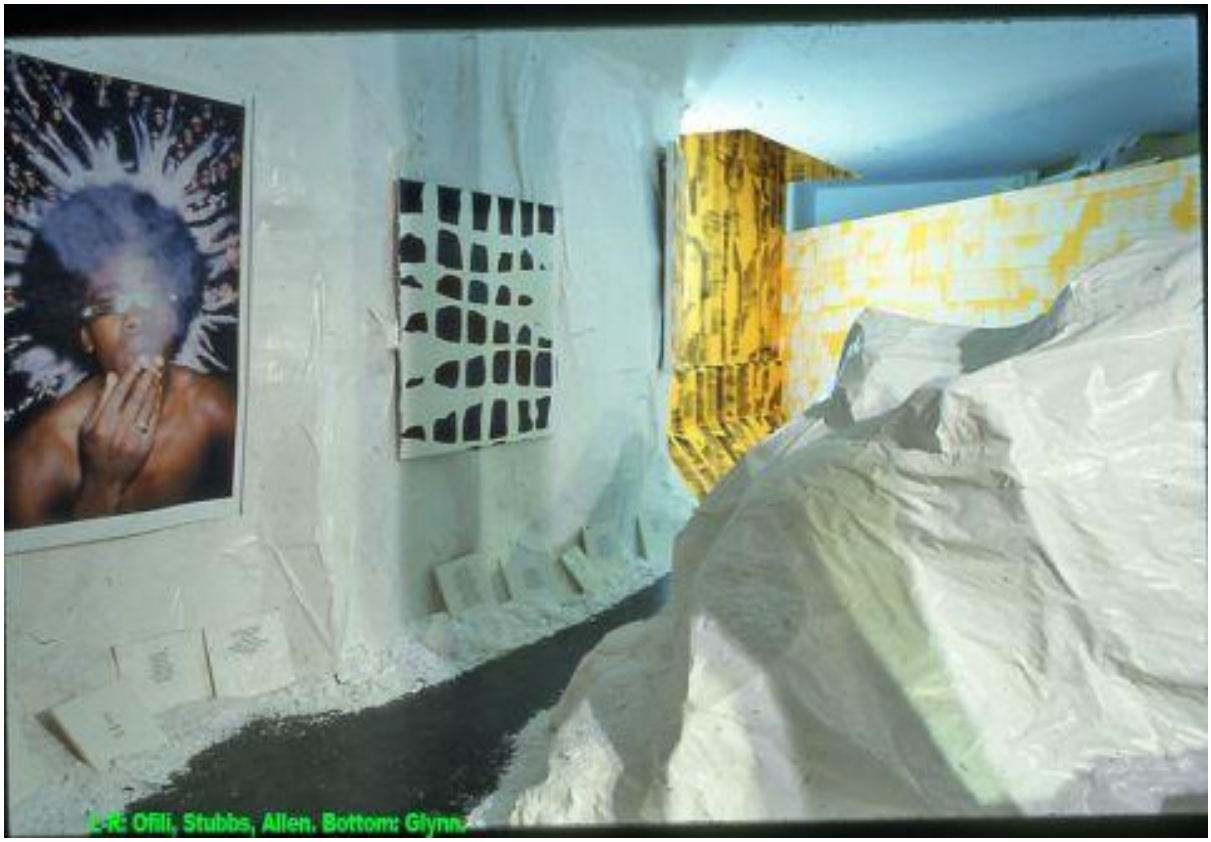

Figure 3. Studio Shot from Cocaine Orgasm. Source https://www.a-n.co.uk/media/3399688/

Conclusion

> "BANKS surly, self-destructive, self-conscious, introspective attitude – combined as it is with critical intelligence and a flair for spotting weaknesses in the art system – is what will make winners in the end." (Collings, 2000, p.95)

BANK were an arch operation. Employing meta-fictions, inconsistent stances and systems of belief, they set out as a gang to expose the market-led, professionalised art world which was rising around them. Fluctuating from raging critics one day to conservers of high art the next, they ducked and dived along the fringes of the art world,

poised to expose and ridicule every affectation they encountered. Aside from their thuggish swagger, access to the BANK scene was very open if not immediately welcoming. They wanted their work to be liked and seen, and like every rock star, they wanted to play to the greatest possible crowd. Throwing the largest party became a vehicle by which to attract an amalgamation of the art world whilst paying no regard to individual status. This was a new platform in which art was celebrated and considered in a loud and vibrant atmosphere. Art was entertainment, it belonged in the everyday. The impact of what I have termed an 'un-curatorial' practice, has been significantly undervalued in the literature around curatorship. Whilst consistently asserting their authority and curatorial style, BANK were highly collaborative with a radical cross-section of artists. Their employment of silliness in the titling of their exhibitions and seemingly slipshod methods of creation and presentation of art were more than acts of resistance. These were conscious tools with which to contest the authority of the institutional art world and the omnipotent assentation of the curator. By creating a platform of their own, combined with a self-authored critical media, a micro art world was proposed, which was edgy, engageable and exciting. Official art world power structures were exploded as the extended invitation to belonging within the BANK art scene was cast wide. This was little short of a revolutionary practice.

In the next chapter, I shall discuss the concurrent curatorial activities of Joshua Compston and his project space Factual Nonsense. In the evolution of the East End art scene, Joshua has frequently been cited as the central protagonist. Operating in a distinctly more formal mode to BANK, there was a great deal of overlap between their practice which I shall explore. This said, Joshua's vision was prescriptive, via his manifesto and evangelistic personality. For him, art was wasted within the institution, alone, irrelevant and speaking only to the converted. To disrupt this conservatism was his life's work, for art was first and foremost a social tool, a vehicle for the transformation and reinvention of the everyday. This was a radical vision and highly seductive not only

for my own practice but for generations of students, artists and curators since (Wilson in Baldwin, 2024).

Figure. 4. Private View Invitation *'Cocaine Orgasm'*

Source www.john-russell.org.

Chapter 7. Joshua Compston and Factual Nonsense (FN): 'The Principle of Salt within the Sugar'.

> "FN, purveyors of the 'Notorious Dream'. 'The Notorious Dream' is basically sites of perfection, those perfections formed of collusions between art, advertising and commerce in real time." (Joshua Compston. Transcript of recorded conversation: Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard with Joshua Compston. Recorded 20th 21st August 1994)

Introduction

This chapter explores the ideological and curatorial stance of Joshua Compston and his self-styled 'creative hub' Factual Nonsense (FN) (1991-1996). Joshua pursued a singular vision to upturn the systems of the art world and instil art and culture as part of daily operations. The FN shop, club, real estate and funeral service were documented in the FN manifesto. As self-appointed chairman of FN Holdings, this quasi-totalitarian operation was the manifestation of a consuming passion to effect social change through art. It directly impacted many of the key themes discussed in this thesis: the creation of East London as an artist community, independent strategies for a greater democratisation of culture and the employment of the social site in the greater mediation of art. This, more than any other single factor, directly resonated and influenced my future curatorial activities. I worked with Joshua as an intern at FN, forming a deep friendship during the last five months of his life (November 1995 – March 1996)**.** I will go on to argue that FN's unique proposal for the democratisation of culture, whilst having precedence in Modernism and a nostalgia for a bygone age, was a blueprint for a new way of cultural consumption. Joshua imprinted his vision onto the post-industrial wasteland of East London, preparing the area for those in the DIY art scene who were to follow. (Dama, 2014; Turk Interview; Rayner, 2018; Tonkin, 2000; Lawford, 2019). Shoreditch and Hoxton were to be Joshua's first 'site of perfection' for the

realisation of the FN vision, a holistic integration of art into daily practice, to be executed on a global scale under the operational and ideological banner of Factual Nonsense.

Ahead of writing this chapter, I spoke with a number of people who knew Joshua across different time scales: his biographers Jeremy Cooper (also the landlord of FN) and Darren Coffield, and the artist and his childhood mentor, artist David Taborn (whose work Joshua later represented), along with close artist friends, Gavin Turk, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, Sue Webster, and indirect observers and journalists from the FN period. This afforded me access to a co-constructed account of his thinking, vision and curatorial projects, which took place prior to my encountering him. I gained access to previously unseen transcriptions of conversations between Joshua and artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard from their tape-recorded discussions with him in the early 1990s. (Appendix 1). My autoethnographic accounts are related to the period I knew him and the subsequent legacy of FN. This chapter contributes a revised enquiry into the principles of Factual Nonsense and their ongoing impact and realisation within the creative sphere.

Factual Nonsense was a short-lived venture and remained largely unrealised at the time of Joshua's passing (aged 25). This said, this is not a story of failure. The impact and prophetic iterations that FN proposed towards a society which embodies art and culture warrant greater discussion. Unlike many of his peers, Joshua wasn't content with producing a DIY curatorial strategy for art in the early 1990s scene; his aim was towards the establishment of something more fundamental, the 'Notorious Dream'. Factual Nonsense was Joshua Compston; Joshua was the artist (Gilbert & George in Cohen, 1996.), and in turn, Joshua the artist was the 'art' (King in Coffield, 2013, Emin in Cooper, 2000)**.** Factual Nonsense was Compston's conviction, a basecamp from which to launch something of a cultural revolution that harmonised both the art world's defensive barriers and the cultural ambiguity of the person on the street. He strove to engage all walks of life in a new design for the everyday, a fusion of art, entertainment, media, advertising and real estate (Coffield, 2013; Cooper,

2000). It was an absolutist vision, mapped out in precise detail as the interview materials testify. “FN (is a) way of life rather like the Marlboro man way of life” (Compston 1994. In conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard 20/9/94. NP.). There was no uncertainty or wavering in his vision. Akin to much of the DIY scene of that time, Joshua’s proposal was borne out of frustration but one which extended beyond the realms of artists vying to have their voices heard and work recognised. For him, the situation was much more fundamental.

> “I think our time suffers from a massive sense of purposelessness, a massive sense of hopelessness and a massive sense of indifference and terminal boredom”, (Recorded conversation: Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, 1994).

The change he envisaged was not desirable - it was vital. This vision had a fundamental impact on creating the conditions for an independent artistic scene to develop in Shoreditch, as I will go on to discuss. Though posthumous biographies of Joshua have been written (Coffield, D. (2013), Cooper, J. (2000), my aim in this chapter is to closely examine some of the strategies he sought to employ in order to integrate art into the everyday, in order to extract the greater curatorial methodology and its immediate and ongoing impact. As his vision was fundamental to his personality, I will initially convey my and his friend’s experiences of Joshua, for together with the greater project of Factual Nonsense, they were singular and inseparable.

Posh Josh: A Brief History

Emanating from a more than comfortable upper-middle-class background, Joshua was, to all accounts, an angry, defiant and violent little boy. David Taborn recalls a studio visit from Joshua’s parents and the six-year-old Joshua cut short by the child wielding copper pipes around the space (Interview, 2024). His personality was so acute by the age of eight that it warranted a whole chapter in a child psychology book (Emily Compston in Coffield, 2013). Though I can’t recall or identify the title, I do remember upon my first meeting with Joshua he

kindly handed me the book for more extensive reading. He wanted me to take stock of what I may be taking on. Later in life, Joshua had flirted with the idea of being an artist, having attended Camberwell School of Art (Foundation Course, 1988), but as soon transpired, the manufacturing of products, albeit cultural products, was a too limiting role for him (Coffield Interview, 2024). Having then toyed with revolutionary ambitions, he sought out the guerrilla forces in El Salvador to 'fight to the death' (Cooper, 2000). He was, however, quickly blindsided by an affair with an oligarch's daughter there (Gott, 1995; Cooper 2000; Coffield 2013; Taborn, 2024) and returned to London to undertake an undergraduate degree in art history at the Courtauld Institute, a move more fitting to his class and background. In typical fashion, he was soon overcome with disillusionment with the institution. "A few months in, I was in horror at the deficiency of the students and the organisation" (Compston in Coffield, 2013. p.34).

It was typical of his character that Joshua did not simply endure his experience at the Institute, he challenged it head-on. Infuriated by the wholesale absence of living artists in the Institute's prestigious collection, he actively contacted potential patrons from *The Times* 500 Rich List, asking for funding to establish a collection of contemporary art at the Courtauld, unbeknown to the management there (Coffield 2013; Cooper 2000; Gaskin, 2020). Whilst berated by the then director, Michael Kauffmann (see Appendix 2), who took umbrage at his misuse of the Courtauld brand for fundraising purposes~~,~~ he continued in his endeavours. His efforts resulted in the launch of the '*Courtauld Loan Collection'*, including blue chip living artists of the calibre of Gary Hume, Damien Hirst, and Gilbert and George (who soon became champions of Compston's vision). Aged just 19, he had single-handedly launched a substantial collection of contemporary art, donated or on loan to the Courtauld at a reception of over a thousand people. The whole project was financed by The Duchess of Westminster and art patron Jeremy Fry ~~(~~Coffield, 2013; Cooper, 2000; Wilson,1995) and remains an annually renewed feature curated by students at the Courtauld to this day.

I'm sure his future in the commercial art market looked mapped out by this point. The right background, entrepreneurial skills belying his age, impeccable connections, PR acumen and a seeming ability to charm the birds from the trees. Sotheby's must have been dusting down a green leather-topped desk in anticipation. However, this colossal achievement was for Joshua rooted less in his personal gain but rather in setting a clear example of single-minded cultural change. This was the guiding principle for the remainder of his life. He was setting an example for others to follow: that art can effect change, that change must start with individual action. The last thing that Joshua was destined for was to become another charmer to mingle among the art markets, he had the greater business of Factual Nonsense to unleash upon the world.

Joshua was a man who did not understand nor care about danger (Coffield interview, 2024). There were no boundaries to be crossed, and the more intense and debauched the experience (Taborn Interview, 2014), the more he sought it out. There have been many stories of Joshua appearing with a gun or flares at a private view, not to mention the dynamite, which was recovered by the army from Factual Nonsense after his death, intended to relieve the world of some unsightly sculpture in Liverpool Street he had taken umbrage with (Coffield, 2013). It has been suggested by some whom I spoke to that he was on the Autism / Asperger's spectrum, though testing was not a practice in the 1970s (David Taborn; Darren Coffield, 2024). This, coupled with a colossal physical strength made him volatile in the world, something he was aware of and keen to hide from public view (Interview with Turk, 2024; Coffield, 2024; Cooper, 2024 and Taborn, 2024). How could he lead society towards his self-styled cultural revolution whilst laying his extremes of personality and physicality before the world? I asked several collaborators if Joshua liked himself, to which the general answer was negative. In my perception, he was trapped within his undiagnosed condition and the subsequent drivers, which afforded him poignancy and distinction on the one hand and a binary unwavering worldview on the other. "He was self-terrorized" is the viewpoint of his friend and mentor David Taborn (Interview, 2024), something I encountered

frequently in his final months when he would express in a passionate rage how abandoned he felt by the many he had helped along the way. Joshua asked for one thing from those around them: to be listened to and ideally agreed with. Towards the end of his time, many were impervious to his thoughts. Jeremy Cooper describes Joshua's compulsion for reception succinctly, "More than anything else, Joshua Compston wanted to stand among friends together looking out onto life and to know they all saw the same world" (2000. p.73).

The subsequent construction of 'Joshua Compston: Chairman of FN Holdings' could, in many ways, serve as an alter-ego for Joshua. A version of him with clarity of vision, consistency of thinking and implied business skills to ignite real change in a world he found at best banal and at worst redundant. Depending on the day you encountered him, his persona slipped between the two incarnations. As discussed with Gavin Turk, Joshua was a near-impossible individual to characterise (Interview, 2024). Surveying the limited literature around him, the dominant readings focus on him as an 'Impresario' (Coffield interview, 2024; Cohen, 1996), 'visionary' (Forsyth and Pollard interview, 2018; Cooper interview, 2024), and 'persistent' (Webster interview, 2020) to the point of 'Irritating' (Birch in *Haden-Guest* NA, 2014). Though again, it is difficult to navigate between these viewpoints as they are tainted by the circumstances of his early death. The Joshua I briefly knew was passionate, generous in his thinking and a gentle soul within a manic frame. Extra - ordinary.

Much like BANK's efforts, he was ultimately to join their ranks of cultural failed entrepreneurs (Coffield, Interview 2024, Turk Interview, Cooper 2024, Haden-Guest, 2014, Ellen 1999 widely discussed in Coffield 2013). Though an ideological ground breaker, poor financial acumen now seems almost requisite for the true cultural pioneers of that time, allowing them personal growth outside of the rhythms of the art market and their curatorial directives. Business planning and financial management were not Joshua's strengths, as Coffield contextualises, "if you gave him a thousand pounds, he would spend it on his friends, on drinks and fine food only to be penniless the next day" (Interview, 2024). Unlike his popular

perception as a ‘property developer’ of sorts (Interview with Julian Stallabrass, 2022), monetary gain was a desire, though not his motivation nor his gift. His day-to-day life was hand-to-mouth, with meals taken in the local ‘caf’ (sic) and eggs boiled in a kettle in the back room of his gallery. This was alleviated only if a wealthy or generous friend invited him out for a meal. Though this adds to the romanticism of his story, I recollect that he was mainly living in a state of poverty, which greatly contributed to his mounting depression and drive for change.

Factual Nonsense: Towards a New Bohemia

> “…the FN butchers, the FN baker, the FN candlestick maker”
>
> (Compston in conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, 20th September 1994)

Joshua’s frustration with the banality of society was equally applicable to the state and production of art by the close of the 1980s. Due to the conspiracy of poor education and neglect of art in the media, the conditions he perceived afforded an “art that is able to be” but “not able to speak” (Compston in Conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard. 20th – 21st August 1994). The result of this scenario, he believed, was a set of conditions for art which divorced its function and meaning from effective discourse with the person on the street.

Figure 5. Former site of Factual Nonsense at 44 Charlotte Road (Courtesy of Jeremy Cooper)

Trailing the organisational structures and theoretical traits of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde, Joshua's thinking was largely informed by early modernism and particularly the revolutionary claims of the Vorticists (Coffield, 2013; Cooper, 2000). He longed for a time when art was less concerned with formative issues, the 'art-ness of art', instead being embedded in society, entertainment and commerce (Coffield, 2013; Cooper, 2000). His prophetic writings extended into all iterations of Factual Nonsense, from preview invitations to press releases. David Taborn identifies two key roots to his idiosyncratic writing style. Firstly, it was, in many ways, the manifestation of his thinking written in a verbatim style. Secondly, it was a deliberate device to command the attention of the reader to work hard towards an understanding of what Factual Nonsense stood for. Like many of his

predecessors in the early Twentieth Century, his vision was teetering on the edge of brilliance and insanity. Former Courtauld tutor of Joshua, Professor Sarah Wilson, traces the genesis of these concerns to his undergraduate days when he consumed the ideologies of the Futurists and Dada in ravenous proportions (email 24th June, 2024). He took them, she recalls, at face value, models for living which he felt vital to the present day. David Taborn further recalls talking to a young Joshua about Surrealism and how instantly he engaged with their concerns (Interview, 2024).

Central to FN's mantra was the notion of 'site'. Art had to be prioritised and embedded into every aspect of daily life to penetrate society in an absolute measure. The 'site' to Joshua extended into the realms of "magazines, television, large scale billboard format advertising and… within all the streets" (Compston in conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard 20-21 August 1994. NP.). Perhaps an urban architect at heart (Coffield Interview, 2024), Joshua forswore the transfiguration of geographic sites into FN towns as his ultimate endgame, [to create] "Perfect spaces as special solutions to given problems of daily life" (Coffield Interview, 2024). Central to the construction of these spaces was the eradication of the impersonal edge of town retail parks and a return to the local high street run by individual tradespeople under the banner of Factual Nonsense. As sites for human connection and dialogue, they were, in Joshua's view, an essential component of his vision: to re-empower the individual to take ownership of their community. In its hybrid state, he sought to "build a cultural, critical and commercial force as a corporation" (Compston in conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard 20th September 1994. NP.). Each industry and service would be branded with the FN logo followed by the proprietor's name connected to that individual business. By impacting society at all key strata, the population would, he envisaged, be subsequently propelled into one of two positions. The absorption of an FN way of life or ignited to rethink their own terms and conditions for living (Compston in conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard 20th September 1994. NP.). This was in many ways Compston's 'Notorious Dream', where art connected with commerce through advertising,

branding and the built environment into the everyday to create a society that was engaged, stimulated and ultimately entertained.

The impact of the ‘special sites’ would, he believed, attract funding and partnership from both the commercial sector and local government. An early resident of Shoreditch in its dilapidated days (1991), the East End was, for Joshua, the most precious of his ‘special sites’, something a manifest destiny (Gaskin, 2020). To this end, he has subsequently been cited as the catalyst for the East London art scene and its subsequent gentrification (Turk Interview, 2024; Coffield, 2013; Cooper, 2000; Harris, 2012.) Shoreditch was raw yet fertile territory which he identified whilst still a student as his designated operational landscape. (Coffield Interview, 2024). As he stated in his self-authored text for the *Life/Live* exhibition in Paris (see chapter five) with unwavering certainty, he was embarking upon a solo mission:

> “Establishment of a commercial idealist exchange mechanism, a corporation that forms and promotes products and services that bridge the gap between art, advertising and manufacturing. Under its NEP policy, FN anticipates the establishment of subsidiary companies within advertising, art and curatorial services, entertainment’s brand name retailing and popular publishing.” (Compston in ‘*LIVE’,* 1996. p.63)

Within his recorded conversations with Forsyth and Pollard, Joshua is insistent that within a ‘four-year’ time frame, FN was to operate on a grandiose, multi-national scale. An operation which was a hybrid of Warhol’s Factory and Richard Branson’s ‘Virgin’ enterprise (Coffield Interview, 2024). Addressing the aesthetic deficiencies in retail, real estate, advertising and entertainment, FN would operate along the lines of the Bloomsbury group’s Omega Workshops Ltd, where aspects of cultural production would be outsourced to artists and craftspeople under the watchful eye of the Chairman (Coffield Interview, 2024). Artists and

friends Langlands and Bell, who were close to Joshua, once questioned the need behind his vision for change:

> “What exactly needs redesigning (in society)? “
>
> [they asked]
>
> “Everything needs to be redesigned in life.”
>
> [Came his reply]
>
> (Coffield Interview, 2024).

The ‘transnational’ scale of his vision is easy to ridicule as delusional, and for some, a world designed and run by artists is something of a traumatic concept. However, this scope was essential to effect a complete transformation, not for the intellectual classes but for the women and men on the street. The working person, he foresaw, would be greatly enriched by their proximity to art and culture as an integrated part of their everyday products and services. He was fighting, in his mind, for a better society. In rare video footage, Joshua stakes his case, which warrants full transcription:

> “… a form of culture, that can be ready-made, copied, understood, become part of the process of life within all communities as opposed to encouraging or wanting to help the assimilation of art objects as such. I’m more interested in the idealisation or aestheticization of daily life than I am the guarding of critical high standards within the art establishment itself. My real test of strength and virtue, my reward, would be to lever the general population to a better understand of that which is art, and that is not the art within the galleries but that which has become part of their lives. Better housing, better factories, a better landscape… a better Woolworths”
>
> (Coffield, D. (2013)

Joshua never shied away from his class background even though it identified him as ‘other’ and, vis-a-vis much of the London art scene at the time, branded him somewhat ‘uncool’ (Turk Interview, 2024). Plus fours, silk waistcoats, and handmade shoes re-leathered between the Compston generations were his trademark look – fitting in was the last thing on his mind. David Taborn perceives this lack of self-awareness as part of his condition. Further, he perceives the brilliance of Joshua’s alien qualities while marking him out within society as central to his ability to singularly envision the FN society he strove for (Interview, 2024). Strategically, I am sure Joshua recognised the value of his class in its ability to connect with potential donors and investors, as evidenced in his construction of the Courtauld Loan Collection. Further, his credentials afforded him the status of (un) official translator of the machinations of the emerging contemporary art scene in the 1990s for the establishment classes who were slow in their desire to travel East at that time (Rushton Interview, 2022). However, the question remains: what did a young man who has mainly lived a life of privilege really understand about the working classes? Their daily life? Their relationship with art and each other? Was this just another example of what Nathalie Olalia terms ‘working class symbolism’ (2019, p.46.), which, as discussed in the literature review, was an increasingly common gesture on the curatorial and theoretical world stage?

I believe Joshua made a presumption of understanding on behalf of society, as many young bucks arising from his background have done before and since. However, his was not a clear-cut case of privilege assuming power. ‘Posh Josh’ (Turk Interview, 2024) was no regular ‘toff’ in my experience. I put this question to Darren Coffield who detailed examples of how Joshua would join soup kitchens and talk to the homeless there. Further, he noted how Joshua, in his fearless guise, would go to Afro-Caribbean and all Asian male clubs besuited in tweed and win over an initially very hostile crowd (Interview, 2024). David Taborn concurs recalling an instance when Joshua went to Brixton to buy cannabis on one occasion, only to have his money taken and the door closed in his face. Rather than retreat and reflect, he knocked on the flat door which was populated by a large number of young

Afro-Caribbean men, stating with ‘Withnailian’ (sic) swagger. “I have paid for my 8th, and I demand my 8th” (Interview, 2024). Astonishingly, he was successful in his demands and left unscathed. As charming as these anecdotes remain, they ultimately reflect his fearlessness much more than they afford him a genuine insight into everyday life. This said, his existence during the *Factual Nonsense* years was, as discussed, very much on the breadline, and his visits to soup kitchens were less the act of a schadenfreude and more those of a genuinely desperate individual.

Joshua, however, never struck me as particularly fetishist in his perception of the working classes. Despite his aesthetic choices and occasional well-heeled social encounters at a friend’s expense, much of his day-to-day was spent at the local pub and cheap cafes. Many of the friends who I saw visit towards the end of his days were not from a monied background but people he had met in the area calling by for a chat. Joshua invested a lot of time in discourse with everyday people, including myself, with the full understanding that we had nothing of commercial value to offer in return. What I believe is more vital to an understanding of Factual Nonsense in terms of class and society is an underlying hankering to a bygone time, one characteristically “Closer to Dickens than Trollope” (Taborn interview, 2024). Joshua’s referencing of the ‘factory’ (see above) as the site for working labour was less a reflection of ignorance as he did, after all, reside in the post-industrial aftermath of early 1990s East London, rather it was something of a physical memorial to a now dead age. The factory setting reflected for him a set of conditions and ideas in which the stratification of class and society was ordered and clear, where one might say everyone knew their place. As noted by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard in their taped conversations (with and together about Joshua), his vision had an underlying yearning for a set of traditional values to: “Convince people that they can invest in this little English myth” (Iain Forsyth, 1994). There was an internal logic to class in this nostalgic worldview, which worked towards societal ends, each doing their bit via the factory shift or philanthropic gesture. Within a society which harboured the values of this era, the imposition of the FN ideology would not only be largely

uncontested but, he believed, heartily welcomed. The barriers to a better society for Joshua were not hinged on class division; it was the concentration of power in the multi-nationals who, beyond monitory gain, “do not have a burning desire inside them” (Compston in conversation 20th September 1994. NP.) resulting in the overwhelming ‘banality of society’. Whilst eulogising a utopian view of society, Joshua was also highly alert to contemporary conditions and their cultural failings:

> “I think there has been an incredible and immense erosion of boundaries across the stratum within the last 20 or 30 years, but one thing that led me to my dismissal of a completely burning bright modernist ethic was the realisation that much art anyway which I was reading as modernist, actually has a degree of postmodernism within it … I think that postmodernism, when it becomes a style, a practice, a way of life is unutterably wrong because what it is doing is academically condensing what is merely available in daily life and making it into an art form of epically boring proportions because the real thing in itself is far more interesting. Popular culture is far more of a come-on in its raw, un-edited un-art processed state than it is when it gets into the hands of an artist or an architect or a musician.”
> (Compston in conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, 20th – 21st August 1994)

Integral to this argument, a revival of historical standards was not only necessary to the enrichment of society but also vital to the protection of art and culture from inevitably self-imploding. Perhaps there is some element of what Stallabrass identified as an Urban Pastoral (1999) at play in Joshua’s ‘Notorious Dream’? Joshua was forthcoming on the subject, “What I want to achieve is more in tune with the life of working-class communities a hundred years ago” (Compston in Barklem, 1995). Though I, and others, never encountered any resulting fetishisation of these same classes (Cooper Interview, 2024, Pollard and Forsyth, 1994), we can perhaps speculate that due to his mental health, he took people

more at face value than is common practice (Taborn Interview, 2024). Having spent a nervous evening in The Bricklayers Arms with Joshua, during which he earnestly tried to convince a fellow drinker from a clearly far-right persuasion to see the error of his ways, it was clear to me that whilst one could easily pick away at aspects of his theorising, I was never in doubt in the sincerity of belief and intention.

FN: A Forecast for the Future

The branding of FN was a fundamental part of the realisation of its vision. One of the closest people to Joshua was typographer Tom Shaw (Coffield, 2013). Together, they devised the logo, manifesto and invitations for FN, which were stark and littered with Joshua's streams of consciousness thinking on art and society. The inspiration for the logo and accompanying typeset was a scavenged acquisition of a series of posters from a former Union of Farm Workers headquarters which Joshua had broken into during his teens. The poster read:

(Figure 6 the image has been removed for copyright reasons.) (Figure 7. The FN logo courtesy of David Taborn)

'**DANGER! FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE**'

(In conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, 20th and 21st August, 1994)

Through his fastidious attention to detail, the logo and branding of FN were distinct and compelling. In many ways, he was prototyping the potential which bound the roles of art and branding, which informed future discussions around the creative industries later in the

1990s. The image, style and ethos of FN was a compulsive part of the concept, after all, this was intended to impact each one of us. It was stark, memorable, playful, neo-totalitarian even. This is borne out by a misunderstanding of some residents misreading the FN as an inversion 'NF' on the T-shirts of volunteers at his events (Coffield, 2013). It was a critical part of his thinking to develop the strongest of brands for FN as they were, he envisaged, to be the aesthetic currency of his towns and cities, achieving celebrity status in their own right (In conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, 20th – 21st August 1994).

One of the key FN projects was the 'Banner Project'. Advertising was a key site for FN with its viral qualities and dependency on the reinvigoration of everyday items. The business model for the banners worked simply on selling advertising space as revenue. To summarise, they were to be made of industrial plastics for longevity, 50 ft x 50 ft in scale for visibility and have an ensured duration through the acquisition of planning permission. The content of each banner would be a mixture of a slogan, "aggressive" or "idealist" in nature, devised by an invited 'celebrity', which Joshua defines as widely ranging from artist to politician. On the reverse would be advertising copy and images. His business planning, as far as he had one, estimated 100k towards the R&D of the project and acquisition of space and a further 500k to roll the project out (In conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, 20th – 21st August 1994). It is typical, perhaps, that there were no projected income figures in the source material. The co-existence of radical but inevitably contradictory messages would be the key capital in the banner project media success. Joshua had no interest in what the messaging might contain. This is a feature of his laissez-faire curatorial style, similar to BANK's. Further, it is not unreasonable to assume that the more provocative and contradictory the content, the better, echoing Joshua's discursive style. Much like his written word, gestures, statements and provocations would work towards the general awakening of the society to which he strove. To some extent, the merger of art, advertising and real estate was a template for the later evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility and the development of Business Improvement Districts (BIDS), the latter introduced by the Blair

government in April 2001 (UK Parliament). These measures, in a more popularist guise, reflected the FN example of corporations reinvesting into the cities they benefit from through the funding of aesthetic attraction, be they ‘artist painted sheep’ or the creation of the ‘city beach’ for example. FN was something of a living version of Michael Landy’s monumental installation, the fictionalised people cleansing company, *Scrapheap Services* (1995). In Landy’s depiction of the legacy of Thatcher’s reign, which deemed much of the lower classes in society as dispensable, the totalitarian operation is characterised by a stark red and white branding throughout. It serves as a visual depiction of municipal street cleaning services in an FN society.

Figure 8. Michael Landy, Scrapheap Services, 1995

Figure 9. *Scrapheap Services*, 1995 Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 1996. Both courtesy of the Thomas Dane Gallery

In her policy essay demonstrating the value of arts and culture in driving economic growth via BIDS, Caroline Davies (2013) draws upon the wealth of post-millennium publications that have attempted to analyse the centrality of arts and culture in the creation of geographic distinction. Much of this is an elaboration of the central thesis of Richard Florida’s publication “The Rise of the *Creative Class*” (2002), which questions the clustering of creative individuals within cities and their greater role in shaping the cityscape (p.232). The value

system which cultural integration into towns and cities is summarised simplistically here by Landry (2006):

> "First, with their aesthetic focus, they draw attention to quality and beauty…Second, the arts challenge us to ask questions about ourselves as a place. Finally, art projects can simply create enjoyment." (2006, p.252)

In the focus of the curatorial gaze, daily life is either paraded for arts amusement (see discussion on Sierra's work in chapter one) or confined only to audiences with aesthetic education, such initiatives fall sadly short of the FN hallmark of deep cultural integration into society, "The dream on offer is one of long-term regearing, re-presentation, rebuilding and unrelenting continuous marketing within the social, cultural and economic spheres" (In conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, 20th – 21st August 1994). A repeated failing of much of public sector arts when it aims to address audience engagement, it seems to me that it does not aim to seek societal change. Rather, it serves to sweeten moments amidst daily banality. Though inconsistent in many ways, the 'Notorious Dream' set real standards for change through a sincere belief in the transformative capability of art, which in the hands of council administrators, bureaucrats and introspective curators, consistently fails to be recognised.

Joshua's vision, whilst focusing on the revitalisation of goods and services, was pre-emptive of what was to become deemed as the fourth industrial revolution towards the end of the 1990s, otherwise known as the '*Experience Economy'* (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). In this new transactional wave, the mediation of the goods and services becomes a vital factor. "An experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event" (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Engagement with the individual was a skill Joshua was blessed with, and his 'Fetes', which I go on to discuss, were transformative on a number of levels. Artists premiered future successful techniques and radical gestures, such as the mass outdoor

occupation and transformation of urban geography. Ultimately, we were being told that "art doesn't need to appear as art to still be art" (Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard interview 20th – 21st August, 1994). This final point being key to the legacy of FN.

The London DIY scene of the early 1990s can be seen as the necessary laboratory conditions for the ensuing business theorising by the likes of Florida and Pine and Gilmore. This was discussed at the time by Simon Ford:

> "This emphasis on temporary exhibitions, short-lived commercial enterprises, art consultancies and parties, corresponds to a shift towards a culture of service industries, where what Is sold is less likely to be goods than the experience of an object of a service." (Ford, in Occupational Hazard. 1996. p.133)

Though unrealised on the intended scale, FN was the touchpaper for this wave of experimentation with the modes and structures of art manifesting into a new economic, social and curatorial model. One in which art was to be consumed en masse, via the principle of guising 'the salt in the sugar' (Compston, 1994, NP.). The essential remaining element in Joshua's hybrid economy was the power and potential of entertainment to ensure the mass consumption of a new life, an FN way of life.

The Fetes: All the Fun of the Fair

There is no coincidence in the parallel rise of the DIY art scene and the greater gentrification of Shoreditch during the 1990s (Hubbard, 2016). Cited as a catalyst of this process were Factual Nonsense's curated outdoor events between 1993-95 (Harris, 2011; Rayner, 2018). As a public manifestation of his 'Notorious Dream', Joshua organised two school-fair-cum-art-events, which he named *A Fete Worse Than Death* (FWTD I & II). Both 'Fetes' took place on the streets of Shoreditch in 1993 and 1994, followed by a more staged for television event entitled, *The Hanging Picnic,* an inversion of the book title *Picnic at Hanging Rock*

(Lindsay, 1967) in 1995**.** The artist-led stalls and performances featured at these events have been extensively detailed in both Joshua's biographies and elsewhere. So, they will be addressed here mainly in terms of their impact rather than content (see Coffield, 2013; Cooper, 2000.). The economic principle underlying these all-day events was simple, Joshua would invite artists to hire a stall at a nominal rate of around twenty-five pounds (Coffield, 2013). In true 'un-curatorial' style Joshua led only on the brief; 'the village fete of yester-year', with the precise content left in the safe hands of the artists. The first of the Fete's (July 31st 1993) showcased, now legendary performances and interventions by a mix of artists drawn from both the yBa umbrella and the DIY scene. Most famously perhaps was Damien Hirst and Angus Fairhurst dressed as clowns offering the assembled crowds the option of making their own spin painting (a premiere outing for Hirsts lucrative future concept) or a private viewing of their genitalia decorated as it was by the wonderful Leigh Bowery (FWTD. I). Both were valued at the relative bargain price of 50p, even considering inflation. (Cooper, 2000; Coffield, 2013; Reiner, 2008). According to Hirst the option of the genitalia decorator was the greater earner on the day (cited in *Daily Beast*, 2014). Gavin Turk in haste, took the elements of a sock, some sand and a piece of guttering to run his popular - if impossible to win - 'bat a rat' stall. The first of the Fetes was a modest affair, attended by around a hundred or so largely art regulars connected to Joshua and the wider scene (Cooper interview; Turk interview; Coffield interview, 2024). The greater significance of the Fetes, however, remains in their trialling of the FN concept by embedding art within entertainment and cutting it loose on the streets for all to encounter. At the end of the first Fete, high on all-day drinking and equally intoxicated by the spirit of the day, Joshua's friends raised him on their shoulders, parading him down Charlotte Road, chanting the anthem of "Long live Joshua" (Cooper, 2000). This was to be his 'Apollinaire moment' a role which he had seemingly strived his whole life to assume, "This age needs a brave and fun 'Hero of modern art' such as Apollinaire. I will try to fulfil such a role" (Compston in Dama, 2014. NP; Compston in Coffield, 2013. p.16)

By the time of the second Fete, July 30th, 1994, the notoriety and marketing zeal of FN had begun to take hold. Branded as ‘The Hybrid Pop Culture Extravaganza’, Joshua was by now chanting the FN mantra loud and clear. With an estimated 4000 people in attendance (Cooper, 2000; Coffield, 2013), the site expanded across Shoreditch into Hoxton Square. A whole host of, now, household name artists (See Coffield, 2013 for details) took part: Tracey Emin hosted ‘Mouse Roulette’, Sue Webster erected cardboard cutouts of Gilbert & George’s head, which you could post your face through and have your photo taken (Interview with Sue Webster, 2020). Arguably, the event gained its subsequent iconic status through the staging of the final performance of the day: “The appearance of the late Leigh Bowery's eccentric "pop group", Minty - a performance in which Bowery mimed giving birth to his wife through the ripped gusset of his tights - assured the necessary little sprinkle of "shock factor". (Bracewell, 2004).

The Fetes were something a hotch-potch of silliness filtered through each artist’s practice, set within an overall structure which was blurring out of view as the hours and alcohol passed. “I think it is that sort of juxtaposition thing where you can put together a lot of things that you wouldn't ordinarily or wouldn't necessarily think belong together and put them together and they can make an amazing ‘meal’. Yeah, that was the word.” (Gavin Turk Interview, 2024). Within Turk’s account lies perhaps one of the fundamental messages being conveyed through the ‘Fetes’. Running contrary to curatorial practice, art and artists were more easily consumed by society if given free rein within a given structure. If we take as the base job descriptors that artists make art and curators situate art, then the outcome of heavy-handed thematic curatorial devices, which were prevalent then and to this day, are indicative of a grave mistrust of the artist by the establishment. Through the Fetes, entertainment was foregrounded not at the expense of the art concept but as a pleasurable mediator with Joshua, the event's conduit. Further, these events served as an important learning curve for some of the artists who participated, as photographer Rut Blees Luxemburg further testifies. “By creating a structure such as the *Fete Worse Than Death*,

Joshua demonstrated to artists that there can be different parameters within to make and show art" (In Coffield, 2013 p.74). Through the seemingly simple gesture of replacing the gallery walls with the street, artists were afforded a great liberty to play with time, space and engage with each other and the public at large. This was to be Joshua's winning formula. The last of the Fetes, *The Hanging Picnic* (8th July 1995), assumed a more formal style than the two *Fetes Worse Than Death*. Differentiated in that it was hastily assembled and produced for television. London Weekend Television was commissioning a series of documentaries aimed at the teenage market to assist them in citing a future career trajectory (Opening Shots, LWT. 1993-1995). Curiously, Joshua was the selected archetype curator-at-large. This event appropriated a presentation style directly from the amateur art markets of the Bayswater Road restaged within Hoxton Square. Fourteen invitees (from poets to art collectors) were staged within the Square to enact their picnics and set the scene, whilst artwork from over twenty artists was hung on the Square's railings (Coffield, 2013). Gary Hume donated his feet as a walking jam sandwich; Sue Webster hung photos of herself with her head through the railings in true 'Grange Hill' style, Tim Noble installed a birdbox in the square which sang a chorus of expletives and ice cream was sold in condoms (Coffield, 2013). The format was consistent with its predecessors, though differentiated by the addition of a camera crew which followed Joshua around the whole day, something which compromised the spirit of the day, according to Gavin Turk (Interview, 2024). The focus of The Hanging Picnic and subsequent TV programme was very much on Joshua himself. He was by now the celebrity element in FN events, a role which he took to heart, as many participating artists commented on. "Oh, my God, Joshua was so media savvy". (Jessica Voorsanger in Coffield, 2013, p.162), "Josh was lording it" (Paul Fischer, in Coffield,2013 p.162). Director of the TV programme Liz Friend keenly observed Joshua's manipulation of the 'fly-on-the-wall style' format towards his agenda. Something she reflects, in many ways, anticipated the reality television format of today, with him as the subject, directing much of the content. (Coffield 2013). The resulting documentary of *The Hanging Picnic* transpired to be the much-desired mass media pulpit on which Joshua could preach the mission of FN.

Though aired at 11 am on a Saturday for the teen market, Joshua didn't hesitate in taking over the vast former Tram Shed on Rivington Street, erecting a giant screen and projecting the film to a herd of invited guests. I was running the bar that night and was afforded an insight into the vast following that both he and FN had, by that point, amassed. Hundreds of people had turned out to essentially watch a T.V. documentary with a little added incentive of free J&B and Bombay Sapphire. On the surface, it seemed that Joshua had the magic touch with everything under the FN logo, a hallmark for creative validity for an ever-expanding following.

By this time, he was living something of a double life. He was sought after by the general press who were beginning to recognise the East London art scene and Joshua as the spokesman. Simultaneously, it was to mark the beginning of the end for Joshua's 'Notorious Dream'. His reenergising impact was quickly pricing him out of the neighbourhood, which was, after all, his 'special site' one that he had designed. Though this inevitability came as no great surprise to Joshua, who, early on, had befriended the only local estate agents to speculate on the area's commercial potential, James Goff and James Lynch. (Goff and Lynch founded Stirling Ackroyd on Rivington Street in the relative dark ages of 1986) (www.stirlingackroyde.com). Both Goff, Lynch and Compston, it can be assumed, saw the fundamental connection between their ambitions for the area and Goff was not only invited onto the advisory board for Joshua's Fetes, but he also took a stall at FWTD II, grilling tuna fish tails over a BBQ for the day with the help of Lynch. Crucially, it was Goff and Lynch who financed the Fetes, which, in now typical style, failed to turn a profit (Coffield Interview, 2024). For Joshua, this collaboration was an essential milestone towards the establishment of FN in the area, the collision of culture and property. Equally, the vast media presence that Joshua's events achieved is frequently cited as the trigger for the escalation in the price of real estate, setting a trend of 380% price rise between 1995 and 2015 (Lawford, 2019). His documentary also attested to this. "Compston's outdoor events had worked, in his words, as a way of 'shaping and mythologising the area' and promoting it as 'a funky, upbeat up-and-

coming cultural zone' (LWT, 1995). Though a great deal of the later obituaries and reflections on Joshua's life have homed in on his role in the creation of Hoxton and Shoreditch as an art world capital, this, I would argue, was not the greatest significance. The greatest legacy of the 'Fetes' was, in my view, his unique blend of art and entertainment, which inspired many artists and curators to explore territory outside of the gallery walls as a site for informal engagement. Gentrification is the inevitable by-product (Harris, 2012; Rayner, 2018): "This contemporary art can be presented in such a way that people are not aware of some of its nature and so they're being entertained, but at the end of the day they realise that they've received a different form of entertainment, instructions and codices than if they went to see Danny La Rue in Tottenham Court Road" (Compston in conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, 20th 21st August 1994). Entertainment, fun and nonsense for Joshua were active currency. Not only did they belong in the art world, but they were also essential to the process of the mediation and consumption of contemporary art, he insisted.

In typical, nostalgic form Joshua had a deep love and understanding of the Music Hall heritage of the East End. As Gavin Turk attests, "Joshua had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the area" (Interview, 2024), and the McDonald's Music Hall in Hoxton was a key part of its geography. Moreover, the social function provided a template for Joshua, which echoed through the curatorial framework of the Fetes. "McDonald's Music Hall (where it) continued to be an affordable venue to entertain the working classes with acts including music, circus, and even performing dogs!" (https://www.hoxtonhall.co.uk/about/history/). An essential output of FN was Joshua's planning towards a chain of 'Nonsense Clubs'. These were to be hybrid spaces where 'art gallery meets nightclub' (Coffield Interview, 2024). Joshua talked to me at length about the clubs, modelled on something of a hybrid of the music hall cultures of the past and Weimar-styled dens for debauchery. Crucially, their function was more than simply engender pleasure. They were, in Joshua's words to be: "Sites of happy agitation" (In conversation with Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, 20th September 1994).

Through the juxtaposition and clashes of cultures from the most refined to the eternally degenerate, the clubs would be sites for cultural and moral expansion filtered through the medium of amusement. With echoes of 1930s Dada, art ‘happenings’ in the 1960s and a touch of the glamour of Studio 54, Joshua was again pilfering the past to reinvigorate society's future. As discussed in chapter three, Shoreditch and Hoxton in the early 1990s was a far cry from the buzzing social scene that defines it today. FN was the site in which the beginnings of a social scene took place. As early as 1993 FN hosted a series of evening events by its upstairs tenant Mike Walter and his ‘extreme quartet’ (Cooper, 2000). These events quickly gained traction as Gavin Turk recalls:

> “It started that people were coming to Shoreditch in the evenings. And I know that Joshua did some sort of like late night kind of, late night kind of free jazz and kind of odd evenings at the gallery. And you know, (and) I think that started bringing people that were interested in art to the area in the evenings as opposed to other times and then maybe there was suddenly like there was a few opportunities for some shows and things that brought people to the space to create the people to the area in the daytime.” (Gavin Turk Interview, 2024)

Although the greater vision of the Nonsense Club, which Joshua identified as his ‘special site’, was unrealised in his lifetime, it was something I realised in post at the ICA. Indeed, by the end of the decade, an alternative scene for culturally informed nightlife became a regular feature of London, a direct result of his vision. I was wholly won over by the principle of ‘the salt in the sugar’ (Compston, 1994) as a playful formula by which to expand the cultural playing field beyond the sanctified few. Other manifestations of the FN method permeated the art world, and many of the artists that I went on to collaborate with at the ICA were themselves influenced by their experience of and participation within the Fetes (Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, Rod Dickinson, Tom McCarthy, Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing, Angus Fairhurst, Jake and Dinos Chapman).

Artist friends Gavin Turk, Deborah Curtis and Mike Walter honoured Joshua and the Fetes in 1997 (August 9th) with a 24-hour street fair, *Live Stock Market*, across Charlotte Road and Rivington Street just a year after Joshua's passing. Expanding the Fete's concept into the agricultural market, animal pens were erected, and farm gates marked the entrance and close of the event, where artists traded their wares and services as Joshua had prescribed. The event utilised its own currency, 'The Bull Note', which was purchasable ahead of the event and remained the only permitted currency. Six thousand people attended, and for the first time, a 'Fete' made a profit of three thousand pounds, which was invested for the next honouring of 'FN Day' (Cooper, 2000). Within our interview, Gavin Turk identifies his key motivation in recreating the markets in terms of his own learning experience.

> "I really appreciated that whole kind of like levelling down kind of the feel that the market thing had … And we would do them in August when the collectors and people with money were away on holiday" (Interview, 2024)

Joshua had afforded through his 'Fetes' a time and space for artists and the public to play and engage with each other, to trade ideas and take full control not only of their work but crucially of their environment. Curators were notable for their absence in the mix. Where the white cube concept restricted and defined both physically and philosophically, the urban site awaited a narrative, aesthetic and agenda in which the social interface of art and the wo/man-on-the-street conspired in the creation.

Conclusion

Upon opening Factual Nonsense in 1991, Joshua, together with many of his early contemporaries in the DIY art scene, were all on something of a cultural and economic level playing field. The artists were young and largely broke, Joshua was young and largely broke, and the area was perceived as commercially barren (Harris, 2012; Rayner, 2018; Cooper,

2000). Together, they were the cultural speculators, and Shoreditch was theirs for the taking. By the time of his death, just five years later, these conditions had changed significantly for many individuals. The area was hastily becoming notable for an artist-led social affluence, which FN had been instrumental in driving. By 1996, Shoreditch had become the destination for those who had begun monetising on the back of the FN and yBa bandwagon. Many of the artists connected to Joshua were offered significant international shows for their work, and the accompanying price tags were starting to be realised. Alongside them were the City property investors who had worked out the equation that 'artists + post-industrial space = gentrification' and placed that month's bonus down as deposits. (*Daily Beast* NA, 2014; Bracewell, 2004). Thus, within the brief time frame of Factual Nonsense's being, its revolutionary vision transitioned from potentially feasible into the realms of impossibility for Joshua, who remained impoverished until the end.

Joshua passed away on 5th March 1996 from inhaling a lethal overdose of liquid Ether (halophane) (Cooper, 2000). Much has been written and documented on the tragic end of Joshua's life and monumental funeral (Cooper, 2000). The list of obituaries was immense and detailed, as Jonathan Glancey observed at the time:

> "Last week, his death was marked by obituaries writ large in the Independent, the Guardian and the Daily Telegraph, occupying more column inches than any number of brilliant physicists, doctors and musicians were granted before him." (The Independent, 21st March 1996).

For a young man of just 25, this was a testament to the scale and depth of his impact on the London cultural scene.

Figure. 10. Photograph of the funeral gathering for Joshua Compston (Courtesy of Jeremy Cooper)

Along with what seemed like thousands of people, a New Orleans jazz band led an hour-long procession from the former FN headquarters on Charlotte Road to Christ Church and All Saints in Spitalfields. Though I caught sight of a few of his close friends, much of the mob had been less than present during the past five months that I had worked at FN. The precession had an element of performativity, with pallbearers being exchanged along the way. Darren Coffield recalls a degree of pretence amongst some in the proceedings, which he cites as a crucial moment for art world career enhancement for some of those who jostled to be centre stage. (Interview, 2024). Upon arriving at the church, his coffin paused outside, where Gilbert and George paid their respects ahead of the service. As we processed into the church, music started to play; rather aptly, it was a music hall anthem lamenting, “Joshu-ah, Joshu-ah, gosh you are, nicer than Lemon Squash you are…” (George Arthurs and Bert Lee, 1910) I both cried and laughed at that same moment.

One of FN's enterprises was realised in time for Joshua's funeral, his concept of 'artist-designed coffins' (Turk Interview, 2024). Reflecting his love of the decorative arts, Joshua's coffin was hand painted in a William Morris design by friends and artists Gary Hume and Gavin Turk: "He (Joshua) had this whole kind of concept where you should get artists to design coffins which ultimately ends up with me and Gary Hume doing his coffin, and that was kind of the hiatus moment of it." (Gavin Turk Interview, 2024). To some, his funeral was the most spectacular of FN events. Darren Coffield recalls a later conversation he had with a gallery director at the Tate:

> "It was one of the best parties he had ever thrown, though unfortunately he wasn't there, so to speak." (Interview, 2024).

Close friend David Taborn elaborates further; "I am certain he would have loved the scale, spectacle and theatre of his funeral, after all he had lived in order to become immortalised" (Interview, 2024).

Within my research for this chapter, I asked several close friends what his legacy was. For Darren Coffield it was: "His unique take on life because he would never, ever compromise anything. And he just made the everyday amazing, really." (Interview, 2024)
Jeremy Cooper could envisage the emergence of the 'Notorious Dream': "With his high-octane commitment and hard work, something worthwhile would have emerged" (Interview, 2024). David Taborn perceives his legacy residing in his impact on the artists who surrounded him, "I think he made attitudinal changes. He wanted to make them [contemporary artists] responsible, you know, and as serious as artists of the past." (Interview, 2024).

The legacy of Factual Nonsense, I believe, resides in the proposition of a new set of conditions for the creation and mediation of art and, ultimately, the transactional power when art is blended into the detail of the everyday. The legacy of Joshua on myself was the conviction and confidence that at the first possible opportunity, I was to challenge the modes, means and conditions of cultural representation and those who sought to protect the status quo. This was the central teaching I took with me to the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) later that year, one which still resonates today.

Chapter 8: The ICA: The Reconstruction of a Cultural Playground

Introduction

This chapter considers the propositions: what happens when curatorial strategies are appropriated from the DIY scene of East London and reconsidered within the institution? What challenges and possibilities might this usher in? What impact does this have on artists? Employing autoethnography, I will reflect on the live programme I curated at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) London between 1996 and 2006**;** I will consider the founding mission of the ICA as that of an “Adult Playground” (Massey, Muir, 2014) and the subversive embracement of popular culture by the Independent Group (IG) in the 1950s. The context and execution of a programme of cultural playtime during the mid-1990s will be addressed, considering the relevance and perception of the Institution at large and the internal programming strategies employed by the curatorial team at that time. The social-curatorial strategies which I employed within the live programme from 1996 – 2006 will be outlined derived from personal reflections, participant interviews and personal archives, which I have been given access to. Finally, the role and response of the cultural gatekeeper, its impact on audience inclusion, sociability and pleasure, and the wider critical impact which ensued will be evaluated and reflected upon in terms of cultural legacy.

I begin by providing a clear context for the legitimacy of the ICA at its origins, reflecting on the founders' intentions and later challenges posed by the Independent Group during the early 1950s. I will pay particular attention to the function of the social, the provision for the conditions for discourse and the wider connection to the popular and the everyday in forming the ICA**.** This discussion will be related to evaluating the curatorial strategies and social/cultural impact of the ICA during the early to mid-1990s, providing the context for the period directly before I took employment. I will pay particular attention to the specific challenges and incongruities around a singular designated ‘Institute of Contemporary Arts’

by the 1990s, some fifty years after its foundation, with the greater context of formal and DIY programming strategies being employed by curators and artists at this time. Together this contextualises the historic relationship between the ICA and the general public and how lessons from its formative days, specifically a fluidity between genres and an embracement of the social site for culture, were resurrected within the live programme I curated during the late 1990s

Swings and Roundabouts: The Construction of a Cultural Playground

The integration of the cultural and the social were embedded into the early discussions around creating an Institute of Contemporary Arts. From the very start, working out of its location on Dover Street, the programme presented by the ICA unleashed vast swathes of activities by the European Avant-Garde on virgin British audiences (Massey, Muir, 2014). The formal programme was juxtaposed with an informal and dedicated space for social spontaneity located mainly in the activities of the member's bar and club (Massey, Muir, 2014). Both key founders, art critic Sir Herbert Reed and artist/historian Sir Roland Penrose, were on something of a post-war mission to integrate a wide range of international cultures into British culture whilst providing a space for creative dialogue and education (Kusters,1996). The ICA was the manifestation of this quest. Within his written introduction to the first ICA exhibition, *40 Years of Modern Art* (December 1948 – January 1949), Reed clearly articulates the significant risks inherent within the ICA's position: "We may be mocked for our naïve idealism, but at least it will not be possible to say that an expiring civilisation perished without creative protest" (in Massey, Muir 2014. p. 17).

This statement testifies to the great ambition and radical vigour which the ICA embodied from the start, qualities which gave it distinction and the independent strength of assuming a position outside of the conventions of mainstream culture. During its first year of programming, the diversity of arts and cultures and their intersections were explored, from contemporary music by Dallapiccola, Berg, Stravinsky and Bach, to poetry readings by

Auden, Eliot, and Thomas, Rossellini film premiers and architecture talks. (Kusters et al, 1996, Massey, Muir, 2014). Former ICA director Philip Dodd noted within our interview that this multifarious approach was very much the byproduct of the institution, which at this stage was essentially an artist-led initiative (2021). Equally, there was an interesting flattening of both cultural and curatorial hierarchies, with the generalised designation of 'organiser' overriding that of 'curator' (pre the professionalisation of this role) and with external collaborations and proposals being actively recruited into the programming (Massey, Muir 2014). The early ICA's door was very much wide open to new ideas.

To be flexible and responsive to contemporary cultural mutations, the traditional curatorial ego, which has rarified the presentation and consumption of culture over the past seventy years, had to be set aside. Creative iterations were drawn together with the desire to form new cultures, not self-replicating ones as has been the tradition in the museum and gallery sector, but cultures plural, which irritated and sometimes impacted on one another. This rally towards a new era of cultural cross-pollination was the very zeitgeist of the new ICA, and the socially discursive space of the member's bar was the petri dish upon which these experiments could be realised. This was the cultural protest Reed had sought. Unpure, messy and open to the possibility of bastardisation thus, a new way of thinking, organising and presenting cultures was unleashed. It was, according to Reed: "a social meeting ground for creative artists" (an Anarchists Dream, News Review, 1948 online NP.). The social being central to the diffusion of discourse and the creation of the new was the interplay between art forms, which is an intrinsic part of the ICA's culture. To this end, the ICA had to be both culturally licentious and future focused. As such, it could not and should not be in the business of presenting the fully formed cultural product; rather, its function was to create the conditions necessary for cultural and social elements to impact one another. The naivety which Reed asserted too resides in this fundamental understanding of risk. The risk of upset, the risk of confronting the fundamental right and the risk of failing in the process of exploring new cultural forms. In contrast to the safety of the museum and the recently launched MOMA

New York, which followed gallery conventions of presenting art to the educated at a critical distance (Massey, Muir, 2014), the ICA was to be a den for cultural gamblers who hedged their bets on potential iterations of art forms and cultures (Cranfield, 2013). The early founders were betting on the impure, uncertified art which, they believed, would shape future cultures and wider society.

Their aversion to the segregation and ranking of disciplines into high and low, official and popular cultures, was the first great step towards cultural emancipation. Indeed, it was only in 1977, when Bill McAlister became the ICA's director, that the departments of 'Exhibitions, Cinema, Talks and Theatre' were established, and hence the authority of the curator/gatekeeper came into play (Kusters, 1996). Until this point, the ICA internally resisted classification and hierarchy. This was not a cathedral for the converted, as the cultures of yesteryear were to be replaced with an urgency to articulate the grammar of the time (Dodd Interview, 2021). The early ICA was a nomadic structure until it finally resided at The Mall in 1968 (Massey, Muir, 2014). Though this imposed physical restrictions upon the scale and shape of their output by operating in pre-existing sites, it conversely aided in liberating the 'organisers' from cultural orthodoxies and nostalgia. There was no history nor nostalgia to attend to, no stylistic choices, and no curatorial strategies; the founders were, in many ways, freed from institutional history and, subsequently, the conventions of curation and mediation. They further sought independence by resisting state funding at the outset, seeking the permissive freedoms of commercial sponsorship and philanthropy over conditional offers from the public sector (Massey, Muir, 2014). This was a clear bid for self-determination, philosophically and operationally, and although it proved not to be sustainable in the long term, it did afford the early ICA a degree of emancipation through which they could assess the practices, interplay and experience of art and culture afresh (Dodd interview, 2021).

The early ICA featured a member's bar and lounge at Dover Street, which became the focal point for many soirées and parties until the move to the Mall in 1968. (Massey, Muir, 2014).

In her history of the first two decades of the ICA, Anne Massey contrasts the two opening nights of the new Dover Street base camp, highlighting a clear class division. The first night was aimed at high society. Given the ICA's determination for financial independence from state funding at this time, this can be seen as an essential employment of modern-day networking tactics. Running until midnight, the monied and the cultured traded wears accompanied by a performance by the pianist Harriet Cohen. The second night, conversely, was ticketed with substantial discounts for its members. The featured raffle included prizes of a bottle of whisky and a 12 lb turkey. (Massey, Muir, 2014). A more mainstream audience was at play. Regular Saturday night social events featured in the member's bar throughout the 1950s entitled 'At Home' nights, a name consciously employed to encourage a sense of ownership and belonging among its members (Massey, 2013). To this effect, the ICA has continued to be a place which is held for some with an untypical deep affection. Seeing, hearing, and experiencing something for the first time with the capacity to incite a multitude of curiosities has been a continued mission and, to these ends, affords the ICA with a generational allegiance, each generation perceiving 'their time' as being the most significant and radical (Dodd Interview, 2021). It is somewhat ironic that whilst firmly turning its back on the museum as the cathedral of art, the ICA has always produced evangelists who align with a time and culture as the source of true faith.

The Independent Group

The Independent Group (IG) (1952-1955) were in many ways, the wayward offspring of the early ICA (Cranfield, 2013). At its core were Richard Hamilton, Nigel Henderson, John McHale, Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull (*The Art Story*, N.D.**)** Cumulatively, they sought to engage with creativity in its broadest sense, from artistic production to innovations in science and technology (Massey, 1995). Frustrated with what they perceived as an indulgence of modernism at the expense of wider cultures by the ICA founders, the Independent Group sought to counter art world elitism by focusing their gaze on the creativity of the popular and social (Massey, 1995). Though their legacy has been widely

noted concerning the construction of the conditions for British Pop Art, it is arguably their engagement with popular cultures which is of greater significance (Massey, 2013). In many ways, they championed and contributed through their practice to future thinking and iterations around the relationship and interface between art and society. Philip Dodd makes the distinction that whilst they were hungry for popular culture, it wasn't their native culture (Interview, 2024); it was, in the main, a preoccupation with American culture. Popular culture served a greater purpose for the IG members, being something of a respite from the ravages of the Second World War, which they had all witnessed (Massey, 2013). "Since the days of the Independent Group meetings at the ICA London in the early 1950s, the complex relationship between art and mass culture has been continually debated." (Walker, 1987. p.8)

Jazz was the popular culture of the day and was a central focus of the IG meetings in the early 1950s (Walker, 1987). Dodd reflects upon former discussions he had with his friend and IG stalwart, the late Eduardo Paolozzi, who believed jazz was fundamentally counter-cultural and, as such, taught us that: "Being playful and being serious were not alternatives" (Interview, 2021). The IG artists organised a series of talks and analyses of jazz culture at the ICA. However, they did encounter significant backlash. Art historian John Berger famously wrote to Reed in December 1954 that the ICA was nothing but a jazz club (cited in Massey, Muir, 2014). A slur damning popular cultures as clearly of a lesser pedigree. As will be discussed later in this chapter, my live programme received a similar critique by some, with frequent and often barbed accusations from peers that I was responsible for turning the ICA into a 'club venue'.

Jazz in the 1950s, and more specifically Bebop (Dodd, 2024), was popular currency; however, the greater cultural impact of this renegade artform was lost on many who sought to protect art from the masses, be it Berger in London or Adorno in Frankfurt. Unscripted, mass-produced, black culture was one step too far for those who we can assume failed to

take the time to understand it. By 1959, even Herbert Reed was beginning to echo this sentiment. Reed was concerned that the very notion of the ‘contemporary’ was being wielded by some to include ‘a whole host of sins’ (in Massey, Muir, 2014). This Massey identifies correctly. “The sins that were being covered up were the sins of popular culture” (2014. p.104). Dodd reconciles this point of division with cultural alignment. He argues that Reed’s commitment to European modernism can be contrasted with the IG group’s allegiance to Surrealism and, in the case of Hamilton to Duchamp. This, he concludes, is the ascendence of the mock-heroic subsuming the heroic at the time (Interview, 2024).
The tussle between high and low has been something of a stalwart feature across the history of the ICA. However, there is a distinct parallel to be drawn between the conditions of the 1950s and those of the 1990s. The activities of the IG in the 1950s were an impassioned consumption of mainly American popular offerings from SCI-FI to Rock Around the Clock (Massey, 2013). By the 1990s, the story had come full circle partly in reaction to Thatcherite austerity, resulting in DIY / artist-led deconstruction of the artificial divisions between high and low and between practice genres (Ulrich-Obrist, Live, 1996). Much like its art school heritage, cultural production in the 1990s talked over itself, fusing cultures and generating new hybrids, and the Institute was obligated to respond.

Activating the Agent

By the time I joined the ICA in August 1996, the role and significance of the cultural Institution was a point for contemporary discussion. For the expanding DIY sector, the establishment's concentration of power was perceptibly at the expense of curatorial independence, favouring the orthodoxies of a homogenised global curatorial voice. Further, the institution was being upheld as an integral and beholden appendage to the demands of the commercial art sector (Burrows, 1998). The ICA was particularly under attack, with some sectors suggesting it had lost its purpose and independent vision. Public institutions became a critical target not only by the DIY scene but also among theorists and critics. In comparison to the agility and responsiveness of both the commercial market and DIY sectors to engage

and nourish new iterations in art, the public gallery was perceived as flabby and immobile, restrained by its stakeholder obligations and cautious, unchallenging and uncritical stance (Stallabrass, 1999).

By the 1990s, the rise of the London art market and its polarisation of artists and audiences forced the Institution to rethink both its social and cultural relevance (Jakobsen, 2006). The market-led rise of the cultural entrepreneur called into question the institution's critical relevance. For many, the once independent and radical ICA was becoming staid, introverted and a spotlight manipulated by the market (Jakobsen, 2006). By the mid-1990s, the ICA had shifted markedly from the ideals of the founding group and Independent Group members. It was heavily state-subsidised and heavily in debt to the tune of £500,000 (Kustow,1997) and on the brink of the auditors being called in to seize the reins (Dodd, 2021), a step which would, without question, have been ideological suicide.

Just prior to Philip Dodd's premiership in 1997 former ICA director Michael Kustow (1967-70) issued him a stern warning within the pages of The New Statesman, unequivocally titled: "Get out as soon as you can! The ICA could be about to collapse (January 24th, 1997)". The focus of Kustow's warning was the loss of novelty of the ICA continuing to reside at The Mall, which he argued, by the mid-1990s, was now a breeding ground for insularity and lack of engagement with the greater cultures of London and beyond. No longer was it an ironic juxtaposition that the most radical gestures were taking place on the Queens very own driveway but, Kustow insisted, the ICA had become little more than another ivory tower: "The ICA has long since lost its charge of chutzpah" (Kustow, 1997. p.38). The world around the ICA was changing radically, something the Institute was in some ways oblivious to. The combination of its accumulated debts, disengagement with the independent cultures of London, inability to attract significant private financial investment and cultural navel-gazing was begging the question, did there remain a need and function for an Institute of Contemporary Arts?

Contextual Autoethnography

Receiving the news that I had been successful in my application to become the ICA's Membership Secretary in the autumn of 1996, I was delirious with joy. This was exactly where I wanted to be, at the very heart of cultural flux. I must now confess to a white lie told during the interview for the job. Having done a little reading on the roles and positions within the art world ahead of time, I confidently informed the interview panel that whilst most people sought out opportunities in curatorial positions, conversely, I was a marketing girl through and through. There was nothing further from the truth. Fuelled by my experiences in the East End, I was here to engage and play after all that I believed was the very remit of the ICA.

Within my first few weeks in post, I had a sudden and crashing realisation that the ICA I believed it to be, a site for risk-taking and cultural interplay, was far from that. During the weekly reflective marketing meetings with the directors and curators, each programme head would give feedback on their programme over the past seven days. On one such occasion, I recall being overcome with a sense of pure frustration as the then Talks Director Alan Reed passionately recalled a discussion which he'd held that week in detail, its significance, critical focus and intellectual challenge were eloquently stated. The question was then asked: How many people came? Six was the answer. Something was very, very wrong.

Live Arts

During my early weeks in post, I would stay behind after work in the ICA bar in a bid to get a better understanding of the evening programme. I was struck by the high percentage of regulars attending at that time. These weren't the cultural version of the regulars down the pub but specific and distinct audiences who attended only for their strands of the programme. This was particularly true of the Live Arts programme, whose audience was distinguishable largely by their then-radical tattoos and piercings. Live programming at the ICA in the first half of the 1990s consisted of two distinct strands: the curated, body-based work and the externally programmed Rock Weeks and occasional club culture night. Both

were incredibly influential, though attracting largely distinct audiences. The ICA's Live Arts programme from 1992-97 had evolved through the dedicated programming of Directors Lois Kiedan and her deputy Catherine Ugwu. Significantly, within just half a decade, Live Art as a genre had become internationally renowned, and the ICA was the launchpad for many notable artists in the field; Franco B, Marissa Carnesky, Ron Athey, Orlan and Annie Sprinkle, to name a few. The programme was experiencing something of a golden age in the early 1990s, and social activism was at its core, with race and queer identity in a post-Aids era underlying the programme (Kiedan, 2017). Largely underwritten by the Arts Council, Kiedan and Ugwu devised thematic significant seasons of performance, which enabled the collective identity of the work to curatorially mirror the longevity and cultural impact of the exhibition programme. This proved to be a successful strategy in the emancipation of many individual practitioners who were largely derived from independent club and underground scenes, elevating them to the official status of 'artist'. "It was a sector development strategy" (Kiedan interview 2024) and a successful one. Through developing many performers, the seasons were simultaneously initiating theoretical responses which have informed a substantial critical discourse surrounding the work (Kiedan interview 2024). To establish an art form, critical response and academic legacy within five years was a great achievement. Kiedan, however, identified a disparity in the hierarchy between the worlds of visual and performative arts as a key motivation at the time: "The high artificial arts and the sort of the study world of performance in the UK" (Interview, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. ND.NP). Live Art at the time situated itself in a confrontational position aimed at de-railing the formal hierarchies which were embedded in the visual arts world and gaining some of their visibility in the cultural spotlight.

Under her tenure, this incongruity was confronted head on allowing the ICA to become the global focus for the art form and the basis for its critical reception. Drawing on emerging issue-based performance practice, Kiedan and Ugwu employed familiar curatorial strategies of aligning a known artist with an emerging artist and the thematic marketing of programme

seasons ahead of individual practice to elevate the genre and engage an audience for it (Keiden interview, 2024). This was compounded by a second strategy through a partnership with The British Library to develop a recorded archive of all ICA Live Art, Talks and Performances to afford the essentially ephemeral, both permanence and legacy within its own lifetime. This archive became a key facility for the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), which Kiedan and Ugwu subsequently went on to establish in 1999.

Arguably, the crucial downside to the establishment of a Live Art genre at the ICA was, to recall Kustow's letter, a chronic sense of insularity (1997). Though it was a programme that was gaining traction amongst critical and academic networks, in terms of audience, it seemed very much to be preaching to the converted. The audiences were populated by a minority of individuals who were or would be practitioners of the genre, flanked by academics and those keepers of performance art who had been stoically flying the flag since the 1960s. There was a guaranteed audience for Live Art at the ICA drawn from the loyal congregation. The programme seemed to be concerned with building a site for marginalised practice which in turn limited the appeal of the programme to a broader art/non-art audience base.

Live Art was not by any means an easy sell. It was difficult, often grizzly work situating the body as a site of protest generated by issues resulting from the post-Thatcherite politics of social and cultural disenfranchisement. Arguably, mediating the programme to a broader audience was perhaps not the objective at that time. It was, after all, imperative to its evolution that a loyal and critical following was first established. The very language of Live Art was also hard to penetrate, with Kiedan herself resisting using the very term during her tenure so as not to alienate potential audiences or cause semantic confusion in the broader cultural arena. (Kiedan interview 2024) Still, it remained that Live Art was not, and for many, should not be a mass cultural medium. To this end, Kiedan somewhat controversially cites Live Art as the most compelling case for public subsidy for the arts, focusing as it was on

artists and practices at the very margins of culture and society. Whilst this is a strong argument, by the second half of the 1990s, it no longer chimed with the economics /politics of the day. The writing was on the wall that a subsidised cultural sector was quickly becoming unaffordable (Dodd, Interview 2021), impacted by both the drive to outsource culture to the market and the boom of cultural activity in the first half of the decade adding a great competitive terrain for those seeking Arts Council funding coupled with the rising mantra that was cultural entrepreneurship.

By the start of Philp Dodd's Directorship in 1997, the air of New Labour was ushered into the ICA, confronting what it perceived to be those earnestly clinging onto the Institute's Avant-Garde legacies. Dodd, within our interview singles out Live Arts as a key case for redundancy: "It was a small group of people who performed in front of one another… it was a safe environment with the same people, there was nothing challenging about it" (Interview, 2021). Unsurprisingly, Kiedan considers Dodd's argument to be "total bollocks" (2024) and a negation of the strategic practices which Live Art had employed to widen a sense of ownership in the ICA to marginalised artists and audiences. Specifically, she notes their creation of a space for the non-white community through practices such as the Associate Artist Scheme, affording artists affiliated with the Live Art programme free access to the whole programme of the ICA for a year to generate a sense of cultural ownership. Despite its significant gains amongst marginalised communities, Live Arts was fundamentally at odds with the political and cultural ethos ushered in by Philip Dodd at the advent of New Labour politics, and within months of him taking the reins, both Kiedan and Ugwu had resigned their positions.

During the mid-1980s and early1990s, the Live programme at the ICA had sporadically engaged with club culture, with a legacy dating back to Michael Morris' programming from the New York club scene launching artists such as Karen Finley to British audiences (Kiedan interview, 2024). Outside of their programmed seasons, Live Arts hosted occasional club

nights largely derived from London's queer club scene, including *Duckie* and *The Mint Tea Rooms* by Offset in September 1995. Uprooted from its resident Kings Cross venue, The Water Rat's Pub club legend Matthew Glamorre had gathered a broad range of performers for his night, '*The Mint Tea Rooms'*. Drawing on the model of Taboo in the 1980s, the content was frenzied, with mixes of queer culture, performance art and soft porn within a club night setting (Palmer,1995). Under the umbrella of Glamorre's 'Offset' collective, a grouping of around thirty musicians, poets and artists, queer cabaret intersected with clubland which in its home venue drew together a diversity of audiences who embraced the alternative scene and performativity of the night (Palmer, 1995). Several Offset members had previously participated in Joshua Compston's 'Fetes', including Nicola Bowery and her late husband Leigh with their band Minty, as previously discussed. Glammore fondly recalls the Fetes as "…the best jumble sales' (Gray, 1996). Many of the members had cut their teeth in the London club scene however, collectively, they began to resist the popularist connotations underpinning the term 'club'. They were self-referencing themselves as an underground art group. "To channel the anger of those marginalised through reasons of sex, sexuality or education towards creative outlets" (Grey, 1996, online, NP.). This chimed with the politics underpinning the Live Arts Programme at the ICA. The body being both the political and performative vehicle (Pacitti, 2008). In many ways, the evolution of performative queer club culture and the ICAs Live Art programme materialised as a source of mutual inspiration at the time, with *Duckie* co-founder, Simon Casson citing the cultural programme as his main inspiration for the club (Kiedan, 2024).

Speaking of his other regular club night, the more popular 'Smashing', Glamorre focuses on participation as an essential element. His clubs were 'not a spectator sport', he asserted, but a participatory experience (Sharkey, 1994). The rationale for inviting *The Mint Tea Rooms* to the ICA was explained by Lois Kiedan; "It's enthusiasm to make connections between the underground and the establishment. They provide a forum for a range of eclectic and provocative work made at the extremities of all performing art." (In Grey, 1996, NP.). What is

notable in this statement is the drive to contextualise the night foremost within the banner of performance art rather than the broader popular/social context in which the night was situated. What is also intriguing is the polarities set for the group's elevation from 'underground to establishment', the void of the everyday being omitted. The role of the ICA's Live Arts was to "legitimise illegitimate practices" and, in doing so, expand the visibility of the work (Kiedan interview, 2024). Though this echoes the ICA founder's desire to bring critical focus to the new, which for them was emerging modernism, I had great concern with the power politics of this language, which by the 1990s was accompanied by the emerging professionalisation and importance placed on the role of the curator. Admission to the 'establishment' was solely at the curator's behest. In this reading, art can only exist in one of two zones: the underground, where the rules are self-defined or validated by the establishment of a highly regulated territory.

According to some reviews of *The Mint Tea Room* at the ICA nights, admission to the establishment seemed to come with a real cost. In his *Frieze* review, writer and curator Gregor Muir noted that within the process of assimilating *The Mint Tea Rooms* into the environment of the ICA theatre, something of significance was lost in translation, "Transitional anomalies are inevitable: a sober audience, formal seating and complex stage facilities. Entering a designated arts theatre and being handed a photocopied programme hardly evokes the original spirit." (Muir, 1995. Online, NP). Muir continued to reflect that the night, once concluded, began to spill into the bar area where a more social and vibrant spirit ensued, causing him to propose that in future events, the establishment should not consider the audience as 'cultural trainspotters' (Muir, 1995). A sentiment we can only assume Glamorre himself would concur with? A further review of the night records the content of the night as pretty much 'central casting' performance art. It included, we are told, four frozen chickens, a gaffer-taped body suspended from hooks, a well-paid porn actor singing about necrophilia and many fairground-style goldfish in bags across the stage. One single plea to disavow the night of goldfish cruelty was the only audience

participation to be witnessed. Like Muir, art critic Louise Gray then contrasted the excitement and vibrancy of *The Mint Tea Rooms* in its Kings Cross home with that transposed into the Institution; "…the same material here fell disappointingly flat", she concluded. (1996, NP).

Through the act of re-purposing the club into performance art, audience intimacy and performativity were negated, losing something vital to the club experience. Recalling Sarah Thornton's study, these qualities are essential components required to achieve the escapist possibilities of club culture (1995). The club space is fundamentally a social space in which cultures are experienced and shared, adopting distinction from the mainstream through the employment of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). When *The Mint Tea Rooms*, in their quest to be ordained as art, traded physical interactivity for formal performativity, they reduced the audience to the status of cultural voyeurs. Popular cultures are not there to be toyed with, and through a curatorial re-branding exercise in this example, one can see exactly the reasons why.

There was a more successful precedent of clubbing at the ICA in the early 1990s in the shape of the now legendary night *Duckie*, housed at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT) and has been running since 1995 (*www. https://duckie.co.uk/*). Inspired by the range of artists who had been presented in the Live Art programme, Duckie hosted their night, *I Dream of Morrisey*, an LBTQ+ and straight Morrisey convention in the theatre and bar of the ICA (July 1997). Boxes of gladioli, hearing aids and NHS specs were ushered in for the night as a 400-strong audience of Smiths fans congregated in worship. (Clynch, 1997). The shift from the small performative space of the RVT to the ICA allowed Duckie to experiment with scale, content and audiences. Retaining the spirit of their home club, *Duckie* was afforded the time and means to play with notions of their Mancunian hero on a multi-platformed scale. I went on to host a further *Duckie* night, '*The Girl Looked At Julie: A Julie Burchill Fan Club Convention*' (7th May 1999). The contrast between the

staging of *The Mint Tea Rooms* and *the Duckie Nights* was a key change in curatorial practice. Unlike Glamorre and the Offset collective, *Duckie* didn't crave the validation of their work as sanctioned 'art' (Kiedan, 2024), the consequence of which saw the ICA curators handing over the keys to the artists and allowing them to play on their own terms. This was a radical gesture at the time and was the foundational principle for the live programme I later initiated. Artists and cultural operatives did not need curators and institutions to vet them for authenticity or define the road down which they must walk. I purported to be nothing more than a cultural mediator between artists, between art forms and, crucially, between art and audience. The whole DIY scene of the decade had illustrated that very point. The establishment needed to regain the trust of the cultural underground and remove the power structures, which were still propping up the ICA at the time, needed to be dismantled as a first step.

Keepers of the Faith

Culture in the 1990s was on something of a tangent. The invasion of DIY cultures, as discussed, created the circumstances for new forms of self-determination, which confronted the ridged structures fiercely defended within the institution. Indeed, the more artists became curators and audiences became creatives with the advent of the digital age, the greater the Institution responded by demonstrating its authority through strategies of cultural segregation and what Philip Dodd has described as an aura of dour seriousness (Interview, 2021). In an open letter to Tony Blair in *The New Statesman* (4th November 1997) (Appendix 3), Dodd discussed this state of cultural flux, conceding that the speed at which the old separatists' languages and hierarchies are being uprooted creates; "A world without an adequate critical language to describe it". The languages of the past, high and low, popular and traditional, sanctified and unsanctified artforms and practices were, by this point, redundant. The notion that British culture is the product of "parthenogenesis" Dodd argued, was by the mid-1990s greatly impacted by cultural hybridisation (Interview, 2021).

Curatorial apartheid was endemic within the ICA of the mid-1990s. Clinging on to the last vastitudes of the Avant Garde, each programming area guarded their corner with something of a pit bull ferocity. This was especially true of the visual art department, whose ego was very much over-inflated by the explosion of the yBa scene and the rise of the uber-curator, they automatically assumed their seat at the head of the table. According to Kiedan, initiatives towards interdisciplinary collaboration within the ICA frequently became subsumed into a “dialogue of resistance” (2024) by the visual arts curators. By the 1990s, cultural insularity at the ICA was the ever-present elephant in the room.

Now a world away from the culturally pioneering spirit of the 1950s, which had rejected the orthodox museum standard set by New York’s MOMA by situating art and high and popular cultures side-by-side (Cranfield, 2013), the Institute of the 1990s had conducted something of a volte face of introversion. Amongst the safety of public subsidy and an internalised dialogue of cultural segregation, the ICA had lost something of its wider curiosity. The departments, while producing largely well-informed and interesting work, were equally somewhat paralysed through internal hierarchies and an unwillingness to unleash within the institution an interdisciplinary manifestation of culture. Indeed, the ICA at the time of my arrival was drifting along the path towards cultural auto-cannibalism. Though cultural estrangement was evident at the ICA due to its physical set-up, it was not a singular casualty but arguably part of a greater condition. Writing at the time David Burrow’s summarises this cycle of deterioration well:

> “The role as chronicler of culture furnishes the institution with its power. In this process, the museum is not all-powerful of course. If institutions do not refresh themselves, they become dry and crumble. The institution always requires fresh bodies.” (1990. p. 28).

In his book '*High Art Lite'* (1999), art historian Julian Stallabrass further observes a necessity for institutional renewal at the time, compelling the incumbent agents to explore new sources of culture and engage in a refreshed dialogue with a broader audience. Once the notion of hierarchy and establishment is overturned in artistic production and mediation, as was the artist-led case by the mid-1990s, then the institution is compelled to respond (Ulrich Obrist, 1996). The ICA needed to make itself vulnerable again, not just in pockets of its programming but institutionally, and that required curatorial collaboration, discourse and a greater embracement of cultures reflecting the value systems of a greater population within society.

Integral to the debate around high and low is a consideration of what the institutional gatekeeper resists in opening the door wider to the greater artist community. Cranfield perceived this to be historical and fundamental to human engagement with art dating back to the Renaissance:

> "The essential nature of art, as it was conceived by the professional discourse of critics, curators, collectors and artists, was not predicated on art's constant and changing relationship to society, but rather upon the institutions that served to keep it mythically away from society". (2013. P.320).

Set against the overriding spirit of enquiry which defined the nomadic ICA of the 1950s and early 1960s, the very physicality of the institution seemed to have imposed traditional curatorial notions of 'protect and preserve' by the 1990s. I put this question to a number of those I interviewed. Curator Lisa Le Feuvre interprets the situation along class lines. She situates the gatekeeper's fear as being directed firmly at keeping the "dangerous, vulgar underclasses" at arm's length from the strings of cultural power and, in doing so, prohibiting any resulting social change (Interview, 2021). Lois Kiedan viewed the gatekeepers' apprehension more in terms of power relations with a fundamental fear of 'loss of control'.

The post yBa scramble for power had contributed significantly to a sense of curatorial paranoia specific to the time, escalating a compulsion to own and defend individual territory with an unforeseen ferocity. Kiedan contrasts this with current times where the internet permits the artistic and audience communities the means to avert the gatekeeper, thus diminishing their historic power (Interview, 2024). During the 1990s however, the gatekeepers across both the institutions and the markets were in their last reign of self-authored empowerment.

Starting Out: An Autoethnography

Within my administrative role as Membership Secretary, I assumed an additional marketing duty, to promote and grow the Institutes audience numbers through promotional methods. Traditionally, this had been accomplished through adverts within the art press and internal marketing. Membership had always been fundamental to the constitution of the ICA (Massey, Muir, 2014), and since its move to The Mall in 1968, was a legal requirement of its landlord, The Crown Estates (Massey, Muir, 2014). Alongside a tiered patronage scheme, regular membership was relatively cheap and accessibly priced at £25 annually, £15 concessions, with the alternative of a £1.50 day membership Monday-Friday / £2.50 at the weekend for the infrequent visitor (ICA Bulletin). Not all members were notably hungry for the culture, with a small number of memberships being acquired by Whitehall's Civil Servants who wanted a square lunch away from the office. These aside, membership was an ongoing way of monitoring the relevance and footfall of the Institution in addition to being an essential independent income stream, and it was my job to improve the numbers.

I had inherited a once-a-month night, which was free for members and their guests, taking place in the ICA bar. This was the *Electronic Lounge*, hosted by the digital music pioneer Robin Rimbaud (aka Scanner) and was advertised internally as a 'members perk' (ICA Bulletin). Billed as a "Time to talk and listen on the first Tuesday of every month 21.00-

01.00hrs", Electronic Lounge featured resident artists Rimbaud and Leaf labels, Tony Morley, for a night of "Abstraction to distraction: transparent fields of ambient sound all at low volume" (ICA Bulletin.)

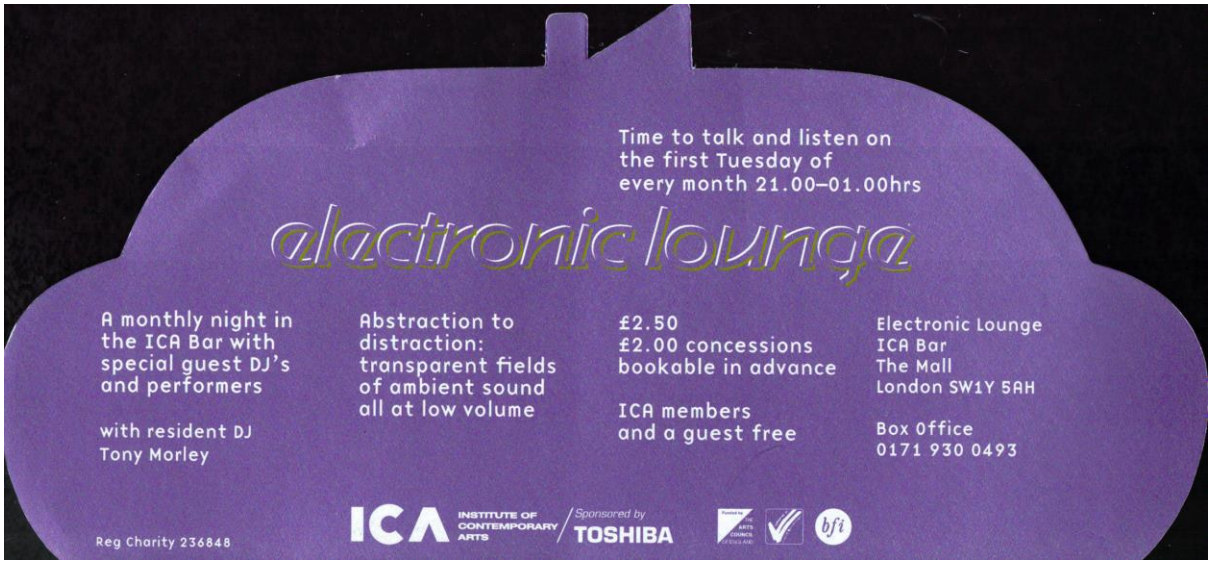

Figure 11. Flyer, Electronic Lounge. (Electronic Lounge Archive. Courtesy of Robin Rimbaud).

Seeking an antidote to the chaos of the dance club scene, Robin wrote to the then ICA Director, Mik Flood stating his case for the night "Clubs can be great places to go, but the volume of the music is detrimental to real contact…It is the right time to have a social space where people of a like mind can meet socially and share ideas" (Appendix 4).

The desire for sociability became a significant motivation behind the club programme which I subsequently developed. Indeed, many of the collaborative artists I interviewed for this thesis identified conversation and interaction as a key ambition of their night (Interviews with Simon Green (RAYA), Mark Webber (Little Stabs at Happiness), and DJ Cliffy (Batmacumba). Working with a disparate group of artists on the club and live programme, their individual relationship with the Institute was a key finding of the primary research. For some, there was a familiar relationship through engagement with other aspects of the programming over the years. Mark Webber (Little Stabs at Happiness) had been a

frequenter of the ICA's Avant Guard film programming over the years (Interview, 2019). Tom McCarthy was taken as a child to the ICA most Saturdays, where he informed me there were regular visits by clowns and other children's entertainers! (Interview, 2019) This experience ushered him into a lifelong engagement across the programming areas. For others, the ICA was a more problematic proposition. Many cited the unwelcome reception that they first encountered at the box office. Far from the cheery smiles of commercial entertainment venues, the ICA reception was populated by several staff members who clearly deemed the role to be something of an inconvenience. "You were faced with this antipathy from the staff they would do everything to kind of make it unpleasant to get into it. The idea that you are disturbing their peace" (DJ Cliffy, *Batmacumba*, interview, 2019)

Perhaps more significant was the relationship with the institute for those artists who held no connection at all to its history. '*Raya*' ran in the ICA bar for two years (1998 to 2000). They were a collective from Essex with four key members: a swimming instructor, a psychologist, a computer programmer and a recently sacked firefighter and union activist of 20 years; none of them had ever attended the ICA. Indeed, the central London location was what interested them most. Raya gained their night by default. A brief club residency had been offered to an acquaintance of theirs, 'Stray'. He had been called away on a well-paid job and suggested Raya get in touch. When I met with Raya founder Simon Green, he talked me through the concept, which involved platforming politics through visuals in an immersive style together with filtering out emerging trends from the dance and EDM (Electronic Dance Music) scene of the time. To be honest, these genres were not a great interest of mine, however, I thought the idea had potential and offered them a trial of four monthly nights. Being situated firmly in the rave scene and outside of the cultural sector, working with an institution raised several concerns amongst RAYA's peers:

> "Then I find out the ICA is really important, and the 'scene' start hammering up 'you've sold out – you're going to the ICA, we get all that shit from the ravers – they

> are saying don't go don't go - I said it's alright we are storming the Bastille here and when we get it – you are coming with us – it's all our opportunities." (Green, Interview, 2020).

A healthy suspicion of the institution by those who held no ties to it was a frequent conversation that I engaged in. It was the establishment, it was powerful, and it was, for many of the artists I went on to work with, 'the other'. Part of my curatorial role over the ensuing years was establishing a sense of trust between a diverse cohort of artist practitioners and the Institution. This could only be done by careful mediation to encourage a suspension of disbelief by both parties. The artists had to believe that the Institute could afford them greater freedoms than the commercial sector and a more professional and visible platform to explore. Equally, the Institution had to mend its curatorial ways and actively seek out the scenes and ideas which were originated in the popular sphere.

The ICA bar was identified as the right scale and context for more intimate music-led events, being small in scale and undoubtedly civilised in comparison to much of the club London scene at that time. There had been a surge in mega-clubs across the capital; Fabric, Turnmills, Bagley's, Ministry of Sound, and Heaven, which catered to the boom in the dance music scene and accompanying thirst for mass social experiences. (Haider interview 2019) With a 250 capacity in the bar, and 450 with the added theatre space, club nights at the ICA offered a contrasting, safe, social space (Green, 2020; Heider, 2019; DJ Cliffy, 2019). This contrast was observed by the press at the time, with one Time Out review of the Brazilian club night Batmacumba, describing the ICA as having something of a cathartic effect. "Squeezing through the dithering throngs of Leicester Square on a Saturday night was always going to infuriate us. Once we've crossed Trafalgar Square and slipped into The Mall's regal solitude, our fiery tempers have subsided…" (Review Nov-24-Dec 1,1999, No.1527)

Alongside many music audiences in the 1980s, Electronic Lounge's Robin Rimbaud had been an attendee of the now legendary Rock Weeks at the ICA, and it was the energy and connectivity of these events he sought to emulate in his club night:

> "…you would go to it (Rock Week) because it would cost you four pounds a ticket and you'd see six bands in a night and you hung out at the bar and talked to other people and you'd get that social aspect, the equivalent in the art world is that you have openings. I find those the most obnoxious things ever." (Interview, 2019)

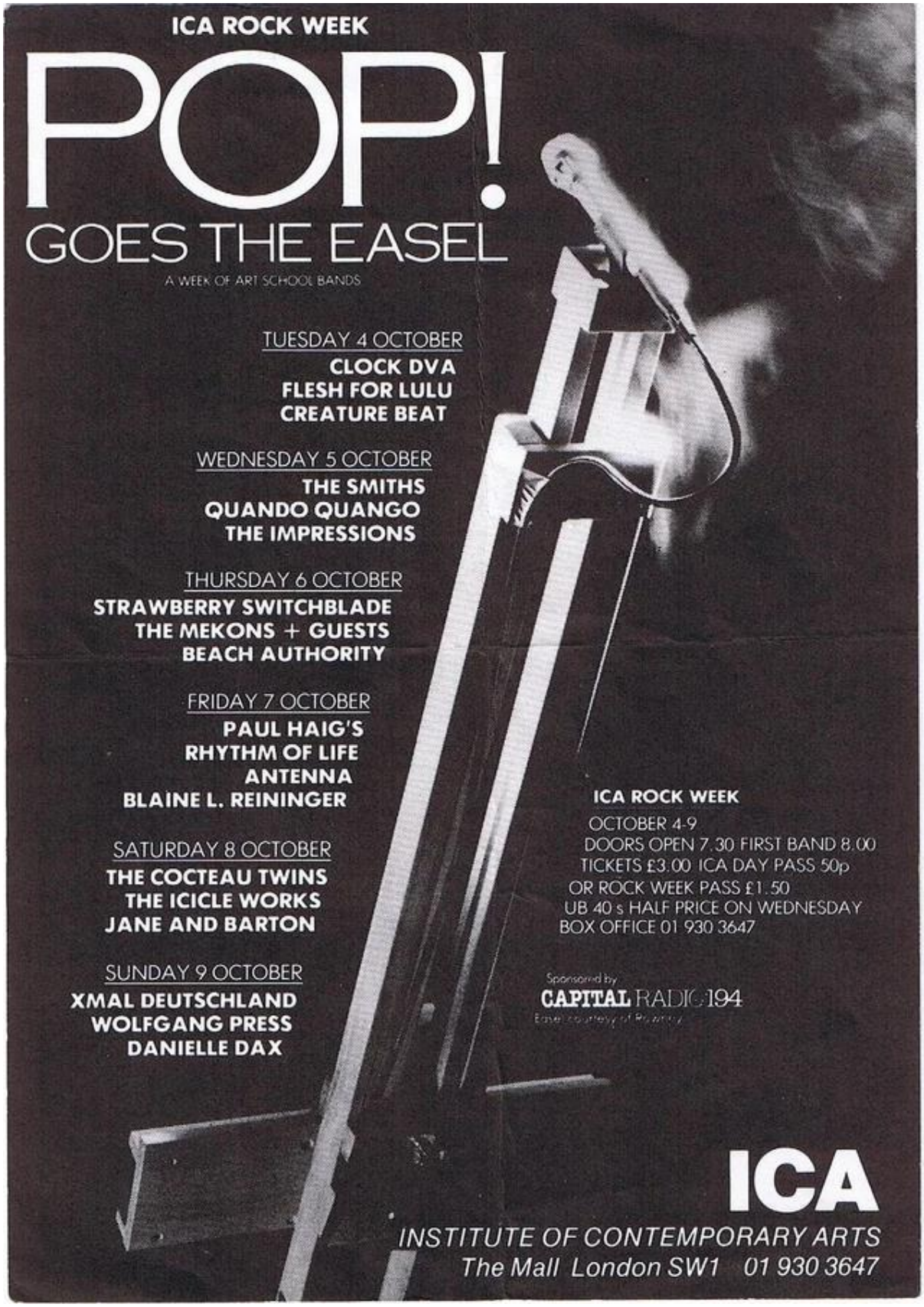

Figure 12. Poster for Rock Week, ICA (courtesy of Robin Rimbaud)

The Rock Weeks gave significant exposure to many young bands of the time, some of whom went on to legendary status, including Depeche Mode, Janes Addiction, The Cocteau Twins, Sonic Youth, The Stone Roses and The Smiths. Whilst the formal programming of the ICA was firmly focused on headier things, the Rock Weeks, initiated by Performance Director Michael Morris in the 1980s were a vital point of access for a broader demographic of music fans who began to claim the ICA social space as their own and by proxy absorb aspects of the broader culture on offer.

Rimbaud's proposition for Electronic Lounge was initially rejected by Flood, who cited a lack of finance as the main objection. Undeterred, he countered this argument and proposed paying personally for the first two nights himself. This was agreed upon, and he set about on a one-man marketing mission for Electronic Lounge, achieving considerable success. By the second month, the night was sold out, forcing the ICA's hand to take over the financial reins. The night retained its residency for a further five years. Musically eclectic, ranging from John Cage to Motorhead, resisting cliques and fandom (Rimbaud interview, 2019). The emergence of music technology was a key feature of the night premiering sound patterns to audiences for the first time. Unlike the mainstream club scene, audiences went to *Electronic Lounge* not for the known but for the unknown. One further crucial feature of the night was the audience balance between the genders (Rimbaud interview, 2019). It was notably a safe and relaxed environment with a 1 am curfew, which was situated between bar and club door times, with night busses were still running, all adding to the overall accessibility to the night.

Set aside from the official programme, Electronic Lounge was classified in the monthly ICA Bulletin not as an official event but as a member's treat. If you had a membership, you and your friend got in free was the messaging. Marketing, not art, was the Institution's overriding motivation for staging the night. The subservient status of *Electronic Lounge* was on occasion made quite acute by members of the Live Arts team, who, when offended by a

sound bleed into the adjacent theatre, did not think twice in literally pulling the plug on the night, much to Rimbaud's horror:

> "I think it's to do with ignorance and a lack of understanding and appreciation to deal with these things… (there are) those establishments and those environments were still locked within such old-fashioned parameters they don't know how to deal with it." (Rimbaud interview, 2019)

During my first weeks in post, I became increasingly baffled that a contemporary art Institute practised a non-submission policy within the visual arts. Further, for the chosen few who were selected, there was a three- to four-year 'waiting list' to endure. This policy negated the idea of representing the contemporary in the moment and, in doing so, reinforced the power held by the curators at the time. In contrast to the Live Arts programme which consciously operated an open call policy "to smoke out the new" from the underground (Kiedan interview, 2024), the visual arts dealt only with sanctified artists who were thoroughly vetted by peers before admission. Through the mechanisms of the markets and allied conspiratorial agents generated by the explosion of Biennales at the time, the leading galleries and institutions moved ahead with the programme only once there was agreement among all parties that a particular artist time was now and further that it enhanced a curatorial meta-narrative at the time.

Sobered by the sluggish and cautious gallery approach, I employed a new set of curatorial criteria drawn largely from my time in the DIY scene and at *Factual Nonsense*. To broaden cultural ownership of the ICA, which by now I considered vital, all and any ideas proposed to my programme were considered, and I met in person most of the artists who submitted. Proposals were measured purely on the dual standards of cultural integrity via consideration of the use of the whole of the ICA available spaces and social accessibility. Was it new or a variation on the present programme? Is there a potential audience who might embrace it?

Further, through open conversation with participants, the shaping of the performance or night was a mutual construction driven by the personal passions and practices of participants and connected to the programme through an unspoken desire for cultural and social expansion. In the programming of the club nights, I resisted the curatorial compulsion to ratify culture as 'art', as that wasn't their point. Though many of the nights provided a social backdrop for the presentation of art forms, the programme set a number of new propositions for the Institute to give access to cultures drawn from popular cultures and the underground and enabled through the Institute's resources and prestige to explore them on a more meaningful level. It was time to get back to the playground as far as I was concerned.

Guerilla Tactics: Recollections on the Foundation of the Club Night Programme

"Viv didn't so much as open the back door to the ICA for us; she gave the bloody keys away"

(Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard interview, 2018)

Though I had visited the galleries and cinema at the ICA many times before working there, I was most at ease in the ICA bar. Situated on two levels with a small, raised corner area and mirrored backdrop, the bar was the most comfortable space in an otherwise formally structured Institute. Contrasting to the programmed spaces, which were sites for considered contemplation, the bar was busy and noisy, a site for discourse and pleasure. Though its location on The Mall and limited visibility at street level rendered it a destination venue away from the main drag of London's West End, a diverse mix of people sought it out, with the 1 am licence undoubtedly adding to the appeal. The bar was the anomaly in the ICA, informal

in nature and neutral, yet cited at the core of the Institute's layout, linking as it did the exhibition spaces, theatre and talks rooms.

It soon became clear that the ICA bar was curatorially something of a no-man's-land and was ripe for the picking. Looking further around the ICA, it occurred to me that there were other, less obvious unused sites and spaces – the un-consecrated, in-between-areas. The long white corridor which connected the box office to the bar lay bare, affording the visitor a somewhat cold and lonely entrance to the Institute. The cinema and cinematheque stopped screening at 11 pm each night, leaving its facilities unused until the 1 am curfew. The theatre was also unprogrammed between the seasons. These were the neglected sites and spaces which combined became a treasure chest of possibility. A scavenger instinct had kicked in – these were my 'Sites of Perfection' (Compston), there was just the issue of authority to contend with.

I didn't like nightclubs for environmental reasons, I found them overall too loud, unsocial and overpopulated. I had tried a range of nights, from being aged seventeen as the only sober person at The Hacienda to London's indie clubs. My combined experiences of persistent noise and the persistent smell of urine invariably left me longing for bed. Now at the ICA (1996), I saw an opportunity to create something of an antidote to this experience. A club night was a curatorial opportunity to layer a night from the initial appeal of sociability and hedonism underpinned by a contemplative programme in the unused spaces of the ICA. The nights were interwoven with instant cultures. The 'four-hour exhibition' in the unused gallery corridor became a staple feature of the clubs along with experimental short film programmes in the Cinematheque. Bar walls became projection spaces; toilets had sound work installed. When the gatekeepers were safely off the premises, the night shift moved in. This programme cut short the sequence of delays and permissions to have work shown at the ICA, with many artists taking credit for having been exhibited at the venue, albeit for one night between the hours of 9 pm and 1 am. Artists who showed at the nights, including

photographer Barbara Wagner, whose work premiered as part of Batmacumba in 2008 and went on to represent Brazil at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019. (Labiennale.org).

Figure 13. Barbara Wagner, Brasilia Teimosa series (2005-2007). Image courtesy of Michael Clifford.

Batmacumba founder DJ Cliffy recalls the backstory during our discussion:

> "She [Barbara Wagner] saved up to put her work on in the corridor because there was a gap in the programme, so we elbowed it in and after that exhibition that was when the exhibitions department suddenly went 'the corridor is now official space." (Interview, 2019)

Keen to claw back authority, the ICA exhibitions department had a sudden realisation that the corridor was a programmable space. Undeterred we moved our four-hour programme to the main stairwell of the building. The backlash came from the exhibitions team, who

complained that because of these mini-exhibitions, a whole number of artists were crediting their work with a show at the ICA. This was a direct confrontation to their authority, and they were not pleased. This was, however, the very intention of the programme and continued to feature across my ten years in post.

There were initially so many major practical issues to overcome. The ICA at that time did not have any PA facilities, these were initially supplied by Robin Rimbaud's friend 'Ron, the PA man' who parked his van on The Mall, set up a PA for 9pm, removed it at 1am all for the inclusive price of 50 pounds. There were a couple of mobile projectors but no technicians and the bar walls were painted white, so helpfully, no screen was required. The real issue remained that the ICA was not a club venue, was not staffed as a club venue, and I failed to disclose my programme to the Institute's management for several months until I was eventually called into the Deputy Director, Katy Sender's office, for a quiet chat in February 1997. It was explained to me that while my attempts to expand the ICA membership base were laudable, I was not a curator, and the nights must now cease. With what I can only now recall as an incredible conceit of youth, I proposed a counteroffer. From my experiences in East London, I explained there has been a cultural collision between high and low. The yBa were being paparazzied rolling out of bars and nightclubs; many of them had formed bands, and in the DIY scenes, there was a wave of collaboration between practice and social space. Art, through its mediation, was in no uncertain terms being exported as the new rock n roll. I proposed three further nights in response to this context by inviting visual artists from the yBa scene to host their club nights accompanied by aspects of their visual art. This, I hoped, was a convincing proposition to deflect the directorship from dwelling on the less appealing engagement with popular cultures. Fortunately, it worked.

What followed were a trio of artist-led club nights unimaginatively titled '*The Event' I, II, III*. With little to lose I called the major commercial galleries and pitched the idea to them. The response was overwhelming – the offer of a self-styled club night down the ICA was, it

transpired, an easy sell. The first Event was composed of Tracey Emin, Gillian Wearing and Georgina Starr. In a planning meeting for the night, we agreed to project video work by Wearing and Starr in the Cinematheque from 11-1 am, and Tracey would perform a reading in amongst their DJ'ing. Musically, the night was uninspiring, with the multiple replays of Mud's '*Tiger Feet*', (1975) being most memorable. The screenings were well attended; However, the real feature of the night was the composition of the audience. Alongside a young club and art audience were huddled a besuited clique of the art world's great and the good. Jay Jopling and Karsten Schubert were surrounded by curators and critics, all focused on the night's 'DJs' spinning seventies pop classics. The bar was heaving, and the cultural glitterati stayed until the bitter end and a little worse for wear. Nowhere else would these audiences have merged. The establishment did not, as a rule, frequent the DIY private views in East London, paying instead a daytime visit to keep abreast of developments. The club/art audience would not have received an RSVP to the opening soirees of White Cube and the like. In an interview I gave to the Guardian at the time, I referred to my former experiences: " 'The private view has overridden the concept of the exhibition,' she [Gaskin] claims. 'There has been an explosion of work which doesn't rely on the established gallery spaces.' " (O'Rourke, 1997, online)

Yet the ICA had the combined credibility of being both a cultural agent and social destination, allowing for a brief time the hierarchies which underpinned the art world to be irrelevant. The second '*Event*' ran in a similar format with Matt Collishaw and Angus Fairhurst on the decks and video work screened. The third, however, was on something of a different level. I invited Jake and Dinos Chapman in to discuss a possible night. They were accompanied by their artists/DJ friend Russell Haswell and discussed their proposed event, '*Solar Anus'*. The music, I was informed, would be loud and challenging, derived largely from the industrial/metal scenes. On the two monitors in the bar, the brothers intended to show their film *Bring Me the Head of Franco Toselli* (1995), a ten-minute film featuring two female adult actors employing one of the Chapman's severed heads with penis nose figures for

sexual performance. This was to be screened on a loop. Just two years earlier, this film had premiered in London at The Ridinghouse Editions gallery, which resulted in the show being closed on the grounds of obscenity (Clark, 2015). This detail I decided to keep to myself to ensure that our night could go ahead under the radar. Ahead of the night, Haswell informed the press that the music was going to be somewhat excessive: "...an extreme form of noise that induces a trance-like state, mixed up with pop. Call it satanic, black metal" (O'Rourke, 1997, NP). The night sold out with the now familiar mix of art world elite and club audiences together with an added niche of metal/industrial characters who were fans of Haswell's DJ work. Within the first thirty minutes, an estimated half the audience had left, being less offended by the Chapman Brothers' dalliance with pornography than the relentless gruelling noise emanating from the DJ decks at excessive volume. Within the hour, even my friends and I decided to retire to the pub around the corner, returning just before 1 am to an audience reduced to a dedicated handful of metal lovers only. Friend and attendee of the Solar Anus night, Steve Rushton, recalls the event in our interview:

> SR: "Jake and Dinos Chapman. My God!"
>
> VG: "Do you remember that one?"
>
> SR: "That was such a weird one. If it hadn't been 1997, you'd have been shut down" (Interview, 2021)

In 1997 Philip Dodd took over the post of ICA Director, initiating a cataclysmic period of change with almost seventy per cent of the ICA's staff resigning in the first year. This, it transpires, was a calculated flushing out of the old predicated by an external report commissioned by the Arts Council, who were concerned with the ICA's diabolical financial state. They were deployed to speak to the ICA members to take the temperature of the institution just before Dodd's arrival: "…and this report said the ICA was like a dysfunctional family. In that sense, for me, the most important thing was to get rid of as many members of the family as I could" (Dodd interview, 2021). Dodd's vision for the ICA was to instill a sense

of, to employ his term, ‘cultural promiscuity’ amongst the renewed curatorial team. Within this greater process, my guerilla activities at nighttime were offered a lifeline. In his recent *New Statesman* open letter to Tony Blair, Dodd emphasised a change in cultural consumption which chimed with my practice:

> “People are more and more interested in DIY culture. This is an audience that won't be told what to enjoy or how to enjoy it; won't be told that they can't enjoy both the Trocadero Arcade and the Tate Gallery. Programmers and professionals are going to have to reinvent themselves to stay in touch with this culture.” (New Statesman, 04/11/97,Vol.126, Issue 4329, p.39)

Having attended a club night early in his tenure, which featured live author readings and DJs featuring Ian Rankin, I overheard Dodd asking who’s responsible for these events. I was called over and told to go to his office on Monday morning. Fully expecting to receive my P45, I was instead asked which programming department I’d like to join. This is how it all started. Chance and chancing in a unique time with a unique set of conditions, I packed up my membership bag, climbed the stairs to the second-floor corner and became the new and only member of the Live Arts team.

The live programme was constructed in response to the many cultural hybrids which were forming across the capital and beyond at this time. Club journalist Arwa Heider draws a parallel between DIY cultures in art and club cultures at this time, both she determines were in a “state of flux” and motivated less by cultural conventions but a very present “intuitive ethos” (Interview, 2019). Forgotten or neglected cultures/subcultures, the positioning of niche content into the social construct of a club night and the informal integration of cultural products blurred the high and low, becoming defining features of the programme. Not to oversell my integrity, I was always happy to employ the odd famous figure as ‘audience bait’ to make the art more palatable. These strategies were not aimed at denying the dominance

of the Institution, its historical significance and its position of influence on the mechanics of the cultural sector but to revive a sense of adventure and risk I perceived to be absent in the ICA, which could extend to wider practice:

> “It [the Live programme] didn’t legitimise the DIY culture, but it bred confidence into it, because this long-standing institution that was by Buckingham Palace, that was set up by this group of artists who wanted to have a non-institution institution, it helped support other things simply by being”. (Lisa Le Feuvre interview, 2021)

It was a subtle but ultimately significant shift in curatorial approach which signified a wider engagement with culture and involvement of a new kind of audience who wanted their culture presented more on their terms than that prescribed by the establishment:

> “Almost like a beach it was the wave of DIY culture was going up this beach and it was leaving in its high tide mark but then the sea was going back into the DIY culture, and it was taking some of that sand from the ICA, some of that grit and that it became a moment of, I don’t know, DIY culture-making institutions more interesting.” (Lisa Le Feuvre Interview, 2021).

1997 witnessed something of a revolution at the ICA. Having alleviated itself from historical curatorial constraints, it was a lighter, more flexible institution which sought engagement with a broader range of cultures. Whilst at that time the juxtaposition of formal and informal artform’s made uneasy bedfellows and the ICA susceptible to criticism from many corners, it was, at last, fulfilling its remit to respond to cultures in real-time and connect them back to the social site for consumption.

Chapter 9: Curating The Social: ICA Club Night Programme

Introduction

Having critically examined the internal and external cultural conditions which informed the curation of my live programme, I will now connect autoethnographic and participant interview materials to analyse the ensuing club night and cultural reenactment programmes. These programme areas were inspired by my experiences of the DIY scene, primarily the BANK private view and Joshua Compston's 'sites of agitation'. In the drive to externalise the ICA's vision to embrace emerging cultures, which thrived outside of the art institution and create new sites for connective discourse, the program generated several radical shifts.

Interdisciplinary curation within the social site requires the downplaying of the curator's gatekeeping role. Moreover, the recontextualisation of the criteria dictating what qualifies as art necessitates reevaluating what criteria accredits an artist as 'institution-worthy'. Subsequently, access is afforded to those formally marginalised within the gallery system, being more closely affiliated with subcultural music and clubbing scenes and thus afforded popular status. This new wave of artist was invited not to present but to play with the spaces, facilities, and consequently with the identity of the Institution, to reappropriate it as a site for pleasure, play and discourse. To this extent, curatorial authority was extended to the artist in sharp and necessary contrast to the expanded authority of both the institutional and globalised curator during this period. Subsequently, a new swathe of audiences claimed a stake in the Institution. Through the informality of the programme, the ICA was temporarily alleviated of its formal duties governed by the greater international gallery system and instead became a vehicle for the exposure of a wide range of cultural activity, diversifying the audiences beyond recognition. This history has not received critical academic attention to date.

My model was later adopted by the global art institute, but as a marketing tool for new audiences, extraneous to the formal artistic programming which remains a feature today. This fundamental misuse of the curatorial strategies for curating the social is a key motivation of this study. For ten years (1996-2006) the ICA's live programming successfully proposed a new remit for the institution as one responsive to emerging ideas, cultures, artists and audiences at a grassroots level. This will now be addressed in detail.

Over this ten-year period, I directed the overall programming of club nights, performances and (from 2001) new media work (then a genre in its infancy). This averaged three nights of programme each week featuring regular club nights, alongside a presentation of performance art and dance work, interdisciplinary experiments and a new genre of reenactment programming. As I am unable to document over a thousand nights of the programme within the scope of this study, I will emphasise key areas of the programme and their impact.

Access All Areas

One of the notable features of the club night programme was their disparity. There was little overlap either culturally or in terms of audience, as each established their own distinct identities. By engaging with the history and status of the ICA, many club night hosts made full use of the facilities on offer, with many crediting the programme with affording them the permissive freedom to devise their distinct brand: "You gave us the freedom to experiment and give resolution to the idea." (Simon Green, 2020, '*RAYA*'), "That freedom for me personally was really an amazing and wonderful thing it really made me feel like I was right in my convictions about music and nights and events" (Nick Luscombe, 2019 '*Roots and Shoots*')

By encouraging hosts to extend their concept beyond music and into the fields of visual art, cinema programming, spoken word, dance, etc., they expanded their curatorial and

experimental range across various forms of media, which had a significant effect on the experience of their audiences. The social had effectively expanded into the curatorial, gaining additional freedoms by operating outside of the conventions of cultural etiquette. This permitted the fusion of diverse cultures, both high and low, into new hybrid disciplines.

The longest-running club night at the ICA was the Brazilian-themed club *Batmacumba.* (1997-2007). A friend of a friend introduced me to Michael Clifford, aka DJ Cliffy, a recent graduate and Latin culture obsessive. His passion for Brazilian music and culture was infectious, complemented by in-depth research trips undertaken every few weeks, where he would scour the bars and record markets of Brazil to unearth musical heritage and future trends. Whilst Latin music was an ongoing scene in London during the 1990s, Brazilian culture was then virtually unknown: “There certainly wasn’t anything reflecting the youth music movements of Brazil” (Heider interview, 2019). Cliffy identified that the British consumption of Brazilian music did not reflect the authentic expanse of its host culture. Through his research, Batmacumba fused old and new cultures, from Jorge Ben and Gilberto Gil mixed with the latest in Brazilian drum and bass. (Haider, 2019; Cliffy, 2019). This pioneered a new scene in London’s nightlife.

World music had been a notable feature of the ICA programme during the 1950s. (Massey, Muir, 2014). When reviewing one night which accompanied the opening of the exhibition ‘Aspects of British Life’ (1950), the *Picture Post* recreated the scene, with racial terms deemed acceptable at the time:

> “On the walls were the strangely exciting primitive paintings from the tiny Negro republic, and the whole room pulsed with the rhythm of drums and dancing feet…And through it all the drums kept beating, till the audience themselves were compelled by the music. Soon white and coffee and black-skinned dancers were moving together

> to the throb of this primitive, eternally compelling rhythm." (*Picture Post*. 14th April 1951 in Massey, Muir, 2014 p.30)

This energy and cultural integration were once again revived. The connectivity of art forms and audience was a central feature of *Batmacumba* attracting a youthful, racial mix. The nights featured a host of Brazilian cultures from visual art to dance, live samba bands, capoeira and a host of experimental short films that Cliffy would bring back from base in his hand luggage. *Time Out* club writer and Batmacumba regular Arwa Heider articulates the informality of the audience engagement with different aspects of the programme:

> "One of the brilliant things was like literally leaving this heaving dance floor and what it does to you – like I can't take this anymore I need to – I need some air and then going in to watching experimental Brazilian films – you know? it was a gateway to something else." (Heider, 2019)

Figure 14, Batmacumba Flyers (Courtesy of Michael Clifford)

Figure 15. Batmacumba Flyer (Image courtesy of Michael Clifford)

Batmacumba employed curatorial themes to give distinction to specific nights, something which the music press engaged with:

> "*Batmacumba* is, of course, the club night which has been flying the flag for Brazilian music since waaaaay before its renaissance in recent years. On Saturday the respected bossa jazz crew Jazzinho perform live with beguiling vocalist Guida De Palma. DJ support comes from *Batmacumbas* main man, Cliffy, playing anything from bossa nova to Latin funk and more contemporary styles, which proved such a fillip in postmillennial clubland." (Verma, 12th April, 2012, *The Standard*. On *Batmacumba* Summer Boat Party).

By expanding the understanding and depth of Brazilian culture, *Batmacumba* employed thematic devices to provide highlights over the long run. One 'The *Batmacumba* World Cup Special' featured an extensive exhibition of photographs by now renowned documentary photographer Julio Etchart, in which he juxtaposed street scenes of football from around the globe with dramatic effect.

Figure 16 and 17. Football Photographs (Images courtesy of Julio Etchart)

Batmacumba's extended residency at the ICA culminated in 2008 with a weeklong art and film programme focusing on the youth of Recife to accompany its tenth anniversary and departure from the ICA. It was a testament to the potential within popular culture to create a platform for traditional art forms and re-install interdisciplinary programming into the ICA.

Film Club

The employment of film as a 'chill out space' became a common feature across many of the nights. Film, however, was the dominant feature of two long-standing nights, Philip Ilson's '*Full Length'* and Mark Webber's '*Little Stabs at Happiness'*. Both are now eminent film curators, though still learning their craft in the late 1990s, as Webber states in our interview, "I was learning at the audiences' expense" (2019). Philip Ilson had previously run a film club in 1995, 'The Halloween Society'. The night first took place in the upstairs room of The

Crown & Two Chairman in Dean Street, where in true DIY fashion, he was projecting short films onto ‘a sheet gaffer taped on the wall’ (luxonline.org.uk). After trialling several pub rooms**,** the night finally took up residency at the Notre Dame Hall off Leicester Square, where it ran for five years, drawing large crowds (luxonline.org.uk). Referencing a cabaret format, Halloween Society nights had a compare in the shape of comedian Eddie Sponge, who maintained a light narrative to the night. *Halloween Society* was part of a wider subculture of filmic cabaret including; *Omsk, Shaolin, Uncut, Kinokulture*, and soon-to-be ICA night *Cinergy*, platforming film against a hybrid backdrop of comedy, performances and VJ’ing, prolific at this time (Heider, 2019).

Having been impressed by the hybridisation of the *Halloween Society* nights I approached Philip Ilson to curate a potential club night at the ICA. Inspired by an emerging trend for live film rescoring, particularly the ICA’s live night of musician and sound artist Scanner’s Imax rescore of Jean Luc Godard’s *Alphaville* in 1998, Ilson’s night ‘*Full Length’* was launched in 2001. *Full Length* drew on an eclectic mix of artists and film choices. Over the three years, 28 films were re-scored live (Ilson, 2017) ranging from DJ Yoda vs. The Goonies to ‘Ladytron vs. Tron’ (ICA bulletin). Unlike other regular nights, *Full Length* had a pick-n-mix audience who came on the strength of either the band or the film, though rarely for both (Ilson, 2017), drawing regular capacity crowds of 400 people. Ilson went on to become the founding Director of the London Short Film Festival (2004-present day) and Short Film Programmer at the BFI (BFI.org.uk).

Little Stabs at Happiness was the creation of Pulp guitarist and experimental film enthusiast Mark Webber. The launch of Channel Four and their late-night experimental film screenings had a profound influence on a teenage Webber. This passion he pursued upon relocating to London, where he became a frequenter of The Scala Cinema, London Filmmakers Co-op screenings and the ICA’s Cinematheque programme, which he noted had a regular ‘crowd’ of around six people in attendance (Interview, 2019). Having met the band Pulp in 1986,

Webber assumed multiple roles: fan club president, stage set designer and tour manager. However, it wasn't until 1995, when the band were well established, that he was asked to join them as their guitarist (Nicoll, 1996).

With the rare exception, Webber was not a fan of nightclubs, a scene which his newfound celebrity status drew him into more frequently. "I don't dance", he disclosed (interview, 2019). I bumped into Webber in the ICA bar in 1997. I had just staged my first cultural reenactment performance with artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, to be discussed later. I approached Mark and asked if Pulp would be interested in working with the artists on a further reenactment with a recent 'Stars in their Eyes' winner, Jarvis Cocker look/sound-a-like Gareth Dickinson. He declined, citing Cocker's dislike for tribute acts (although Dickinson was subsequently engaged by the band during Pulps 'This is Hardcore' tour in 1998) (NME, 11th August, 2023). He did, however, have an idea for a club night which he wanted to discuss. *Little Stabs at Happiness*, named after the 1960 Ken Jacobs film, was the most contemplative of all the club nights. Indeed, it was for the first two-thirds largely anti-social. The format was quiet club - film screening - disco with good music. Opening with quiet classical music, the night progressed into the screening of 3-4 experimental short films, a quick break to go to the bar and then back to the theatre for a full-length film, rounded off by a 90-minute disco, according to Webber's tastes.

Figure 18. Little Stabs at Happines DJing (L-R Gregory Kurzawitz, Mark Webber, Ben Wallers. Little Stabs at Happiness (N.D.) Courtesy of Mark Webber.)

The staging of the night was specific. The films had to be projected on 16mm film which incurred frequent interruptions from technical breakdowns and reel changes during the screening of the feature. This for Webber was a necessary casualty in the pursuit of authenticity: “The deterioration or the traces of history on the film and the scratches and build-up to change even… and countdown and I guess there was kind of an aura” (interview, 2019). The audience sat on the floor of the theatre where the event was held, affording an informality to the screening. The disco that wrapped up the night was also very much according to Webber’s taste. Together with Ben Wallers of Country Teasers and schoolfriend Gregory Kurzowitz they would fill the dancefloor with retro classics from The Knacks’ ‘My Sherona’ (1979), to Scottish anthem ‘I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles) (1988) by The Proclaimers with a splash of Nena’s, ‘99 Red Balloons’ (1984) in the mix. Though distinct by an overwhelming dominance of film, Little Stabs was always mediated as a club night, for the

simple fact that “it was easier to explain” (interview, 2019) and therefore relatable on a greater platform.

The language and mediation of the nights were, for me a critical factor across all the programme. The night had to appeal to the broadest possible demographic and listings and reviews in the Guardian Guide and Time Out club pages were essential for a sellout night. The club night programme was financially self-sufficient, this was crucial in averting external cultural agendas or funding requirements. The films Webber was selecting were those he’d previously seen accompanied by a minority audience of half a dozen film enthusiasts. When transposed into Little Stabs at Happiness they were screened to a capacity audience of 450.

In the last throws of the pre-digital age, the flyers for the clubs were an essential communicator. With a strong aesthetic style to the flyers and an underground film noir appeal, Little Stabs’ promotion was strong and consistent. It became a welcome feature of many of the nights that I’d often stand outside the ICA on The Mall and direct confused audience members who were waving their flyers shouting, ‘Does anyone know where this ICA nightclub is? ‘

Figure 19. Little Stabs at Happiness Flyers (Courtesy of Mark Webber)

A further strategy for popular mediation was constant speculation as to whether Jarvis Cocker would appear with his bag of records for the end-of-night disco. This added to the highly eclectic mix of audience members. There was a regular niche of cinema enthusiasts who came only for the screenings. Many inspired by the night's programming went on to work in the industry Webber notes. Webber himself cites Little Stabs as his launchpad into film curation, a sector in which he is now well respected. The rest of the audience was composed of art and indie lovers, Pulp fans and a noticeable sector of young women hoping to catch Cocker's eye that night.

In 1998, The ICA was invited to curate a cultural programme in Beijing to accompany Tony Blair's visit, just a year ahead of the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule (http://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/ChinaUKRelations/introduction/). Little Stabs at Happiness was the selected club night for the visit. Western culture was held with great suspicion at the time; more specifically, Philip Dodd clarifies that the Government were especially nervous about a culture which wasn't 'formal' (Interview, 2021). This visit was before the greater opening up of China, and tensions were high. Who was this Western pop star showing underground films to their youth? The night descended into organisational chaos and, rather than being presented in the intended club space, was instead moved at late notice to the basement of a Beijing hotel. Unpublicised and highly regulated, the audience, Webber recalls, was a mix of besuited businessmen and young escorts and easy-to-spot secret policy totalling around thirty in number. The greater significance of this event was the early steps which the ICA was making into previously impenetrable cultures, which extended to unprecedented cultural fusions back home on The Mall.

Black Kids from Tottenham

The historical significance of the ICA frequently extended into a form of political leverage, which many of the artists actively embraced. Raya (meaning friend) was a socially and politically led night, positioned on the hard left. As discussed, the Raya collective perceived the invitation from the ICA as a social variation on 'storming the Bastille from the inside'. They abandoned the term club for its connotations of pure hedonism. Instead, they framed their night as an inclusive gathering (Green interview, 2020). Asked who Raya was for. Green had a clear idea:

> "When I used to think about our audience, it was a single black girl in Hackney who had a baby, and she's behind the till in Tesco's. She's got one night off with her mates. If she comes to Raya would she like it? Would she get it? Even though she

was probably never going to come. But they did come they did come." (Interview, 2020).

Raya invited artists from their background in the rave scene to perform, frequently handing over the turntables for their night to their guests. On one occasion, they had invited an Asian garage crew, led by DJ Smokey, down to the ICA from Brick Lane, where they had met them during a Raya set at the Brick Lane Festival. The crew appeared in their best outfits only to disclose they were fifteen years old and as such had been turned away by security. The Raya team stepped in and negotiated with the Duty Manager of the night, giving assurances of guardianship and sobriety and somehow the night went ahead. Green explained the significance of this particular event:

> "These were 15-year-old council kids and somehow, they got the idea that this was a big show – it's because of the institution and all of that – it was because they could show the world how good they and the world would be listening. It's like back in Hackney no one gave a fuck, just them and their mates. Here, they've left their mates come into one of the great art venues in the world. It's big they saw it as big." (Green, Interview, 2020)

Figures 20, 21, 22. Raya, (Courtesy of Simon Green)

The greater infrastructure of the ICA was severely challenged by the club programme and particularly by these new audiences. There was a sudden change in cultures, numbers, expectations and class, which it was ill-prepared for in the early months. DJ Cliffy recalls the first few nights of Batmacumba, which were sold out in advance, leaving a crowd of clubbers lingering outside the ICA. Having no security staff or means for number monitoring in the early days, used tickets for the night were handed out through the bar windows, resulting in an estimated additional audience of two hundred clubbers in the hectic bar (Interview, 2019).

DJ Nick Luscombe (Roots and Shoots and Flo-Motion) recalls the frenzied objections from the ICA management to his night 'Dirty Canvas' (2006). The event was the first grime night to leave its familiar territory of East London for the West End. That the night finally located on The Mall was a culture shock for both parties (Luscombe Interview, 2019). The crew wanted to play at the ICA as many of their home venues were threatening for a surging female audience in the Grime scene. The ICA's Centre Manager objected to the night going ahead, citing the numbers of added security that would be required and the time for extended searches, which would render the event unfeasible. The real reason behind the objection is one typical of the cultural gatekeeper when confronted with a change of audience as being: "…purely ignorance, he was just worried that he was gonna have to face a different audience…These people just get comfortable, don't they?" (Luscombe Interview, 2019). I circumnavigated middle management and convinced the ICA's Director of the significance of the night both in terms of culture and audience. The night went ahead.

Figure. 23. Dirty Canvas, ICA Bar 9th September 2006. (ICA image.)

Raya was as much a political vehicle as it was social. The first-ever Raya night coincided with the immediate aftermath of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in September 1997. Upon arriving at the ICA, the Raya collective had to jostle their way through the hordes of mourners who mawkishly filled The Mall to sign the book of condolence. During the night, the foyer was memorably stormed with irate mourners claiming the music was disrespectful to the memory of Diana. Raya negotiated the hysteria by screening footage of the recent migrant worker strike in Seattle protesting The Auvil Fruit Company in Vantage, Washington, on unfair working conditions and the flawed bonus-pay system. (https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/farmwk_ch10.htm).

Raya's political positioning was not a barrier to collaboration with those outside of their ideology. Indeed, they embraced the proposition. On one occasion, The ICA was hosting an assembly of European Ministers of Culture in the theatre. I called Simon Green and asked if Raya would like to host the after-party in the bar. "I was like 'YES'. This is as sell out as you can get. Let's go" (Green, Interview, 2019). The ICA was cleared of all staff and members, while a huge tunnel was erected for security checks minded by large men carrying machine guns. Towards the end of the conference, I invited the Raya crew to come into the theatre for the closing statements of the night, and DJ/psychologist Andy Beck seized the opportunity. The ministers turned out to be largely middle-aged males accompanied by beautiful female assistants now ready to let their hair down to the night. Of greater significance was Beck's amazement at the final speeches made to the ministers just moments before. As Simon Green recalled:

> "He said 'you'll never believe what Philip said at the end of his speech'. I said 'what?' He said, 'And that brings this meeting to a conclusion, and as we leave, I just want to say we have the most dynamic, inventive multimedia collective in the UK - Raya to host this party' I had a tear, mate! He said it in front of the Ministers of Culture of

> Europe! Andy's like we might as well retire now we are never going to beat that – unless we do the Royal Wedding! (Interview, 2019).

Raya went on to work with the British Council and Princes Trust before Simon Green was drawn into tour management for Pusha T and Wu Tan Klan.

A Culture Clash

There are many stories which illustrate a collision of cultures within the club nights, from East End kids taking centre stage to club nights engaging with the politics of the day. Each occurrence and challenge was resolved to confirm the importance of the programme at that time. Insurgence did, on occasion, arise from within the programme. Little Stabs Mark Webber shared his hesitation that the ICA should be hosting club nights at all, "given its glorious history" (Interview, 2019). Upon probing, he self critically cites himself as "snooty and highfaluting". In actuality, he was conflicted, withholding an embedded cognitive dissonance on the subject. Encouraged to start the night to garner a new following for experimental film, which he cites as "playful antagonism", he also, in part, sided with the cultural gatekeeper as he explained: "I am quite conservative. I don't like change, and I think – (pause) – a museum should be a museum and only show the best things, and it shouldn't try and reflect society and bullshit like just show the best work that decided by the experts" (Interview, 2019).

Perhaps my favorite recollection which articulated the cultural polarities which the club nights instigated at the ICA, was in a single moment of interaction. Visual artist, Bob and Roberta Smith was hosting 'The Punk Rock Punch Up' in the bar. This was a playful sound clash between Bob's band 'The Ken Ardley Playboys' and "the monsters of Medway beat, punk rock outfit, Armitage Shanks" (Victor Mount. ICA Bulletin, October 1997) This was a busy night in the bar with performances taking place on both levels. The night was scheduled to pause at 10.30 pm for 'Pie Time', a feature derived from the working men's club tradition

when the audience was offered a warm pie heated in the ICA kitchens for added sustenance. This led to a pivotal moment when pinnie'd up, I turned with a large platter of cheese and onion only to confront Philip Dodd, who was escorting Gore Vidal from his lecture that night in the Cinema. "Pie?" I offered to Mr. Vidal. He declined the gesture.

Conclusion.

Not all of the nights worked at the ICA, and I was privileged as a programmer to afford the occasional failure in the pursuit of curatorial and institutional change. Established as a counteragent to the mainstream club scene and a confrontation to cultural gatekeeping practices at the time, the programme succeeded in creating a revived sense of ownership and authorship among a new demographic. Malbon reminds us that the club space itself affords democratizing attributes: "…the club situation offers clubbers opportunities to inscribe their own creativities upon a shared space, to create a space of their own making of which they are also the consumers" (1998, p.280) When transposed into one of the most significant sites for artistic practice of the twentieth century this transition of power from institute to audiences was a shift of significant proportions. The ICA was social, interdisciplinary and playful once more and critically, it held meaning and significance for a whole host of audiences who had been inducted into the mindset that culture was determined by class and education.

Situated in stark contrast to the absolutist controlling curatorial operations taking place on the global stage at this time, (See chapter one), the club programme offered a distinct alternative strategy. Through a process of mutual trust and respect, the curatorial and institutional ego were at once sidelined for the very purpose of extending authorship of the space to a diverse range of creatives and audiences who took significance from its unique history and extended the opportunity to those around them. This was a curatorial form of pass-the-parcel, where invites were extended into scenes and areas which were at best marginalised and at worst ghettoised. The social vehicle was the key to belonging in these

nights, not a process of sober *Relational Aesthetics*, but genuine intimacy engagement and pleasure.

The curatorial prototypes of the BANK private view and unrealised vision of the Factual Nonsense club (see chapters six and seven), impacted the creation and formation of the ICA programme. BANK's opening nights were a scene in their own right. The naming of the exhibition was done for maximum impact and broad mediation. Crucially, whilst there were invites, there were no bouncers on the door. The artwork was integrated within the social, and the social was a loud, heady mix of socialising and discussion. Informality in the presentation and mediation of the work was their winning formula. These were happy, at times silly events, which allowed for a lively absorption of the art on offer according to the desires of the attendees. Recalling BANK's mantra that "a circus is more fun than a cathedral", the programme that I ushered in at the ICA created a unique social platform for the mediation of culture to the widest possible audience. From fifteen-year-old grime acts from Hackney to a new wave of experimental cinemagoers, social time was re-considered within the gallery walls.

Echoing the principles of the FN Club, an informal social site for cultural expression, I took the principle of normalising art into the everyday and mediating it on the most inclusive of terms. Though undoubtedly the FN Club would have had aesthetic resonances of the Colony Rooms et al, the model of micro-sites for art embedded into the everyday was impactful. The extension of these examples from their East End scene into the institution's walls was, however, a significant leap of faith for all involved. The creatives who constructed the discourse of their nights placed significant trust in the institution and in me to afford them the conditions and materials to 'curate' the elements of their events. The history of the ICA was, in this discourse, a blessing and a curse. The vital significance of the Institute's history and influence called for careful orientation between the gatekeepers of the pure and the limitations of the space. I acted as a mediator between the creatives, often an interpreter of

diverse cultures and scenes to which they were attributed. Whilst I worked closely on the creation of the programme and its content, my trust once assured was in their understanding of the scene and wider cultures, which they diffused into the nights. They, in turn, placed their trust that these cultures would not be diluted by institutional safety measures. This was a raw yet inclusive programme which drew new clusters of people to the Institute and, through the vehicle of these nights, towards a greater cultural experience. Moreover, it repurposed pleasure into the heart of the ICA, which countered a culture of introspection within the institute at this time, re-introducing dialogue between the programming strands in the desire to present cultures at their most expanded form. For over ten years, the club night programme became an important feature on the cultural and social scene of London, proposing a new site and methodology for art and entertainment to be played out and experimented with. For all involved – a deep learning experience took place as, for a moment in time, art dropped its guard.

Chapter 10. Cultural Reenactments: Calling All Agents

Introduction

Within this chapter, I will reflect upon a further area of programming that I launched at the ICA, cultural reenactment. This also being informed by the curatorial principles developed within the DIY scene. During my tenure, I commissioned seven performance/film/installations, which contributed to a greater cultural genre, becoming globally acknowledged and explored by artists over a decade (Reynolds, 2009). I will discuss the DIY context surrounding the first cultural reenactment which I presented, the curatorial relationship between performer and performed and the construction of a new language around the genre. I shall continue this discussion with case studies of two of the reenactments which I commissioned: Rod Dickinson's '*Jonestown Reenactment'* (ICA, 2002) and Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's film '*File Under Sacred Music'* (ICA, 2003). Both projects reflect the disparity and complexity of meanings underpinning this genre, which evolved over just five years. The impact and legacy of cultural reenactment will conclude this chapter, referencing back to the specific curatorial methods at play, which stood in sharp contrast to those prevalent at the time. Author Tom McCarthy, a key theorist of the ICA reenactments, notes the importance of the temporary nature of this programme, which questioned the greater area of devised live experience. Cultural reenactment was embraced by the global art world and subsequently became the subject of critical debate across the 2000s, creating a reflective narrative that I will go on to discuss.

Origins and Reflections

Reenactments have been a niche, hobbyist activity in the UK since the formation of the Sealed Knot Society in 1967 (Lutticken, 2005). From the Vikings to noted battles from the Second World War, groups of men and women have engaged themselves in researching and replaying key moments from history for the purposes of entertainment and pleasure. In

the field of popular music, this stimulus manifests into the field of tribute acts, who, with such punchline names as '*The Bootleg Beatles' and 'No Way Sis'*, have recreated the image, music and set lists of many a known musical act. Though not precisely pinpointed, some of the first tribute acts to emerge include Elvis's tribute 'Buddy Ocha' in the late 1950s and Beatles performers 'The Buggs' (Victor, 2023). It has been argued that tribute and reenactors share a common desire to engage with a historical or cultural moment through the embodiment of all the original attributes in a quest to experience a deeper understanding of the original (Willets, 2017). Whilst this is also true of cultural reenactment, it is important to make some clear distinctions between the two fields at the outset.

In the practice of historical reenactment, specific battles or conflicts of the past are recreated and experienced by the participants with an observational audience accompanying them. It is the desire of the participants themselves to experience the essence of the past through their restaging of it. In the examples of 'living history' and 'live-action role play', as Inke Arns has observed, 'these practices are closer to a performance of the past than an embodiment' (2007). In 'living history', the conditions of the past are staged and occupied by participants, who assume the social etiquettes from their chosen time. Live action role-play operates upon devised lines with characters and actions being pre-determined. Whilst all function as conduits to the past, the subtlety of difference, in the case of cultural reenactment, is significant.

Some have argued that the flurry of reenactments in the late 1990s and early 2000s responded to a longing for an emotional connection to the past in an increasingly mediated world (Arns, 2007). Through its reenactment, history can be, to some extent, experienced and understood with the present (Mendelsohn, 2006; Blackson, 2007). Further art reenactment is an admission of uncertainty in the reporting of history (See chapter two) that the past is mediated like Chinese whispers, and as such, 'truth' in history is something of an impossibility (McCollum, 2008). As Alun Munslow argues in his defence of a 'narrative-

linguistic determination' of meaning, "history is subject to the same narrative and imaginative constraints as other forms of realist writing, rather than being privileged by an access to knowable intentionality and that this constitutes objective historical knowledge" (2002, p.43). For the artist engaged in historical reenactment, therefore, an essential degree of manipulation of the represented sources becomes vital in their realisation of the past within the present.

Art Reenactments: Genesis at the ICA

In 1996, during my early months at the ICA, I read a review in Frieze magazine by Dave Barrett on a one-off performance by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard entitled '*The World Won't Listen*' (Barrett, 1996). The performance had taken place at the East End Gallery, 30 Underwood Street in November 1995, soon after the artists had graduated from Goldsmiths College. Whilst the concept belonged to Forsyth and Pollard, the actual performance was given by a touring Smiths tribute act who performed under the name of 'The Still Ills'. The review depicted a divided crowd, one composed of loyal Smiths fans eager to subsume disbelief and embrace the fake as fact and the other an art crowd who were "anthropologists, observing the way 1980s people lose themselves to memories of music". Barrett himself was conflicted being a fan of the music, recalling that "only my 'I'm-watching-performance-art attitude kept me from singing out loud" (1996. Online NP)

Upon reading the review, it struck me that outside of the Institution, the DIY scene was at ease working with notions of popular culture and music in neither an ironic nor performance-encoded fashion. This filled me with a joy which was only dampened by the depiction of the unabashed Smiths fans being observed by what we can only suppose were the 'sharp theorising intellects' of the art crowd recalling the rules of simulacra. I invited the artists into the ICA to learn more, though to what end was unknown at the time, given I was still the Membership Secretary and devoid of any authority. During my meeting with Iain and Jane, I was instantly engaged by their demonstration of love and respect for popular music and how

they were employing its near-universal power to collapse the distance between audience and performer and link the past to the present (into the past). We established a quick and firm bond as it transpired that we were all former friends of Joshua Compston and grounded in his curatorial ideologies. Not a sneer between them; they loved pop, they loved art, and they were eager to celebrate culture and entertainment in a way that resonated. My lack of curatorial status did not go unmissed by Iain and Jane, who mused on the subject on the way home, “Did she just want to book the band?” they recalled (Interview, 2018). Little did we know but this meeting was the beginning of a what became a greater genre of artist reenactments throughout the decade, with far reaching consequences:

> " Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, the duo who pioneered this largely British phenomenon, ... Treating The Still Ills 'as a ready-made, in the Marcel Duchamp sense', they staged an event involving the band, with mixed results; they were then invited to restage it at the ICA by curator Vivienne Gaskin, who would soon become the principal art-world impresario behind Britain's re-enactment boom"
> (Reynolds. 2011 p.44.)

Jane and Iain came to the meeting with a firm proposition, to reenact a Smiths concert, ten years to the day since the band announced their breakup in the pages of the New Musical Express on 1st August 1997 (BBC.co.uk). Having checked the ICA’s online booking system, I saw the date was free in the theatre and booked the performance. This was an escalation of my guerrilla actions at the ICA. Running some perceived social events in the bar for the ICA members was one thing, but programming performance art for the theatre was a whole different game and did not go unnoticed. I sat down with the Live Art curators, who were more amenable than I had predicted however, they made it clear that this was a one-off opportunity not to be repeated. The real resistance came from the theatre technician, Justin O’Shaughnessy who only ‘conceded’ to the event as he admired Forsyth and Pollard’s

ongoing project '*Words and Pictures'* (Iainandjane). At this time, it seemed gatekeeping was an endemic practice within the corridors of the ICA.

In the months that followed, Iain, Jane and I met weekly in the ICA bar to construct the details of the ensuing performance, entitled "*The Smiths Is Dead*". This was my first curatorial project and their first commission by a public institute; I was twenty-six, they were twenty-five, and we had, somehow, acquired access to the ICA platform for one night. All three of us at once had everything yet nothing to lose in the creation of this event. During our meeting, we unwittingly established some base rules for cultural reenactment which went on to influence a greater body of work. This was not to be an observation on fandom but the reconstruction of a cultural moment, one which in the case of The Smiths break up held significant emotional connotations for many among our generation. It was decided that nothing of the original was to be present, everything from the stage background to the bar cocktail, the 'Oscillate Wildly', were to be fictions whilst simultaneously access points to the collective memory of the original moment:

> "We felt our way towards the kind of framing of how we were going to write about it in the (ICA) pamphlet, how we were going to promote it and how we were going to frame it as art rather than Live Art or entertainment. I think we found that together I think it was out of necessity though otherwise it would have just been a gig." (Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard interview, 2018)

At 7.30pm on the 1st of August 1997, I was standing on the balcony of the ICA's Nash Room overlooking The Mall. In place of the usual tourists and security, I witnessed a parade of some few hundred young people fully quaffed and beflowered marching towards the ICA. Once at capacity, I illicitly allowed in a remaining hundred or so fans who were standing, dejected on The Mall. The burden of being a Smiths fan seemed too much of a trial to now

encounter further trauma in life. The performance revealed the potential that cultural reenactment had in the unifying relationship between performer and audience. Though it wasn't obvious until after the event, the realisation of the reenactment was largely dependent upon this audience and their engagement with the fictional moment as a genuine experience. '*The Smiths is Dead'* embraced a largely non-art audience, some five hundred strong, offering themselves over to a reconstruction of the memory of their idols. Further, the experience of the performance highlighted the extreme risk that Iain and Jane were encountering as artists. For as meticulous their rehearsing, staging and fastidious attention to detail was in the months running up to the event, it was, in the end, an amateur band fronted by a 'brickie from Birmingham' (Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard interview, 2018) who was on stage that night representing their practice. This was a degree of liveness and risk I had not witnessed before, a search for the hyper-real. The performance, it transpired, was resting with the audience on their total submission via the artist's construction of signifiers to their idols, which in turn instigates a collective suspension of disbelief. This became central to the construction of the genre and marked a change in live artistic and curatorial practice, as Robert Blackson has commented: "The degree to which performers empower themselves through layers of authenticity is secondary to their willingness to allow personal interpretation rather than verisimilitude to influence their actions." (2007. NP)

In the absence of the 'original' in the reenactment, the authorship of the night is shared among the artists, performers and audience members. This affords the artist the role of signalling, with fastidious detail, the audience to the signifiers of the original act. In turn, this affords the artists the permissive freedom to manipulate events within the contemporary moment. The 'script', in cultural reenactments, is constructed between remnants of the past and the conditions of the present. For many who have theorised on cultural reenactments, the ability of the past to critique the present is frequently cited (Manelsohn, 2006; Arns, 2007; Blackson, 2007). "It turns the passive reader or observer into an active witness or participant" (Arns, 2007). This has the accumulative effect of opening up the live arena to the

subjective responses of the individual in the audience (McCarthy, 2004). As I argued at the time, the impossible acquisition of the original moment in many ways negates the idea of the need for singular authorship in the reenactment, where it resides in the experience of the individual (*Schnitt* Magazine, 2003). Cultural Reenactment, unlike its hobbyist predecessor, is distinct in its creative permissiveness, which has a greater liberating effect on artistic practice. Lutticken argues this in his theorising on the cultural reenactment: “Operating within contemporary performative spectacle if from a marginal position, art can stage small significant acts of difference” (2005. p.60)

Artistic re-imagining was central to Rod Dickinson’s reenactment of the FBI’s employment of psychological warfare during the siege of the Waco Cult, which took place in 1993. The reenactment took place over an evening on a speedway track in Thurrock, Essex. Nocturn: *The Waco Reenactment*, commissioned by the ICA September 2004. The audience gathered on The Mall and were ushered onto two commercial coaches, governed by ‘security guards’ insisting on silence. The destination was unknown to the audience, adding to the suspension around the night. Upon arrival at the track, the floodlights were ignited at full luminosity on the crowd and remained violently bright for the duration of the night. Over three hours at excessive volume, sounds from rabbits screaming to Nancy Sinatra’s ‘These Boots Were Made for Walking’ bombarded the captive audience, who could do nothing but endure and reflect. Though replicating the sounds used by the FBI to flush out the Waco residents by sleep deprivation, the staging, site and mediation of this reenactment were devised by Dickinson’s attempt to regenerate the trauma of the original siege.

Lutticken (2005) frames cultural reenactment in an artistic lineage back to appropriation art of the late 1970s and 1980s and the work of Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Walker Evans, Cindy Sherman and Mike Bidalo. These artists were concerned with history and its repetition and a demythologising of art history through an expose of the creative process. Through the recreation of noted ‘masterpieces’, appropriation art sought to establish a new set of

conditions and meaning for well-known artworks (Tate, N.D.). The overlap between appropriation and cultural reenactment as practice is in the decontextualisation of the original when cited within a contemporary context (Sorkin, 2019). Other writers link cultural reenactment directly back to the Duchampian ready-made (McCarthy, 2004; Reynolds, 2009). Forsyth and Pollard's reenactments of moments from popular culture have drawn a direct comparison with appropriation. In Sherrie Levine's defence of her reproductions of Mondrian's painting, she claims that she was concerned less with making a replica than conveying the essence of the work. Mendelsohn (2006) draws a direct link between this and Forsyth and Pollard's depiction of 'Liveness' in their reenactments. As I will go on to discuss in the case study of 'File Under Sacred Music', whilst Forsyth and Pollard are open about the inherent failure of an exact depiction of the past, their goal exceeded that of a nominal depiction of the original, instead serving as an embedded set of stimuli through which to enact the resonant memory of the past in the reenacted moment. Less a homage to the past than a revitalisation of the past moment in the present. Their engagement with the extremities of liveness is essential to this.

Whilst both appropriation and reenactment resonate with the cultural ready-made, the practices are quite polarised. The concerns of appropriation art are largely focused on the role/status of the original artist and the conditions in which an artwork was first created in order to reclaim a new form of reading. When, for instance, Mike Bidlo restaged Jackson Pollock's action paintings at PS1 ('*Not Pollock'*, 1983), his objective was to demystify the original process and, in turn, the value systems attributed to the artwork. Crucially, these works are devoid of any desire towards visual originality (Girard-Meunier, 2015). The concerns of the cultural reenactment are manyfold. Whether the subject of the reenactment resides in pop, politics, religion or psychology, the breadth of the artist's palate reaches across memory, history and authenticity into deep questions around personal and collective morality and ethics, as will be discussed in the ensuing examples: *File Under Sacred Music* (Forsyth and Pollard, 2003) and *The Jonestown Reenactment* (Dickinson, 2000). These are

multilayered performances which, in their staging, question more than they answer (Blackson, 2007).

Figure 24. Sherrie Levine ***After Piet Mondrian: 3,* 2023** Oil on mahogany panel 20 x 16 inches (50.8 x 40.6 cm) (Whitney Museum of Modern Art)

File Under Sacred Music

Having tested the waters and established some ground rules through the production of 'The Smiths is Dead', I went on to commission Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's most ambitious live performance, a restaging of Ziggy Stardust's Farewell concerts (2nd 3rd July 1973) in the ICA theatre, twenty-five years later to the date. Utilising the D.A Pennebaker film of the original as the 'script' for the performances, a band auditioned and rehearsed to within an inch of their lives. Taking over a year in the making and involving Bowies former costume maker Natasha Korniloff, and with the blessing of Bowie himself, this was a performance of epic proportions. The lighting emulated the red lighting on the film (most likely affected by the recording, not the actual performance), the sound was backdated, and when called up to "give me your hands cause you're wonderful" (Bowie, *A Rock n Roll Suicide*, 1972) everyone on those nights, reached forward.

The scale of the achievement and greater cultural and media impact of 'A Rock n Roll Suicide' took some time to digest and reflect upon. In the lineage of cultural reenactments of pop history, it felt that the apex had been reached, and further performances from other acts would add little to the art form. It was some four years later when, during a social evening at Iain and Jane's flat in New Cross, they told me about a new eBay purchase they had made of a bootleg video of a concert performed by punk band The Cramps for the patients at Napa State Mental Institution, California on the 13 June,1978 (Iainandjane.com). The quality of the video was abysmal; it was without colour, poorly shot and highly degraded by time and replication. As a historic document, however, it was utterly compelling.

'*File Under Sacred Music'* (FUSM) (Forsyth and Pollard, 3rd March 2003) was a work in three parts: a performative reenactment, a live discussion and culminating in a film of the event, which was degraded down to its bootleg original and exhibited globally. Unlike previous

reenactments, FUSM required extreme liveness in the performance to create the aesthetic of the eBay tape. The planning process was, as before, intensive and meticulous. The artists compiled a band Afonso Pinto (The Parkinson's), Holly Golightly (Thee Headcoatees), Bruce Brand (Thee Headcoats) and John Gibbs (The Wildebeests) who were indoctrinated with the video 'script' and rehearsed under the artist's guidance. The ICA theatre was stripped down to reflect the setting on the video (a communal hall in the Napa State Institute), and the audience was invited mental health service users from a Hackney charity 'Core Arts' and 'Mad Pride'.

The audience members were invited into the theatre, where they were briefed by Forsyth and Pollard, each was paid a nominal sum for their time and given access to a trestle table laden with sandwiches, snacks and lager. The Core Arts audience was at ease and seemed eager for the concert to begin, Iain and Jane discussed the shooting of the film angle with the cameraperson, at which point filtered in a 'secondary audience' of art and music journalists who were invited to observe and report. The distance and disparity between the two audience sectors were palpable and were later noted in many of the reviews of the event (McCarthy, 2003; Aitch, 2003). "There was no established code of etiquette to follow, Iain Aitch, writing for the Guardian, noted "After all, these are the people most of us slide away from at bus stops" (March 17th 2003, NP).

The band came on stage, and Jane addressed the audience, reiterating that this was a concert for a film and that the audience was invited to respond in whatever manner they chose. The band performed their set twice to ensure the footage was shot correctly and the audience was activated, as many reviews testified: "The gig had a raw, untamed energy, of a sort that the ICA hasn't seen since someone attempted to chew off Shane McGowan's earlobe to the backing of the Clash in 1976." (Aitch, Guardian, 2003. Online NP). "The event was one of the most electrifying the ICA has seen for years" (Williamson, Sleaze Nation, 2003. p. 14). Whilst some members of the audience watched and danced to the music,

others stage-dived, one chap induced himself to vomit only to take a taste for the cameras amid a backdrop of empty lager cans thrown from every corner of the theatre.

Figure 25. FUSM Film Poster. (Courtesy of Forsyth and Pollard)

The second element of the reenactment was a panel discussion on the evening of the same day. The speakers were Forsyth and Pollard, poet Frank Bangay and psychiatrist Dr Estela Weldon and was chaired by author and critic Tom McCarthy. Unlike the performance, the audience was mixed with Cramps fans asking the minutiae details of the cameras the artists had used, a large art crowd and many of the afternoon's audience from Core Arts joined by friends at Mad Pride. Though the discussion started with a healthy reconstruction of the aims and ethics of the afternoon's performance, the discussion soon disintegrated into something of a riot analogous to the premiere of the *Rites of Spring* (McCarthy, 2019). Whilst a sociological contingent in the audience argued their definitions of madness, music writer Everett True recalled seeing The Cramps play live. At this point, an unknown French man stood up to accuse Forsyth and Pollard of acting like Nazis and treating mentally ill people

like animals which generated the response of “Who are you calling animals?” from a member of Mad Pride, followed by a hurling of beer glasses between the various contingent parties (Ratnam, 2003). My job on the night was to field the questions from the floor with a roving microphone. Whilst I averted being hit by a pint glass, I did endure several pints worth of beer over me. The evening concluded with the testament of one member of the afternoon’s audience who said he’d had the most fun he had had in years “After all” he concluded, “It beats fucking bingo” (Aitch, 2003. Online, NP). The film footage of the reenactment then became the focus of the artist’s attention over the ensuing months, during which they tested a number of methods to carefully manipulate and degrade the footage back to the standards of the eBay bootleg version. This film went on to be exhibited globally.

Whilst many of the reviews of the performance and debate focussed on the wildness of the day’s events and mused on the ethical positioning of both the artists and the ICA in the creation of the event, greater discourse was undertaken on the performative qualities of this extreme cultural reenactment. Writing in *Art Review*, Ian White shared his deeper understanding of the day’s activities as he wards off notions of sensationalism which were being bandied about in some of the popular press:

> “The magnitude and sensitivity of this engagement should not be underestimated. Its terms, beyond any binary, liberal accusations of exploitation, dared to embrace, more extremely than before, the tragic flaw lying between chance and action that makes Forsyth and Pollard’s epic structures of re-performance such extraordinary works of art.” (June, 2003. p.36)

The tremendous fragility of this reenactment had moved the discussion around the subject onto a deeper level, though the genre was still being somewhat constructed. As Tom McCarthy himself concedes “I still to this day don’t fully understand what was going on that day” (Interview, 2019). The immediacy and instability which framed FUSM, pushed the genre

to a new level of vitality. Some writers did not however engage, with Michael Bracewell reducing the whole project to “a paroxysm of kitsch” (The Independent on Sunday, March 23, 2003 online,). His interpretation of the performance was that it was, at best, ‘ambiguous’ and open to interpretation. Ironically, I believe this is exactly one of the greatest achievements of the work: the absence of prescribed meaning or intent. For as Sven Lutticken has since argued, it is as much a manifestation of the conditions of the present as it is of the past: “If in the neoliberal theatre everybody constantly reenacts himself and indirectly everyone else as well, reenactment becomes a crucial performative strategy” (2005, p.19.)

Akin to its sister programme, the ICA club nights, the artistry of cultural reenactments is easy to dismiss amidst taunts and misreading’s of the works as simply entertainment, being highly unethical or simply kitsch longings for yesteryear. The artists which I worked with on the cultural reenactments were forensic, not only in their detailing of the original but in their decoding of the emotion, complex meanings and moral punches that the re-presentation might afford. Once decoded and repurposed within the present, the audience’s interpretation becomes the defining factor. In the words of Le Corbusier: 'All artists’ steal; but the truly original artist repays a thousandfold.’ (Lydiate, 2009)

The Jonestown Reenactment

I had read about the work of Rod Dickinson through an article he wrote in ‘everything’ magazine (Dickinson, 1997). In the article, Dickinson discussed some unusual encounters he’d had with unknown lights in the sky whilst going about making his artwork with his two collaborators, Wil Russell and John Lundberg (Laird, 2000). His art practice then was that he made crop circles. Real-life, full-scale overnight productions, which became headline news in many a tabloid on the following day. He had, over several years, accessed the underground communities who followed and documented crop circle appearances and was

fascinated by their belief systems and defences of the supernatural, which his artworks sought to address (Laird, 2000).

Dickinson's extraordinary ventures into extreme communities formed around a central dogma had become something of a self-confessed addiction. Inspired by the cultural reenactments of Forsyth and Pollard, he requested a meeting. The meeting was one of the longest I had ever experienced. During an afternoon, Dickinson attempted to explain the mathematical pattern formations which underscore the crop circles in pathological detail. This led to the intended purpose of the meeting: he had an idea for a reenactment, and was I interested? By extension of his practice, Rod had been researching historical examples of centrally coerced, extreme mass group behaviour, and he was keen to reenact some aspects of the Peoples Temple following their move to Guyana in 1974. The work, he explained, would be in two stages, the first an amalgamation of the cult leaders' sermons against capitalism, to include additional theatrics of 'miracle healings' which Rev. Jim Jones frequently demonstrated to his congregation. This was to be performed to a ticketed audience. The second part was to reenact the full-scale mass suicide of the members of The Temple, which had taken place in Guyana on the 18th of November 1978, through the administration of poisoned Kool-Aid by Jones to his followers. This was to take place with around three hundred volunteers in the open air, ideally in a central London park during the summer of 2001.

Dickinson was compelled to understand how, through psychological manipulation, almost 1000 people were convinced that there was no alternative but to pursue their deaths. It was, in actuality, a reenactment of people rehearsing their death in a series of dry runs which Jones had directed, which he titled 'White Nights' (Dickinson Interview, 2019). Belief and systems for social control were at the heart of Dickinson's work (O'Hagan, 2002), and his research and understanding of the Peoples Temple was extensive, including personal discussions with some of the few survivors. *The Jonestown massacre*, as it became known,

existed in common memory with neo-mythical status and was greeted with near-universal horror. The scale of the following which Jones had amassed, was mainly from the poor, black suburbs of California (two-thirds being African Americans) who went on to take ‘exile’ from Western values with him in his commune in Guyana. Fuelled by increased paranoia, Jones felt there was no escape for his people from the vision of the FBI and that there was just one final, fatal escape point, culminating in a mass death including an estimated three hundred children and babies (Conroy, 2018).

The Jonestown Massacre had, in the West fallen into popular consciousness, with slang such as ‘drink the Kool-Aid’ becoming everyday verse. Dickinson was sincere in addressing the subject matter and aware of the assured outcry the reenactments would ignite. However, his knowledge, passion and commitment to the project were convincing. In many ways, the deconstruction of the psychology of the Peoples Temple Community under Jones’ rule made it somewhat ideal subject matter for cultural reenactment at that time, as Philip Dodd later reported to the press: "From Uganda to the new right in America this is a very resonant subject. The reason I said we should do it was because this type of evangelical material is terribly powerful at the moment, and it is not going to go away." (Wilson, 2000)

Stage one of the reenactment was to take place in the ICA Nash Room on (May 26, 2001) Stage 2, the more ambitious reenactment of the mass suicide, required a greater planning time and additional funding, which we requested from the London Arts Board. Following a rigorous audition programme, the late Graham Edler was cast as Jones to reenact with compulsion and conviction a homogenous sermon (Hanks, 2000) amalgamated from transcripts of those formally given by Jones. Robert Hanks’s review of the performance gives a flavour of the event:

> “The performance began with Edler strolling in, wearing Jones's trademark off-white suit and dark glasses, exchanging greetings and smiles with members of the

> audience…. The impression of intimacy was helped by the presence of a clique, who also provided appropriate responses (applause, raising of hands, shouted acclamations).". "The matter of the sermon was fascinating, a blend of evangelistic religious tropes and quasi-Marxist rhetoric. Beginning with a disquisition on the vastness of the universe, and the impossibility of flying to heaven, Jones launched a hazy but tough-talking assault on utopianism and religion ("Tomorrowland"), punctuated by the cry "God Almighty! Socialism!" He promised a paradise here and now, built through political action" (The Independent, June 2000. NP).

With charismatic passion, the audience composed mainly from the art world, became caught up in the fervour: "You are the chosen people. You are the Avant-Garde" Edler declared, echoing Jones's exact words. Large swathes of the audience took up the invitation to be seduced by the compelling rhetoric: "They were clapping and cheering Jones's anti-American, anti-establishment rhetoric. Despite entering an art environment to witness an art event, they seemed willing to suspend disbelief in some way too" (Dickinson in O'Hagan, 2002. p.64). Tom McCarthy, who was in the audience that night recalls the performance with enthusiasm:

> "I remember just sitting in the Jim Jones reenactment, incredibly excited, just thinking this is just the best - the most exciting art, and intellectually, it just seemed exactly right. I didn't feel this was inconsistent with art I felt this was exactly where art should be." (Interview, 2019)

Stage 2, the planned staging of the mass suicide was quelled by the predicted onslaught of media outcry. Headlines included 'ICA to Enact Jonestown Massacre' (Wilson, The Guardian, 14th May, 2000) and 'Art Group to Replay Massacre in Park' (Brookes, Sunday Times, 14th May, 2000), the latter accompanied by a large photo of a plump middle-aged couple sat in deck chair eating an ice cream in a London Park, garnered the predictable

hysteria which gave our potential funders cause to withdraw. Drawing an artificial lineage between the proposed reenactment and previous ICA programme citing ‘plays on the Moors Murders’ and exhibitions of soiled nappies’ (COUM Transmission: ‘*Prostitution’* ICA, 1976), Rick Brooks played a right-wing masterstroke to Middle England who must have choked on the soldiers that Sunday morning. Whilst Rod and I were given a right to reply, the statements were selective and abstracted from the broader conversations had.

All Great Art Fails

There is an inherent degree of failure within the genre of reenactment through a common understanding that replicas cannot fully reproduce the original. Through staging the reenactments, it became evident that the art in these performances resided in what was lost or missing between the then and now. These artists were aiming at the impossible if the conjuring up of the historical moment was their aim, however, more was at play. They were, as Tom McCarthy went on to contend, “activating an event field” (2004), one in which the aesthetic, ethical, political and social were all active agents. In doing so, the artists I worked with in the formative days took a significant risk in their pursuit as failure to enact both dramatically and memorially were highly possible outcomes. Though each meticulously researched and constructed the framework for the night, both the performers and the audience lay beyond their control.

By commissioning these works in their infancy, the institution was also braced for failure as risk extended to all parties. This was cultural experimentation at its most vulnerable. With the absence of both precedence and critical discourse, the curatorial safety nets, which are nearly always in place within institutional curation, were unavailable. This was very much curatorial free-falling and consistent with the ideological principles underpinning the ICA.

As with the Club Night programme, the audiences for the reenactment were drawn in equal parts from those inside and outside the art world. Unlike the activities of *Relational*

Aesthetics and other formal presentations of art as a social practice at the time, there was no assuredness of commonality of thought and understanding to rest upon. Indeed, the psychologies of fandom or conspiratorial cohesion were arguably the central motivation for those who came to the performances. They were at once voyeurs, witnesses and agents on "a simulation of a simulation, a replica of a replica" (Reynolds, 2009. p.69).

The ICA programme influenced a rash of artists employing reenactment globally, many on a far greater scale and budget, perhaps most famously Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), which involved eight hundred actors and two hundred former miners, (https://www.jeremydeller.org/TheBattleOfOrgreave/TheBattleOfOrgreave.php). This film and performance were directed by Mike Figgis, commissioned by Artangel, and heavily resourced. By this time and at such a scale of production, the risk element within reenactment was largely mitigated as scenes were re-shot until they perceived 'perfection'. Whilst the involvement of some of the former striking miners served as a conduit from the past to the present, this work shared more common ground with historical reenactment in its original form than it did with the cultural reenactments staged at the ICA.

The art world responded to the genre from a suitably safe distance through a series of exhibitions throughout the 2000'nds including *A Little Bit of History Repeated at Kunst-Werke Berlin* (2001), *A Short History of Performance at the Whitechapel* (2002, ongoing), *Experience, Memory, Reenactment at the Piet Zwart Institute* (2004), *Life, Once More at Witte de With* (2005)*, Once More…With Feeling at Reg Vardy Gallery* (2006); *Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History at Mass MOCA* (2006), *Now Again the Past: Rewind, Replay, Resound at Carnegie Art Center* (2006), *and Playback: Simulated Realities at Edith Russ House* (2006) (Blackson, 2007). Once exhibited, all the conventions and reassurances of authorised art come into play, and the audience is again a passive agent reflecting once more on the subject through a mediated, historical lens.

Conclusion

Through the deployment of un-curatorial strategies from the independent London art scene imposed upon the Institution in the 1990s, a greater sense of belonging and inclusion took place. Set against the curatorial and institutional trends of the time, authority and authorship were diffused, and creatives and audiences, previously sidelined, took up occupation. This is not to argue that the role of the gatekeeper was altogether negated, permissions were, to some extent, still being extended. However, the prerequisite for cultural certification was overturned as the site for creativity was returned to the hands of a wider realm of individuals who were actively encouraged to play. Introducing creatives from popular culture scenes was a great risk and was perceived by some with abhorrence. It was a confrontational strategy which exposed the insularity of authenticated cultures making and mediating at the time. The programmes sat outside of the concerns of the market, the rising star of the curator and the globalised concerns of the institution. By doing so, a mirror could be held to a rich abundance of cultures which were being articulated through the everyday social site, one which held resonance and meaning as a space to platform and experience culture in real-time. Whilst the exhibitions and discussions around official culture still took precedence at the ICA, in these pockets of the programme lay a new point of access for producer and consumer, one navigated and directed along their terms.

In due course, many major art institutions took note and implemented a nighttime, social-based programme. Indeed, today, seemingly everywhere has adopted some element of the programme, however improbable, from DJ-based *Tate Modern Live* and *Friday Late at the V&A* to The London Transport Museum and even Christies shaking an after-hours leg. Indeed, the social and the pleasurable are now firm favourites of museums and galleries globally. Frequently aligned to the theme of the current exhibition, these nights have proved to be both a successful formula in audience development for the cultural sector and also as a ‘date night’ site, a recurrent term in the marketing of these events.

Marketing and audience expansion are the common thread across this new museum programming; one can hazard a reasonable guess that many museums engaged the platform in the spirit of New Museology and its embracement of “non-hierarchical, dynamic interpretations of collections” (Robinson, 2020.p.476). The common formula of these nights seems to be an extended opening (9pm being the common closing time), often a DJ and performances and, crucially, a bar to differentiate the daytime museum from that of the night. I collated the thoughts of some of the ICA contributors to my original programme, whose perception was that it was a marketing strategy (Simon Green, 2020; Robin Rimbaud, 2019). Whilst the former ICA Director considers the Tate late-night programme as being “stuffy if slightly embarrassing”, there is a legacy statement for the ICA programme that the traditional exhibition of art is no longer enough, and pleasure, entertainment and sociability have now been embraced (2021). The Club Night programme at the ICA did not seek to sell the space to audiences at any cost. As discussed, they were complex, layered and curated events which required navigation, dialogue and exchange. The social was not considered a point of easy access but a valid area of culture to be afforded institutional critique. Through a rethinking of the spaces of the Institute, the language of mediation and a de-coding of the site, audiences formed loyal relationships with their chosen nights, many of whom came to foster a career in their related artform (Interview Michael Clifford, 2019; Simon Green, 2020; Robin Rimbaud, 2019).

Reenactment’s legacy in the cultural arena was more formal, quickly morphing into a genre adopted on a global scale. During the first half of the 2000s, it seemed that artists were reenacting a host of subjects, from Artur Zmiljewski’s recreation of Zimbardo’s *Stanford Prison Experiment* (Repetition, 2005) to Felix Gmelin, who re-enacted his father's 1968 march through Berlin waving a communist flag, rightly being celebrated examples. For the Whitney Biennial 2006, ‘*Relational Aesthetic’* artist Rirkrit Tiravanija was commissioned to recreate the *Artists' Tower Against the War in Vietnam*, 1966. Tiravanija, in turn, commissioned Mark di Suvero to construct the work, di Suvero being the original artist and

architect of the 1966 *Peace Tower* in West Hollywood. The work was a sixty-foot-high tower with more than four hundred 2x2ft paintings donated by a host of artists (Kastner, 2006). Reviews of the work focussed on the reenactment of the politics of peace and protest and how a once radical gesture can now seem tame (Kastner, 2006). Situated in the secured and sanctified ground of the Whitney site, I would argue the work signifies the great lack of vulnerability and risk taken by the artist in this reenactment, representing the gulf between the once radical gesture of the 1960s artist as an activist and a relative 'playboy' lifestyle by the 'A-listers of today'. For, fundamentally, art reenactment achieves a vitality and discourse in its own right, one that relies on the past to articulate the present. This is seemingly lost within some manifestations.

Performance artist Marina Abramovich embraced the reenactment zeitgeist in her performances, '*Seven Easy Pieces'* (9-15th November 2005) at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. Each evening from 5 pm - 12 pm, she re-performed significant performance works which shaped her own practice from the 1960s -1970s. The works reenacted were Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974), Vito Acconti, *Seedbed* (1972), Valie Export, *Action Pants, Genital Panic* (1969), Gina Pane, *The Conditioning, First Action of Self-Portrait*(s) (1973, Joseph Beuys, *How To Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), culminating in the restaging of her own 1975 performance, *Lips of Thomas* (Guggenheim.org). Abramovich cited the dual imperatives in doing these reenactments as the lack of documentation of the original (Burton, 2006) and further a desire to physically experience these seminal works and in turn celebrate their significance in performance history. "There's nobody to keep the history straight. I felt almost, like, obliged. I felt like I have this function to do it" (Abramovich in Takac, 2019). Through these works, Abramovich was engaging with the past to illuminate the present, her own body being the conduit. Much like Forsyth and Pollard's work before it, the very subject of liveness, memory and authorship become questioned through the process of reenactment. Far more than homage, this was the reactivation of the performative past.

In the hands of Abramovich, commonly cited as the ‘grandmother of performance art’ (Tate.org), the performances that she chose to reenact were central to her practice. One can assume, therefore, that they were deeply embodied in the greater mass of artwork she has produced over the years. Through the physical reconstruction of these seminal works, she was gaining a deeper understanding not only of the original work but its impact on her in the moment. ‘*Seven Easy Pieces’* ignited something of a flurry of performance reenactments by a diverse set of academics and practitioners culminating within the UK in the Performance Reenactment Society (PRS), Bristol. The PRS is formed by artists, archivists and researchers connected to the University of Bristol, whose drive is to metamorphosise performance works of the past into new events’ (Thornton, 2012). As an academic pursuit, this may deliver some form of research. However, it is hard to understand the purpose of restaging performances for no obvious reason. Moreover, the function of reenactment is not to transform the past, as this is not achievable, nor is it to create new events for the past and present are intrinsically entwined. These activities may be best understood as a cultural equivalent of the tribute band, as the process of restaging is all that is at play here.

Through the programmes of Club Nights and Cultural Reenactments at the ICA 1998-2006, new genres were devised for expanded cultural authorship and ownership. Risk and danger were central to the programming, as I and others believed it was central to the very DNA of the ICA. Time and space were afforded to a new generation of artists and creatives to test the very limits of liveness, and subsequently, a new, expanded generation of audiences felt a sense of belonging and residence within the institute. The greater cultural impact of the programmes can be seen from the underground through to the certified art world, which coopted the principles of this genre according to their taste. Once embedded, the DIY ethos within the institution caused a ripple effect which externalised its worldview beyond the confines of cultural discourse to reflect how cultures were at play outside of the institutional walls. This was their greatest achievement, as Tom McCarthy asserts:

“I really think in a hundred years no-one’s going to talk about Damien Hirst, they are going to talk about Iain (Forsyth) and Jane (Pollard) and Rod Dickinson. Who wants to talk about Tracey Emin’s bed? This half-arsed Duchamp rehash for Saatchi – I don’t think so.” (McCarthy Interview, 2019)

Chapter 11. Conclusion

This thesis redresses and critically appraises the overlooked independent curatorial strategies devised by the DIY British contemporary art scene during the 1990s. By directing the research lens towards the activities of non-market-led practices and their curatorial strategies, this significant contribution to cultural history is given vital attention. It answers a series of largely unexamined questions in the creation of an expanded narrative of the period: What social, economic and educational factors formed the conditions for an independent artistic community in the 1990s? What were the overlapping independent strategies of the pre-commodified practices of the Young British Artists (YBA) and the East London DIY scene? How did agents in the DIY scene employ the social site as a vehicle for integrating art into the everyday? And how did the incorporation of DIY curatorial strategies at the ICA between 1996 and 2000 impact live programming, audience demographics, and the democratisation of the cultural institution?

Methodologically, this thesis is curated. Drawing together, as it does, it binds together a multivocal narrative of the time. These voices have been interwoven with archive footage and the authors own autoethnographic reflections to bring together historical fragments and remanences into a story of the independent art scene in London in the 1990s and its greater impact on the institution.

To contextualise the immediate socio-economic factors which permitted the formation of an independent art scene en masse, it has been essential to establish the cultural transformation within the art school system emanating from the Coldstream Report (1960). I have argued that this report had a crucial democratising effect, specifically on the admission of students from working-class (and other marginalised) backgrounds. Further, it liberated the pedagogical direction of individual art schools, encouraging collaborative practice and informing a wider cultural community of artists who merged practice genres and contested

the divisions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. Cultural distinction was further acquired through the implementation of ‘Independent studies’, which informed a peer-to-peer critical dialogue amongst the student body. This manifestation of communities of critically engaged art students, populated by a diversified class mix, infiltrated popular cultures in both creative practices extending into the social realm. This, I argue, was the social catalyst for the construction of the 1990s art scene in London.

The extension of social and housing benefits to graduating students, alongside the Enterprise Allowance Scheme's brief initiative, are cited as necessary factors in enabling an artist community to develop in London during this period. Drawing upon numerous first-hand accounts, art school students were permitted greater time and space to develop individual practices and form communities upon graduation. This manifested a flurry of artist-led spaces in the late 1980s, extending throughout the 1990s, within which curatorial practice and cultural mediation were re-considered independently of institutional orthodoxy. I argue that the emergence of a cultural community within the relics of a post-industrial East London generated a drive to emancipate art from the domain of the gatekeeper. The local café, pub or private view became active spaces, giving way to the formation of a real-time narrative of the period, articulated through the independent and mainstream art press. Micro-scenes proposed manifestos and templates for alternative societies which introduced a cultural narrative into the everyday. New methods of curation and mediation of art were accompanied by a playful satire which challenged the operations of the art establishment. This, in turn, formed a new critical mass which experimented with a more socially focussed and, as I argue, inclusive practice of cultural presentation impacting the greater artworld.

An imperative to circumnavigate the protocols of accessing the genealogy of the art world system is identified as a common trait amongst both the yBa and DIY scenes. Indeed, as argued, artists who later became commodified into the yBa generation were the initial instigators of a self-authored form of experimental practice. By focusing on the early part of

the 1990s, clarity is afforded to a set of conditions, allowing artists time and space to consider cultural possibilities and to devise alternative propositions to those of the mainstream. Whilst artists had challenged the conventions of the art market and institute since Courbet's Salon des Refuses, the early 1990s DIY scene proposed a new set of conditions for creative practice. Self-reliance and autonomy from the market and institution permitted a frenzied period of cultural activity which not only blurred the boundaries of art forms, site and interface of cultural engagement, it also re-proposed the rules of curatorial practice, in part as a social practice. Subsequently, the limited access points for creatives and audiences were expanded, and the gatekeepers circumnavigated.

Engaging with found sites, large-scale forms of self-curated exhibition and mass promotion whilst undergraduates, the Goldsmiths artists who came to dominate the yBa generation, forged a hitherto unexplored zeitgeist for cultural entrepreneurship. This, I argue, was vital for the emergence of a DIY scene. By the mid-1990s, it was evident that there had emerged two camps, crudely distinguished in market terms as the 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' entrepreneurs. However, cultural value was accrued mainly in the practices of the less fortunate camp. By focussing on this early period of practice, a common drive to remake the conditions for contemporary art is asserted and defended.

Evolving on the global contemporary art stage was a parallel professionalisation of the curatorial role within a rapidly globalised contemporary art market. This gave rise to a formal narrative on the social function within artistic engagement. Practices which addressed social relations were embraced by a new wave of uber-curators who coopted and debated the subject and, in turn, elevated its market value. Artists who employed social relations within their practice became championed within the major institution and its international manifestation, the global art biennial, within which open-ended artist practices sought to challenge exhibition conventions. Within this territory, artists assumed the role of social agents and engaged individuals from among marginalised groups to demonstrate their

conditions as a form of exhibition. Under the doctrinal umbrella of '*Relational Aesthetics*' (Bourriaud, 1998), critics and curators debated the detail of sincerity and social interplay, ethics and liberation within the work. Unacknowledged within this discourse was the sanctified conditions the institution and its operative, the curator, employed to allow relations to ensue. Bound within the safety of the institution, underpinned by the finances of the commercial gallery/ biennale, and crucially protected by the curator who acted as an intermediary between concept and subject. This thesis argues that these were largely performative gestures with complicit partners and audiences, the outcomes of which were, for the most part, a foregone conclusion.

Embedded within the utopian propositions of the DIY scene lay tangible strategies towards the realisation of a socially based site for art. This dialogue was further refined under the banner of Factual Nonsense in the artist-led collaborations, social events and re-imagined communities of Joshua Compston's *fetes*. Practices centred around pleasure and entertainment challenged the sober conventions which determined cultural consumption. Further, it promoted strategies for mediation, which circumnavigated the curator as the essential interpreter for the audience, proposing as it did an experience of art embodied in the machinations of daily life. The ability of the wider public to discern and engage with art on their own terms became the lasting narrative of BANK, Factual Nonsense and the broader DIY scene, extending the possibility for multi-channelled and self-authored cultural engagement. The dual sites of the BANK private view and the FN Fetes are identified in this thesis as significant manifestations within the DIY scene, in their own time and for ongoing practice. This has not been afforded the academic attention it deserves. Drawing on multiple sources and first-hand accounts, significant influence is afforded to these hitherto sidelined practices. In these examples, new propositions for a social mediation of culture were enacted and experienced by a diverse body of consumers. Veiled in the trappings of pleasure and hedonism, these two practices, I assert, had a greater impact on curatorial practice at the end of the twentieth century. Affording an authenticity, devoid in institutional

practices around socially engaged art, their agency and influence necessitates reconsideration and elevation in the greater empowerment of curatorial practice to impact daily life. In turn, they are cited as catalysts for the later emancipation of curatorship and the institution to extend its reach beyond conventional practice.

This thesis further refocuses attention on the neglected cultural position around the subsequent implementation of DIY curatorial strategies into the Institute of Contemporary Arts. Following a period of institutional introspection and an estranged programming culture, strategies for collaboration, dialogue and expanded mediation were introduced. By recalling foundational remits of the early ICA and its motivation to come into being, practices of play, hybridity, interplay and risk-taking were cited as essential to the establishment of an art space which was reflexive to the cultural moment and immune to the stratified practices of genre-led programming. This early history abounds with practices of cultural fusion, often manifest through the social site. Pleasure, as a conduit for cultural consumption and expanded participation, was a demonstrable tactic. By embracing and engaging with popular cultures, the early ICA established points of access to its site and programme for both the informed and the cultural novice. On reflection, the founding years of the ICA were more akin to a cultural youth club than it was a museum. By creating something of a neutral territory, cultural practitioners were encouraged to explore the possibilities of what cultures in their plurality might be, creating an emancipatory zeitgeist outside of institutional convention. For within this period, I have argued, the ICA was an artist-led institute informed by the disparate practices of the Independent Group, whose understanding of culture was as a lived experience.

The final chapters of this thesis focus on the diffusion of methodologies appropriated from both the early years of the ICA and their later manifestation with the DIY activities of the East End. Through the establishment of a Club Night programme, the social site of the institute

was afforded an independent identity and reclaimed an authority to draw together diverse audiences. It further gave rise to informal practices in the curation and mediation of art as an active part of the social event, establishing new methods by which art could be experienced. Creative genres were blended into the Club Night programme to enable an informal experience of the cultural within the social realm. Both popular and niche subcultures were equally validated within the programme as the repurposing of the Institute as a social site was explored. Who the Institute was for and who belonged were re-proposed as the doors to the playground were once more unlocked. Emerging from subterranean scenes, the creatives who hosted the nights had free access to unprecedented tools through which to exercise a deeper understanding of their genre. This, in turn, was extended to a broader audience. Institutional validation was extended to neglected areas of culture, hitherto dismissed as popular and for mass consumption only. By making available the sites and facilities within the ICA an enriched presentation of each genre was permitted, extending a cultural understanding mediated through a social discourse.

By focussing on the Cultural Re-enactment programme, which began at the ICA in 1998, contributing to a global genre across the 2000s, a new set of possibilities were proposed, centred primarily around the extended authorship at play in the live moment and the greater consideration of what liveness might create. These re-enactments created a wholesale suspension of disbelief within the live moment, and in doing so, historic events served as conduits for a deeper understanding of the present. The artist’s authority was further shared with the stage performer and, importantly, the audience's willingness to enact the past collectively. This programme, I argue, asserted a necessary moment of cultural vulnerability and risk of failure, which was vital to the greater understanding of the experience of live culture, situated in contrast to the establishment endeavours within *Relational Aesthetics*.

These programmes employed experimental curatorial strategies independent of the power politics at play within the museum. They embraced and gave legitimacy to popular cultures

as vital manifestations of a host of activities emerging outside of the Institution. These held significant meaning for a wider demographic of audiences, initiating new relationships between the Institute and audience. By expanding institutional recognition and validating a diversity of cultural expressions, those who experienced the programme determined meaning and resonance for themselves. Ultimately, the social space was engaged as the basis for discourse among the new, impure and amalgamated public who directed their own modes of cultural consumption. In turn, these programmes afforded a reconsideration of the conditions and uses for an Institute of Contemporary Arts in the 1990s. They revived interdisciplinary dialogues, permitted ownership for a new generation of artists and audiences and located the Institute back into the contemporary moment. Further, they contested the meta-narrative of the day, which continued to uphold the polarity of high and low as a conscious device for gatekeeping. They further challenged the newly asserted authority of the curator and their centralised role in the creation and mediation of the artwork. In contrast to the elite stratification of a super league of artists and curators which emerged throughout the 1990s, these programmes reengaged the Institution with grassroots activities, prioritising emerging cultures over validated ones and allowing for an expanded cultural voice. Through this repositioning of the institute, I propose the ICA once more became an artist-led space, and *'play'* again resumed.

This research proposes a revised reading of the London art scene of the 1990s not as an economic success but as a blueprint for the radical revision of art production, presentation and consumption. Reinforcing as it does that this scene instigated far greater cultural merit beyond, "one tiny clique behaving badly, cash-rich courtesy of Saatchi and Jay Jopling." (Fox, 2013, NP.). The challenges which confronted the official artworld directed power away from the institute and its keepers, in turn reinvigorating a new generation of artists and audience who had erstwhile been outside of the scope of their vision. When introduced into the institution, the site was deconsecrated and neutralised, and agency extended to socially based art interactions. The greater artworld became alert to the possibilities of its night-time

economy as a time and space for playful interaction. In turn, access was afforded to creatives from popular cultures to develop an informal setting within which the absorption and interpretation of art became an expanded practice. Ultimately, the maverick curatorial experiments prompted a greater reappraisal of Barr's exclusive classification of an educated audience for art; curation ceased to be a monologue but a multi-cultural dialogue arising and evoking change far beyond the traditional canons of art.

To address this cultural history is of importance today. The official sites for art were directly impacted by experimental practices within and outside the institution. Subsequently, the institution has been obliged to revise its understanding of 'the audience for art', migrating, as it has from the committed congregation to addressing the cultural agnostic. Like its counterpart evolution of the 'messy church', a social obligation has been embedded within the gallery to extend the cultural conversation beyond the exhibition space and beyond formal hours of presentations. The site for art no longer can nor should be a sacrosanct space, and the curator, in turn, has had to broaden the register of its sermons, expanding the dialogue around art to the greatest possible audience. The institute today recognises its socially transformative function by prioritising audience engagement and addressing the relevance of the cultural experience. Nighttime programmes, social practice, everyday curation, co-authorship, and faith in creativity, the curator's job today is to communicate, not to define practice.

In a digital age where the means of production, distribution, mediation and the consumption of culture are liberated, art in many ways has become inevitably integrated into everyday practice. Through asserting a new set of challenges to the relevance of an official site for art, it provides a renewed context in which to consider the mediatory possibilities of curation today. By reconsidering the curatorial experiments conducted at the onset of the digital era, pleasure, popular cultures and a greater institutional faith in the creative producer and consumer are here proposed.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Fax Joshua Compston to Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard 4/11/94

"I think the best way to approach the subject is via a number of different angles simultaneously. These would include a series of investigatory interviews with some of the artists, a critical evaluation by yourselves and an investigation in of its meaning within the context of general FN curatorial practice. However as I always say its up to you and this is merely a suggested approach"Transcript of interview with JC 20-21 August 1994

"The fact is at least we have some prior initiation, an acquired ability to read these objects, ideas and processes. In this country, due to educational neglect and media derision and / or media neglect of art, a situation is produced that means very simply that art is able to be (when its beyond the gallery space) but nearly always not able to speak as such, to ne read, because the fact is most people don't have a clue what's going on. As in Holzer, such moves beyond can be affective (to a degree), and should nevertheless always be attempted, but we are operating within futility if we confine ourselves to present activities. I nurture very strong ideas about how the commuability of art can be increased, hence underlined and emblazoned beyond notional white columns, white walls, ice box situation. At present however I think unfortunately the answer ids effectively no, able to speak no, able to be, perhaps yes."

"the classic point about entertainment was put to Gavin (Turk) in the recent frieze interview, and he currently pointed out that it wasn't his job to entertain people, but that entertainment had come to be part of the armour and arsenal involved. . I concur with his opinion: it's not part of the artists job to entertain people. However, they should, in line with white collar workers, organizers, curators, art managers, administrators or whatever you want to call them, find ways of deliberately opening up that media space to become part of a general rule. It's important to try and find ways of splitting and opening up that particular crack in the door whilst not losing… it is important to find ways of promotion and presentation that do engender and usher in the notion of entertainment. It's a matter of forming a holding structure. The holding structure that I'm trying to create here is my own protean litmus test, albeit slightly unformed and unshaded in parts", the vis. Two fete worse than Deaths that I have presented to date. These spectacles are that holding structure. A situation where salt can be presented in sugar. This contemporary art can be presented in such a way that

people are not aware of some of its nature and so they're being entertained, but at the end of the day they realise that they've received a different form of entertainment, instructions and codices than if they went to see Danny La Rue in Tottenham Court Road. So its part of the art worlds job to entertain people. But it should be mainly those involved who are not artists to do so, and not to do it simply for the pure point of entertainment. Pure entertainment on its own is usually vacuous, nearly always ephemeral and also if it is repeated too much, downright boring"

"I think we're not talking about a situation which is not particularly new, but more a speeding up and a drift. Within what might notionally be called the 'avant-garde', there exists a specialisation and particularisation of art that contains more of itself, history, context, entertainment and commerce than it does of those formal imminent self-contained possibilities within 'art-ness' art. And to what ends? I think the ends are to produce a conclusionistic hybrid possibility, a kind of indeterminate ground between popular culture and 'art as art'. The present ends are in the main, not people thinking that they can really become of a similar status as Prince is to music. However because they find it artistically intriguing to pinch something from there, a colour from chemicals via a rope from commerce, in order to make their own kind of special package, special solution to the problem of being an artist in our very artless society. , they pursue this interested syncretism. So id say their ends are individually speculative rather than possessive of a visionary mission. This stance applies when they are actually making this cross-fertilized work and contextualising its presentation, as well as when they present themselves as individuals to the media and to their contemporaries. I don't seriously think that , despite Gavin being actually one of the best and most effective artists within this expanded field, he would really like to be a glitch star full circle, one hundred and fifty per cent. I don't think he'd like to be a Dave Stuart. Despite this assumption, what I want to try to do is to have a company that is like that', not kitsch, but the company is the celebrity, the company is the endorsement mark, and it works on a critical , commercial and cultural level, and is intrinsinsicly involved in these worlds that have been plundered, raided and used by some artists. . But what they've done is make individual stories from their journeys, from their explorations. I'd like to make a company that's involved in such ends, and therefore has to be geared to mass reproduction, and also more geared, in terms of its capital base, as to how it would reproduce itself and sustain itself economically. My ends are to try and engender artistic thought and artistic practices under many different guises, both in terms of art work full of art-ness, and artwork that is not essentially full of art-ness, to then bring both of these entities to the forefront of public taste, and the possibilities of absolute public consumption."

“I think in London there’s a great deal of purpose-less-ness in terms of new sites for art, be they alternative or be they hardcore commercial entities. I think there are very few institutions, outside those publicly funded that have an actual purpose beyond commerce and monitory priorities, or beyond just merely wanting to be ‘wacky’, thereby providing an intriguing and stimulating time for the organisers. (GIVE BACK). My purpose is not to create new sites for art, but to create new sites for FN, which has off course, built within it a great deal of art in many different hues, cries and forms. My interpretation of sites is extremely wide, so far ive been forced to work with a reasonably limited amount of sites, but at the end of the day, in my end game, I’ll be defining sites for FN activity in terms of magazines, television, large scale billboard format advertising and, if it really works and I manage to do what id like to do, within all the streets, by identifying and thence ‘branding’ certain towns and geographical areas. I’m particularly interested in selective parts of the urban environment , buying them up, reforming them and marketing them as examples of perfect FN reality. I would like to try to produce an idealised scenario which would act as a model for other people to follow, both on an individual level, in terms of their daily practice, but moreover as an example to other companies so that they can then think , ‘ we wouldn’t, in terms of our profit dividend, have to make that much of a difference to our balance sheets and to our share holders expectations. If we operated that form of factory, if we pursued that form of advertising etc. So it’s trying to set up a series of perfect spaces as special solutions to given problems of daily life. On the cover f the ‘FWTD” programme it says ‘ FN, purveyors of the Notorious Dream’. The **Notorious Dream** is basically sites of perfection, those perfections formed of collusions between art, advertising and commerce in real time.

“Koons comments are always on the surface very simple, almost piss simple, but I think this comment is actually very apt. very appropriate and true. I think that given a dose of strong headedness, ‘wrong-headedness’, tenacity , will, a general understanding of the situation, then if one wanted to, once one has one’s space, one can effectively, if ones prepared to take the flack, declare anything and everything possible within the realms that one controls. On day it could be a pin ball parlour the next day it could be a brothel, and the third day it could be a show of contemporary shoes. Then it is indeed not actual politics, but its playing at politics, its playing at definitions, its playing at context, its playing at representation of the holding structure and within London, it’s a reasonably small board in terms of players, but in terms of the audience, it’s potentially immense. If one is absolutely switched on to one’s inner necessity, then one can go beyond the play, and become actual. Most spaces, going back to this idea of ‘alternative sites’, simply remain as interesting critiques upon the situation, and they don’t manage to become real-time issues. After all the Body Shop was once an alternative site”

“We’re dealing here with a pretty thorny, bitchy problem which has plagued art throughout this century, in the sense that there was once a time when art was done with the best will and intentions aesthetically, but essentially the art that was part and parcel of a political mechanism, usually under the control of religious bodies. I think the situation faced by artists at the beginning of this century, and now, is that old scenario of ‘us and them’. We all have our different colours, smells, understandings and problems, stratified educational backgrounds and interests, and hence all different forms of art, that correspond to the different realities outside of art, are created. Therefore I often think that it’s a valid and vibrant venture when some artists decide to … (missing line) indicative of their fears and critiques of the shapeless horror of the ‘other’. However, I often speculate that if they were really that concerned, then perhaps they would walk along this cliff, knowing that they might fall off. In other words, unfortunately it is impossible for an artist to be ultimately responsible for the siting of their work. It is desirable that they try and ensure the best situation for their work to be sited in if it contains a large dose of socio-political critique within it, but essentially at the end of the day they must accept that they have limited themselves to the limitations of artworks, and their given scale. Their given scale being not only often extremely small, but also nearly always one, or two, or three in number which can only reach and extremely limited audience. Therefore most art that addresses this great rift and divide can only, by its fundamentally flawed nature, unfortunately exist as fuel for seminar room debate. So it depends on the bravery and ambition of the artist whether they can manage to circum-navigate this grand technical problem and allow their art, often in many ways not that applicable within the context of the artworld, that therefore should be out there. Thus I do think that those artists who belabour or make an issue of their critiques should make it their duty to try and lecture, to try and have their work reproduced as much as possible, and to work in design, or magazines, anywhere outside the art world strategies. They shouldn’t just have this attitude, ‘I’m spilling the beans, I’m showing my wounds, I’m doing what I’m doing’, and then leaving it up to everyone else. They should try as much as possible to make the right connections, otherwise they’re essentially being morally inconsequential, and thus morally irresponsible. But I think that some of them are rather smug about it.”

“I wouldn’t say art has found its feet in terms of looking to invent a new colour, or suddenly everyone’s decided that this is what we are supposed to be doing, and we have to take on board the responsibility of creating a more informal, familiar and comfortable setting. I wouldn’t say that’s been the case at all. There are more artists now than there were 5 years ago, who are not so interested in purely themselves, and are more interested in the idea of the general public, but I’d say it’s still at the interest stage, rather than the actual fact stage.

At the end of the day I don't think the audience has expanded that much, and those who are interested will go willy-nilly to gather what they may. It's a matter of transition, no radical change has yet taken place. Its purely a matter of cosmetic change. It seems to me that part of the fascinating melting pot of Goldsmiths is, that alongside the very bad, and I think in many ways the teaching attitude encourages that,) can come some extremely strong invigorating and truly monumental work

"I think there has been an incredible and immense erosion of boundaries across the stratum within the last 20 or 30 years, but one thing that led me to my dismissal of a completely burning bright modernist ethic was the realisation that much art anyway which I was reading as modernist, actually has a degree of postmodernism within it, and that art was never as hermetically sealed, or as. Idealistically practised, as some art historians and some artists would like to advance for it. I think that the periphery has always been circulating and swimming on and out of the consciousness of an artistic understanding this century, be it a modernist or postmodernist one. All that postmodernism did was that it stepped away from the position of saying 'it doesn't exist' and postmodernism admits that it does exist, and when its bad is when it wallows in a sense of self-pity. I think that postmodernism when it becomes a style, a practice, a way of life in unutterably wrong because what it is doing is academically condensing what is merely available in daily life, and making it into an art form of epically boring proportions, because the real thing in itself is far more interesting. Popular culture is far more of a come on in its raw, un-edited un-art processed state than it is when it gets into the hands of an artist or an architect or a musician. So unfortunately, yes, it has become manifest in artistic practice, but it shouldn't have done. That art which, whilst going forward with art goes forward as art, at the same time nevertheless takes stock and acknowledges the 'other', is much more valid than the art which tries to simply acknowledge and represent the other as the other with no hope behind it, its quite a fine line but one I adhere to in my daily ablutions"

Interview JC 20 /9/94

Q you have identified 5 commercial industries as areas of interest for FN. Art seems to be the most dispensable of these. Why is art so important?
"There are two primary answers. 1, my personal history since I was at least 15 or 16 has been intrinsically involved in art, in its consumption and its production to a certain extent between the ages of 16 and 20, ranging from gestalt expressionist style painting to constructions using bird skeletons, to performance pieces in mute sacking, rather like Oldenburg soft sculptures, outside the Tate gallery. The with the inception and conception of

FN, first conceived publicly as a form which one could visit in October 1992, but first used as a term of critical demarcation by myself in a catalogue, in august 1992, for an exhibition called “Abstractions from domestic suburb scene (sic” and the term prior to that being taken from a painting by David Taborn, he in turn had taken the term from Wittgenstein. The long and short of it is that FN started of very much with the arts, and with my own curatorial practice, and my own, to a far, far more limited extent, representational practice of FN representing and upholding certain artists for consumption. ‘Hey, come and look at this one boys!”. The second thing is that all those fields, as we can either explain now or people can read subsequently in documents I will publish and one would hope, things I will do in advertising, entertainments, brand name retailing and property development. All those fields currently completely out of my control as they currently are existing, use art to a greater or lesser degree. The usually use the bastardised form of art known as kitsch. Or just the pale watery Windsor soup version of that which is high art, for want of a better word. Certainly property development is inconceivable without at least some form of architecture, albeit mainly completely mechanised and computerised and completely ridiculous for it to wear the name of architecture, but one cant try to pretend there is a difference between one office block and another office block because the fact of the matter is that they are both built by an architect. Ditto advertising, Advertising constantly plunders and has reference to art practice and to artistic forming all shapes an hues. Entertainment necessarily so, one has of course the beautiful term ‘artist’ and then ‘artiste’ for instance. So in many ways I’m talking about within FN, or rather withing FN Holdings, art can be carried through into these fields and hopefully the possibility engendered and curated, of upping the issue and stake of art within these given fields. I say that because , not that we want to work on a consultorial consultancy base, but because we will manifest those advertisements, we will manifest the entertainments , property developments etc. in which case, because this company came originally from within an art background, I think that I can logically clean up the crap from its current standing and abuse. Thereby I make sure it is not dispensable and very much work according to my principle of sugar within salt.

Q so would it be right to say that art is at the core, the one thing you wish to push promote, develop?

“More under its guise of these other fields, Its with service industries and product industries. I want to make them so large, so powerful and so essentially unforgettable that in my opinion they will be art. But the main thing is not that they are art, but they’re real life.. Also the mai main thing is not that they are received as art, but in secret they are. It’s a matter of one doesn’t have to have this annoying handle of art around it

, secondly a companies not going to work if it says lets prettify, lets make art out of advertising, art out of entertainment. That's not the point. But at the end of the day, I think they will be art, yes. They'd also be advertising, that's the main thing. They are just as powerful and just as effective as an advertising medium, as they are as art. So its much more cosmetic infiltration"

Q By way of example sport and its related industries seems to demonstrate how the given areas excluding art, work together, merge and inter-act, to greater or lesser extents. However in the hearts, minds and imaginations and day-today existence of much of the general public, art simply no longer seems to have a place

"Yes that's right but FN can have a place, FN will be sport, it wont literally be sport, I'm not interested in sport, but it will be a sport , a pastime, it will be a way of life when it establishes its entertainment bases, and its localised consumption bases, where lots of people can tap into its mores and means"

Q So you wouldn't say that art was a hindrance?

"But they're not going to be thinking that they're going to an art thing. That's the point, because otherwise it would hinder them, exactly, it wouldn't work. Basically, if one wants to be extremely crude about the whole fandango, one could say that FN is the desire to improve the quality of the built environment, of the corporate environment. So to accept the face of mass produced food, hamburgers and Wimpy bars, burger kings etc. but within those fields to radically improve not the standard of service…the standards of service are pretty good, but the appearance on the one hand, how they actually are and how the facades are, and how the facades often completely disrespect the buildings that they happen to have been placed in, the interiors. Secondly the ethical background structure behind those corporations which are often really corrupt and even more of a nightmare. If you want to be really crude you could say that that was the corporate policy of FN, which I think will be an extremely viable commercial policy because, as witnessed by the success of the Body Shop, I am fascinated by the whole idea of the ethical corporation, the mighty colossus that is working or profiling itself in some ways an issue of saviour-hood. As a result, it is grabbing the consciences and the consumer habits of the people. I get that kick, I think one can make something that's quite moral in many ways a sexy, cult issue.

Q you told big issue that FN is "into power and control", where does that power lie and what does it intend to control?

"… its power will be within its ability to construct and rebuild reality. I'm saying reality in the real sense…buildings locations the built environment. So its power will be in its power to represent itself and to hopefully allow its representation to be so glamorous and so psychologically apt that it keys into people and in turn they begin to get into the FN way of life rather than the Marlboro man way of life. That's how its power will be and that power will be control, but it will be human control., certainly it will be far less corrupt, far more honest, far healthier than the control currently exercised by corporations and by communication structures such as the huge Paramount Communications or Murdoch. Who don't have a mission beyond their monetary madness. I don't think they have a burning spirit inside them"

Q Marlboro offers cigarettes , the brand name offers tangible, practical and luxury product to its mass consumer, as does Coca-Cola, Nike, Benetton … Where and what is FNs product? "fns product? In which field"

Q If we were to say that people would live this FN way of life, is that its product? Just an image, a lifestyle an ethic?

"No it is far more than an notional encouragement that will come through articles or through advertising. It is a actual physical thing, or rather it is not, but it will be in terms of what I want to be FN bars…numerous nonsense bars, which will pivot around a sort of cabaret, and a mixture of a gaudy post-war, plus Weimar, a sort of Berlin, 20s experience, tied in with a kind of fun Cabaret Voltaire and will very much become sites of HAPPY AGITATION, sites of constant amusement, I'd like them to become analogous with a sense of sheer gutsy fun the Gin Palaces used to have at the end of the last century. Id like to restore on a high street level the idea of an art pub that is a great swooning time out rather than the current bars (thematised, dirty dull) fall into the trap of the old man with the urine-pants, or they're chrome and enlisted as modernist nightmares, and on the other hand you have the loud rave pub or club. Within that I think there is a new option… Retailing furniture on the high st furniture stores.. huge buying cartels that have as much buying power as the Sainsbury or the Asda. But rather than just seeking to sell our products, and our products are literally just cabbages and Coca-Cola bottles and malt vinegar, (rather than sell outside a town centre) we would seek to delineate, restore heavily support and reinvest in the idea of the town as a town.in the 70s we had the Walvy-Lane Groceries (now) we would have the FN butchers, the FN baker, the FN candlestick maker."

Q wont this destroy family businesses/community?

“ no, because it would be rather like the entertainments, the ‘Nonsense bars. Branding will of course be involved. So on a given fascia what id probably like to have would be a third of the fascia with one of the FN brand names, the other two thirds would say ‘Hogg and Son Butchers’…At the end of the day I don’t want to ne the ‘sausage king’, so one would hope that after 10 years one would withdraw ones support because the town had become re-activated – ….power back in the hands of the people. Sainsburys or Asda were forced to shut down their out-of-town shopping centre because it was a failure.

Q how and when will this power become both evident and effective?

“..The first building block is the formation of the holding company, which empowers me, in other words gives me a wage, give me a personal budget, gives me a research and development budget for various different projects. (example of Banners estimates 100k R&D and 500K implement) FN so large that property developer puts in money and local council – network grows accordingly. – EXPRESSES PEOPLE READY TO INVEST BUT HE HASN’T GIVEN THEM THE PLAN” will be done by Jan 1st 95 establish FN holdings

… “suddenly I am liberated, and I have personal who can take care of daily matters, whilst I go and liaise and seek out basically co-partnership capital within advertising for instance”

Q you say that overall “FN makes sense”

“its trying to interpret the needs and desires of the times, and programme them and re[package them accordingly” combination is new not elements (jenny holzer banners)
Idea new – elements not – scale and ambition new
“stripping away at the bullshit and trying to prune things down to their conceptual hard kernel. I think its all pretty logical, the only thing that will prove it is money”

FWTD proved concept.
Q Notorious dream being something solid which creates sites of perfection – perfect reality’

“McDonalds wouldn’t be McDonalds unless it was so confident within itself”

“ND is the idea of inputting into real time dreams”

“build a cultural, critical and commercial force as a corporation”

Q is this fascism?
“One doesn’t need perfect people at all. One needs people who are willing, helpful and who want to believe in a sense of purpose. I THINK OUR TIME SUFFERS FROM A. MASSIVE SENSE OF PURPOSLESSSNESS, A MASSIVE SENSE OF HOPELESSNESS AND A MASSIVE SENSE OF INDIFFERENCE AND TERMINAL BORDOM”

Q how would this feed into everyday realities?
“snowball effect”

“if on the whole one is making commercial, critical and cultural milage, then it stands to reason that people will think either “I want a piece of the action” or alternatively “ I’m going to shake up my own structure”

I&J conversation

FN curatorship – presenting established artists with up and coming – OMF
Becomes less commercial and staged

OMF “JPI think what’s more important and in terms of this publication is not the artists that were selected, but the restrictions the project imposed on them. The ideas of text and the technicalities of letter press printing”

“JP Joshua seems really into investing in something with a great tradition. IF which is quite odd when everyone else seems to be really involved with putting magazines on the internet and exploring CD Roms and all the idea of the virtual museum…it’s also very him in a lot of ways, everything is very clear and proper, there’s a real sense of traditional values even in the way he speaks”””

OMF”IF Theres something of a DIY feel to it. Partly because you know each page is hand printed, so there’s bound to be slight differences and inaccuracies with each print, but also in the way Joshua always calls it a real “jobbing job’. It seems pretty important that he has a lot of control over the finished product…JP also reviving that dying tradition…That whole thing of reviving dying traditions comes up when he talks about the idea of reviving urban society by way of some sort of return to more traditional values, like de-centralising control away from the big multi-national supermarkets and back to small independent high str shops, the FN butcher..the whole idea of FN investing in those things to achieve a move forward and to improve things, but to a large extent by looking back”

(Relates back to national union of farmers foot and mouth poster inspiration)

Many of the artists OMF looking back – Gillick advert for a film already made Collishaw page from Lady Chatterley's lover'

IF RE PUNK" people seeing that they can invest in their own part of the notorious dream, and if you can package that neatly enough and market it well enough you can reach every part of the civilised world. Its all about convincing people that they can invest in this little English myth, or legend by owning this perfectly packaged thing…

"IF you get the feeling that everything to do with FN is kind of incomplete, or some of it perhaps more 'in progress', but if you take each element separately then they all have an internal logic"

"perfect site as ultimate objective"

ND – JC definition
"1 advertising, 2 art and curatorial services, 3. Entertainment, 4. Brand name retailing, 5 property development "each division already has at least one unique product or service waiting to be developed and sold, all of which are uniquely indicative of FNs mores"
Jane and Iain on OMF exhibition – not state whose work was whose

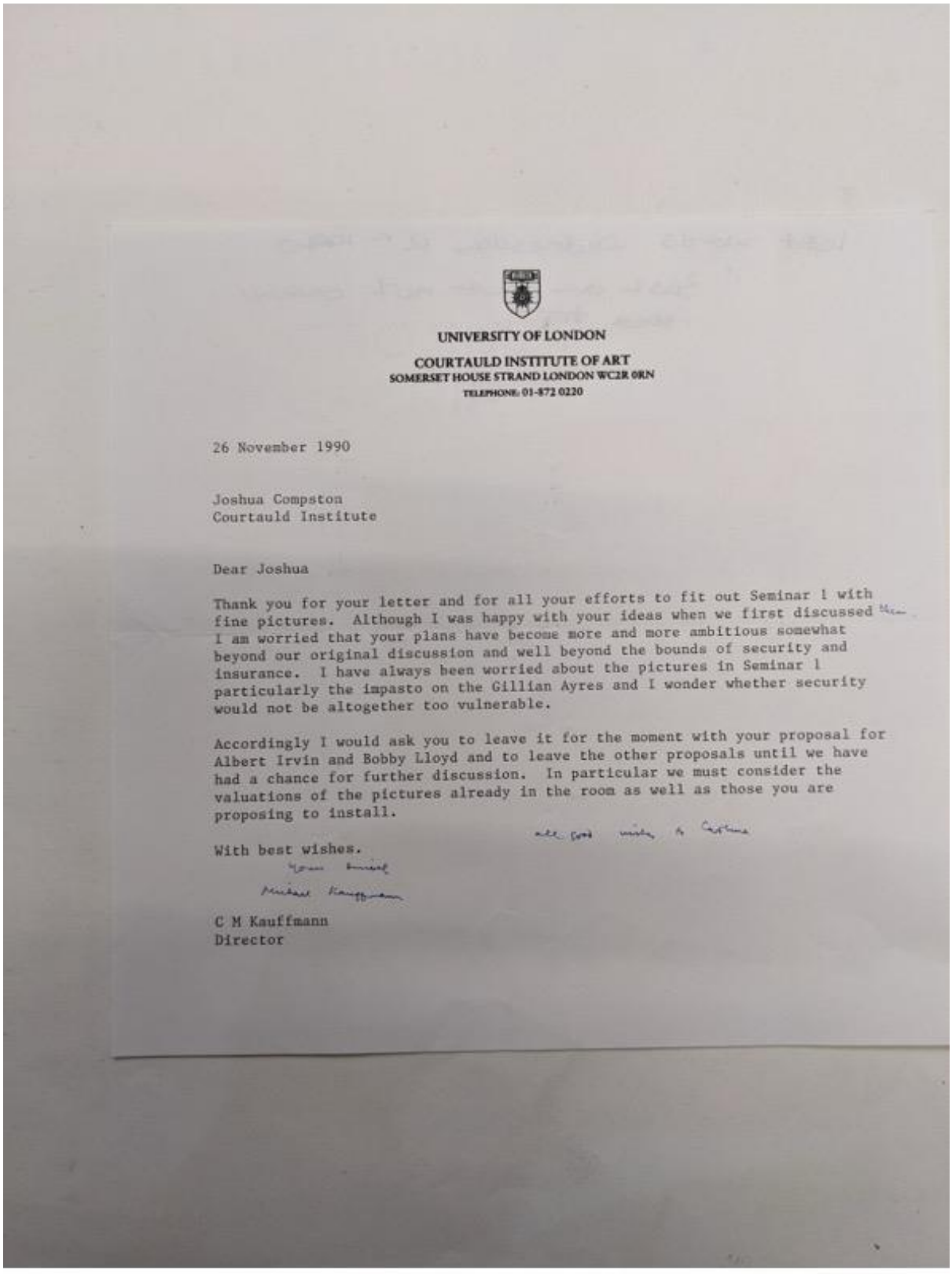
J&I FWTD 30/7/94 "As the day progressed it proved to be nothing less than a giant spectacle, and although art was everywhere, it didn't feel like art. This seems to be the point of most FN activity. The lesson clearly being taught is that art doesn't need to appear as art to still be art"

"..the considerable ideas nurtured at FN are not simply designed to agitate the foundations of art…FN now acts as the publics first contact with a much larger enterprise, now driving on auto-pilot to the dizzy heights of household name stardom"

ND "The dream on offer is one of long term regearing, re-presentation, rebuilding and unrelenting continuous marketing within the social, cultural and economic spheres"
Acknowledges loss leaders to forward the principle
"FN seeks to , in a genuinely more humane and ethical sense engender the possibility of real cultural change, and in doing so project itself into the homes, shops and workplaces of the public at large"

Banners – income generated by selling space on banners – 50 banners from industrial plastics 50x50 ft erected across London – each banner makes available a platform an advertisement and a voice – recognisable and unique platform – reverse have advertising. Banners carry logos JC “aggressive” and “idealist” written by celebrity – artists politicians.. and man on the street – planning permission to ensure longevity “the plurality of opinions expressed will secure a great deal of attention, not only from the entire population of London , but also via media and news networks

Appendix 2



UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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TELEPHONE: 01-872 0220

26 November 1990

Joshua Compston
Courtauld Institute

Dear Joshua

Thank you for your letter and for all your efforts to fit out Seminar 1 with fine pictures. Although I was happy with your ideas when we first discussed them I am worried that your plans have become more and more ambitious somewhat beyond our original discussion and well beyond the bounds of security and insurance. I have always been worried about the pictures in Seminar 1 particularly the impasto on the Gillian Ayres and I wonder whether security would not be altogether too vulnerable.

Accordingly I would ask you to leave it for the moment with your proposal for Albert Irvin and Bobby Lloyd and to leave the other proposals until we have had a chance for further discussion. In particular we must consider the valuations of the pictures already in the room as well as those you are proposing to install.

With best wishes.

Yours ever

Michael Kauffmann

C M Kauffmann
Director

Appendix 3

Record: 1

Title:

Authors: Source:

Document Type: Geographic Terms:

Company/Entity: People: Abstract:

Full Text Word Count: ISSN: Accession Number: Database: Section:

Get out as soon as you can! The ICA could be about to collapse, warns a former director in an...

Kustow, Michael

NewStatesman.01/24/97,Vol.126Issue4318,p38.2p.1Color Photograph.

Article

ENGLAND LONDON (England)

INSTITUTE of Contemporary Arts (London, England) DODD, Philip

Presents an open letter to Philip Dodd, the author's successor as the eight director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Great Britain. ICA's celebration of its 50 years with two opening exhibitions; Advice to Dodd.

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GET OUT AS SOON AS YOU CAN! THE ICA COULD BE ABOUT TO COLLAPSE, WARNS A FORMER DIRECTOR IN AN OPEN LETTER TO PHILIP DODD, HIS LATEST SUCCESSOR

Dear Philip Dodd, I wish you luck, quick wits and the strength of a weight-lifter as you become the eighth director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts since we led it into that delicious John Nash confection of a culture palace on the Mall in spring 1968.

This year the ICA celebrates 50 years since its twin opening exhibitions Years of Modern Art and 40 Years of Modern Art. "There was a conviction," wrote one ICA founder, Roland Penrose, "that something must be done at once to reawaken interest and prevent a return to insular indifference."

Setting Cycladic figurines side by side with Giacomettis and Les Demoiselles d'Avignon might have been a mind-opening vanguard statement in those days. But today the notions of avant-garde and modernism that cradled the ICA's birth have been masticated to pulp.

A return to indifference is the very threat that confronts you. How will you reach those who associate the ICA with female drag artists, James Bond conferences and UFO weekends? Or those who consider it a closed shop of jargon-congested theorising in which everything, however trivial, is susceptible to earnest, postmodern debate? Or those who think its art is no longer avant-garde, that the mutilated dummies of Jake and Dinos Chapman are the very symbol of mainstream British art? For many people the only reason to go to the ICA these days is the food in the restaurant or the distinctive programme in the cinema.

The ICA you run will have meaning only if it takes account of the transformations in our city and society, in the globally circulating images and genre-inter-play of our weightless culture. Material production and manufacture, once the index of our national "greatness", may now be yielding to the mind and the imagination. There could scarcely be a more propitious time for the ICA.

But I suspect the price of keeping the Institute alive is to come out from behind those plumb Nash pillars, quit the Mall and get down to some more bustling part of the city where art and images are trafficking with the forces of the century.

When Jennie Lee and Arnold Goodman, the dynamic arts duo of the Wilson government -- so unlike our very own Jack Cunningham -- shoe-horned the ICA into the former stables of Nash's building, we found ourselves in the centre of gentlemen's clubland, monarchical parade routes and imperial iconography. Were it not for one of the ICA's founders, the irrepressible architect Jane Drew, who wooed the then MP for Buckingham, Robert Maxwell, for a crucial debate, the building would have become an Air Force Museum.

The sheer incongruity of being planted in the ceremonial flight-path of empire was both overwhelming and, to be truthful, something of a turn-on. In excited anxiety, I sought to validate a showdown between the old culture and the new by seeking sources from the past, such as the William Blake in our first ICA bulletin: "Let it no more be said that Empires Encourage Arts, for it is Arts that Encourage Empires." And democracies, too.

I don't know whether you'll feel these contradictions as fiercely as we felt them in the late 1960s. Vietnam, Prague, Paris and Chicago made us acutely aware of conflict and power, and hungry for heaven on earth. Today we are all much more knowing; there's a template for every shock-horror-what- a-waste-of-tax-payers'-money arts story.

Authority would have been happier then if we had confined ourselves to the well-scrubbed face of modernism: urban utopias out of Ruskin or Le Corbusier, English neo-romantic lyricism, the mothering forms of Henry Moore, the incipient orthodoxies of museums of modern art. That was the contemporary art they might have expected from an ICA personified by Herbert Read, Coleridgean philosopher and critic, Jungian and self-styled anarchist (despite a knighthood); or by Roland Penrose, who kept the old ICA alive by selling off works from his own surrealist collection. One Max Ernst from this "passionate participant in the Parisian cafe and Parisian art world", as the official history still describes him, paid for the ICA for a year at its previous Mayfair address.

Authority would have known where it was with that clubby, harmless ICA. But if London couldn't manage the revolutionary changes of Paris or Prague, at least there was an upheaval of manners, a defiance of decorum. Energised by the surrealist legacy of scorn for good taste and by the 1960s cult of instinct, many events at the rehoused ICA in the early years threw over every trace of politeness. Inevitably, there was trouble.

It began when I invited Carolee Schneeman, a New York pioneer of body and event art (recently given a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum) to do a happening in the still-unfinished ICA cinema. She filled the place with foam rubber -- very much a material of the times -- and rolled around on it naked, with images of the Vietnam war projected over her body. Several members of the audience stripped off and joined in. Two days later Lord Goodman, Dickensian and avuncular at breakfast, warned me that the building wasn't yet paid for, and that some prospective donors might be discouraged by lurid accounts of

such happenings.

At the other end of the spectrum, John Arden and Margaretta Darcy, invited to stage their new play about Nelson, denounced the ICA as a puppet of power, banned me from performances and unilaterally declared this free theatre, causing foyer scuffles with those who had paid for their tickets. I took comfort in the graffiti that appeared soon after on the walls of the Duke of York Steps: "Do not adjust your set -- there is a fault in reality."

I still think those 11 words make one of the best artworks of those times. In those convulsive late 1960s and early 1970s the incongruity between the location of the ICA and its purposes was energising. Today the panoply of majesty and monarchy that surrounds the Nash terraces is self-destructing or tabloid- tainted, the disparity between vanguard art and privilege no longer piquant. The ICA has long since lost its charge of chutzpah. Other centres of new art and thought, from the Pompidou Centre to the Riverside Studios at its peak, have stolen some of the thunder; the Bankside Tate promises to change all the rules.

Over the past 30 years successive directors and teams have squeezed just about every drop of juice from the Mall-mounted ICA. I haven't been the ICA's most assiduous attender since I left in 1971, but my reading is that during the 1970s the ICA experienced the same kind of narrowing and retrenchment as much of British culture.

Virulent and triumphalist conservatism took over. Sneering and vindictive mockery of anything innovative came into the culture, its offspring the ghastly coinages "chattering classes" and "luvvies". As their hopes for political change were stifled one by one, artists and thinkers retreated into surly, specialist enclaves. At the ICA many British artists responded with sullen provocations and taunts, exhibiting sadistic displays or mausoleum furniture, narrowing their perspectives as the social fabric was dehydrated by Thatcher and her art-collecting sorcerer, Charles Saatchi.

A vast army of thinkers withdrew into theory, which dismantled anything you cared to name at the drop of Derrida's chapeau. The ICA embraced theory, along with the BFI and many other sectors of British culture, except the theatre, which has to get bottoms on seats and keep deconstruction on a leash. In art and academia there was much extravagant gesturing and rhetoric, which scarcely masked the depression of people who felt that what they were doing wasn't appreciated during the Thatcher era.

The ICA went through a rapid succession of directors, then settled on Bill McAlister, a granite arts manager who took the ICA through the 1980s with a team who, when they were strong enough to stand up to him, gave the ICA once more a sense of necessity. Michael Morris as head of performing arts (with the physical theatre debut of DV8, for example);

Sandy Nairne as head of exhibitions (staging Helen Chadwick's unforgettable On Mutability, with its luscious imprints of her body and its stink of rotting compost in a Georgian salon); Lisa Appiguanesi bringing the crunch of intellectual engagement out of academe and into the sceptical metropolis for the talks programme; Archie Tait building the cinema into a distinctive platform for the inventions of Jarman, Svankmayer, Chen Kaige -- the ICA was out of harbour and into the high seas again, creating currents as well as riding them.

When things go well, an arts outfit -- a band, an orchestra, a theatre troupe, a centre -- can become a magnetic field. In the mid- 1980s, when I was running arts at Channel 4, I gave the ICA £100,000 to produce an unspecified performance work for television. The result was Michael Nyman's opera of Oliver Sacks' The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat, a work of typical lucidity and untypical emotion. Another sign that the ICA could still be a good catalyst was Ariel Dorfman's Death and the Maiden, the premiere

reading of which took place at the Mall before the Royal Court staged it.

But then many of the most memorable ICA events of the 1980s took place beyond its white walls, as if it were literally deconstructing itself. Laurie Anderson at the Dominion, Jan Fabre at the Albert Hall, billboard art in Trafalgar Square, ICA films distributed to independent cinemas, ICA videos and publications in universities and schools. But nomadism had been an itch from the start: in the 1960s we put on The Bread and Puppet Theatre in a dusty ballroom, John Arden in the disused Roundhouse, Jerzy Grotowski in Limehouse.

When I asked Mik Flood, your departing predecessor, how much time he spent on artistic planning and how much on building administration, the sponsors and, above all, the deficit, he muttered, "It's weighted toward the bureaucrat bit." In the medium term, as consultants have doubtless told them, the ICA board is sitting pretty: it owns a lease on the Nash terrace conservatively worth 4 million, and its deficit, accumulated since the 1970s, is 500,000. Despite fund-raising auctions, and architects' plans for a 25 million future home at Blackfriars, little has happened to shift the ICA out of its well-heeled paralysis.

Bill McAlister stayed 13 years as director, which many thought too long a tenure for an experimental centre. It took a revolt of the staff, a mini-Belgrade, to sweep him from office. A similar staff rebellion, coupled with Toshiba's withdrawal of 150,000 of sponsorship, greeted Mik Flood's recent attempt to reorganise the editorial team along the lines of Channel 4's "publishing house" editorial process, or the distinction between commissioning and broadcasting in Birt's reformed BBC.

The ICA needs an exodus to break its introspection. If the RSC, with its troupes and workshops, can purge its soul with a partial exodus from the Barbican, surely the ICA, which travels lighter, is agile enough to follow. There's a moral and artistic truth in nomadism which can get lost in cushioned residency. There may be a new home at Blackfriars, or even better, in Tottenham Court Road, electronic bazaar of the information age. But more than this, the ICA needs a testing exodus, out of its white neo- classicism into the world of reproduced, synthesised and treated images which are the platonic cave- walls of our age. It's a fairground out there, a circus whose only booths so far are sad cybercafes. Are you ready to be its travelling ring-master and follow the best art and thought of our time?

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By MICHAEL KUSTOW

Michael Kustow was director of the ICA from 1967 to 1971; Philip Dodd is a former deputy editor of the "New Statesman"

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Appendix 4

Record: 1

Title:

Authors: Source:

Document Type: Subject Terms: Geographic Terms: Abstract:

Full Text Word Count: ISSN: Accession Number: Database: Section:

The door swings both ways in contemporary British culture, but the Labour Party is far too square...

Dodd, Philip

NewStatesman.04/11/97, Vol.126 Issue 4329, p39. 2p.1Color Photograph.

Article *ARTS & society UNITED Kingdom

Presents an open letter to Great Britain Prime Minister Tony Blair regarding the status of arts and culture in the country. Reasons why arts professionals are losing the influence they once wield; Developments in arts and media affecting the state of society as a whole.

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THE DOOR SWINGS BOTH WAYS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH CULTURE, BUT THE LABOUR PARTY IS FAR TOO SQUARE TO NOTICE

Dear Tony,

Sorry you missed the private screening of David Cronenberg's Crash I organised a few weeks ago, but I understand you were otherwise engaged. It would have been interesting to see an ethical socialist respond to a film the power of which lies precisely in its refusal to take an overtly ethical stance towards its visceral and highly sexualised subject matter. I hope your brokering of the deal between David Alton and Michael Howard to toughen up

legislation on videos when you were shadow home secretary doesn't mean that you find the New Arts more than you can bear.

You'll excuse my coining this rather ugly phrase, "New Arts", but I'm rather surprised that the Labour Party hasn't extended its Hare Krishna-like mantras new Britain, new Labour, and so on - to include culture. After all, it's perfectly plain that there is just as much "old" thinking to be jettisoned about the arts and media as about any other area of our daily lives. Not that this is likely to be at the forefront of your thinking.

But since this is the moment at which everyone is offering you suggestions, I don't see why I shouldn't join in, even if the New Statesman was expecting me to write a reply to Michael Kustow's kind advice to me in January about what to do with the ICA when I become its director, a role I assume this week. (Michael: I do wish you hadn't gone over the whole history of the place since your time. It made you sound like one of those King Crimson fans who thinks everything has gone to the dogs - and I know you don't believe that.)

We all know that there has been a lot going on in the arts and media in Britain recently. There are the "hot" artists, fashion designers, pop musicians and filmmakers who have fed the self-congratulatory hype about London as the centre of the cultural world; there's the transformation of broadcasting, with the launch of Channel 5, the reinvention of the BBC, the digitalisation of television; there are the building projects -the Tare at Bankside, the ENO, Sadler's Wells, institutions all over the country. And, most obviously, there is the Lottery, which has changed the priorities of arts organisations dramatically. (Let's hope we don't end up with beautiful buildings and no money for programmes.) But despite all the frenetic arts and media activity, I don't think anyone has tried to describe just how far the 1990s has ushered in a new world for the arts.

This has been the century of experts, according to the social historian Harold Perkin. Nowhere is this more true than in the arts and media, where everything has been sifted, sorted and graded for us by such people. After all, it's not so long since our experience of art was defined for and presented to us by a relatively small cadre of people who worked in the Arts Council, terrestrial television, national arts institutions and so on.

For this burgeoning nucleus of professionals, the arts were the cultural arm of the welfare state: doing us good in the same way as free milk and orange juice. I'm not trying to mock this, since I was a beneficiary myself as a working-class grammar-school boy. But according to Lord Goodman, Harold Wilson's adviser, access to the arts could even transform hooligans into upright citizens.

I assumed that these beliefs were a thing of the past- until I read new Labour's cultural policy paper, which begins with a quotation from Ruskin about how one can be "born again" by reading "a page from a good book". From my Methodist upbringing, I recognise the impulse to make every experience moral or religious, even the aesthetic ones. But the simple truth is that art is often much less comforting and a lot more pleasurable than Ruskin implies, and many people enjoy it for precisely these reasons.

Will Labour be able to live with this unnerving fact if it comes to office? Or will it, Canute-like, try to push back anything that is not sweetness and light? If so, rows over difficult works such as Crash are likely to become commonplace.

On present form new Labour is hardly likely to take another tack and back the guardians of the arts who give the Ruskinian moral fervour a revolutionary twist the cultural studies brigade who reduce the arts to no more than an aspect of the ideological struggle. After all, these guardians are the arts equivalent of the Labour activists of the 1980s, with whom you have no truck. They believe themselves to be the true representatives of the artists and their constituencies, the vanguard, the ones whose competence or commitment must never be questioned.

But whether they are the Ruskinian or revolutionary variety, the arts professionals are losing the power they once enjoyed. The reasons for this are legion, but among them is the effect of technological change.

If you were brought up in a provincial city 20 years ago there might have been, if you were lucky, one cinema that showed non-Hollywood films. Its programme (and programmer) determined your sense of cinema history. Now Chungking Express, Nosferatu and Batman Returns can all be found on the same shelf of videos in someone's home - a taste of the extraordinarily wide section of cinema that can be privately owned without the mediation of any programmer.

There's evidence of this cultural democratisation in television, too, in programmes such as Video Nation and, before it, Video Diaries. These have allowed people to make their own documentaries, programmes that are not just interesting at an anecdotal or anthropological level, but which have developed film- making sufficiently to shift the aesthetic of inhouse television documentaries. The amateur camcorder has unnerved professional film-makers to such an extent that whenever you see a camcorder in a Hollywood movie - sex, lies and videotape, for example -or a European art movie such as Benny's Video, it is a sure sign that the character in that scene is corrupt.

The Internet, for all its unrealised potential, is also part of this argument. People are more and more interested in DIY culture. This is an audience that won't be told what to enjoy or how to enjoy it; won't be told that it can't enjoy both the Trocadero Arcade and the Tate Gallery. Programmers and professionals are going to have to reinvent themselves to stay in touch with this culture.

The artists are no more compliant than the audience, no longer happy to be curated in someone else's gallery, often preferring to control their own show, perform in their own space. It's no accident that the famous Freeze show, which introduced the present young generation of Brits to the world in 1989, was curated by one of their own, Damien Hirst.

Indeed, it is likely that young artists (and I don't want sentimentalism to enter here) are going to be more sympathetic to emerging trends, or just quicker to spot them, than professional curators. Even in grand institutions such as the National Gallery, the most surprising and challenging shows have included the Artist's Eye series, where artists have been invited to curate a show from the permanent collection. (If I might put in my sole plug for the ICA, it is that from its very beginning in the late 1940s it always encouraged artists to be at the centre of such activity.)

This fluidity (artist becomes curator, audience becomes film-maker) is characteristic of the 1990s. It is equally evident in the blurring of artistic categories. The old distinctions (avant-garde and mainstream, art house and commercial, elite and popular, theory and practice) are less secure than they were. When Andy Weatherall, one of the DJ kings of London, is commissioned to make a new soundtrack for a classic avant-garde film, is the product popular or elite? When the experimental artist Christian Boltanski stages Schubert's Winterreise, are we dealing with the avant-garde or mainstream? When Jonathan Coe, this magazine's film critic, in his new novel House of Sleep writes a comic Lacanian account of part of his own book, is he writing theory or fiction? Is Steve McQueen an artist or film-maker, given the fact that he makes nothing but films, but shows (so far) only in galleries? And quite where does the fashion work of Vivienne Westwood or Alexander McQueen sit in any of the received categories within which we have been used to talking of the arts?

This blur sometimes throws up the oddest pairings: Mike Leigh's Secrets and Lies owes a debt, it seems to me, to the television sit com Keeping Up Appearances.

There are those who are appalled by this mongrel word, want to reinstate and police old orthodoxies, believing that the avant-garde was once some such pure entity - against all the evidence, from Joyce's Ulysses onwards. This new world does pose complex problems, it is

true: the collapse of boundaries means we are in a world without an adequate critical language to describe it. But the instability and mobility it promises, and the licence it offers for new combinations and connections, are potentially exhilarating. And these connections will hardly respect customs barriers.

That's why Labour's document, for all its decent policy formulations -the Arts Card for teenagers to see

shows cut-price, the NESTA fund for arts training and "enablement" - is in the end so disappointing: it gives a sense of a country with its cultural barriers firmly closed. It lacks any vision of Britain's place in the world, as a country where the door swings both ways, a place where ideas, forms and performers are both imported and exported.

It has no sense of contemporary London's connections with contemporary Los Angeles, or Edinburgh's with Prague. And this is not some failure of taste. To watch Jean-Marie Le Pen justify his racist policies of a France for the French, with threats of "alien" dilutions of "French culture", is to be reminded that concerns for the health of a national culture (to use a Ruskinian phrase) can often be turned to reactionary ends. So can the bizarre belief that British culture was somehow born by some unsullied means of parthenogenesis and is now threatened by invasion.

Since the Labour Party document suggests a fondness for 19th-century authors (Blake included), Tony, let me offer you one in return: Keats' "let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts". You can't get more promiscuous than that. And it is a commitment to principled promiscuity that this country needs now.

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By PHILIP DODD

Philip Dodd, a former deputy editor of New Statesman, is the new director of the ICA

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Appendix 5

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Mick Flood
Institute of Contemporary Arts
The Mall
London SW1

January 30, 1994

Dear Mick,
I have a proposal to put to you.
I recently organised a one off event at a south London venue which involved an evening of music and sound as a background to basically what one might call a 'social club' and surprised all concerned with the positive feedback and response we received from the 80 or so people who attended.
Having been such a success I would like to broaden this venture and I am therefore writing to you. I have been a member of the ICA for over ten years now and have regularly supported your events and indeed have made many friends through my visits and feel that the ICA would be the ideal venue for this project.
The basic premise is this - clubs can be great places to go but the volume of the music is detrimental to real contact, i.e. conversation; bars usually have a certain uncomfortable cliquey atmosphere about them. It is the right time to have a social space where people of a like mind can meet socially and share ideas. I also envisage the club as a forum for presenting new work, be it video, super 8, readings and so on.
It's a very exciting time at the moment creatively I feel and there are countless artists on the edge of a 'scene' with no central meeting point .I work with a record label, Touch, which has been going for ten years now and am in close contact with a host of other eclectic and interesting musicians and artists. We could provide an original sound installation for every night, to be held once a month, using a number of very successful and recognised artists on the underground music scene including Rephlex Records/Aphex Twin, Seefeel (about to tour with The Cocteau Twins and likely to be very big this year), Reload, Scanner - a group of