‘It could be an eye...’

Neil Mulholland

Now what has ‘good’ criticism to look like... I would say first that it recognises the figural nature of its language. Further the non-referentiality of its discourse in respect of critical readings which may or may not have happened literally. Recognising just these two conditions would release—or lead to the release of—criticism from its own ontological crudities...[1]

Now look harder. Your probably saying, “Hey! That’s just a full-stop. I’ve seen one of those before!” But that just goes to show how stupid you are. [...] That black, black circle says a lot about death, it says a lot about modern anxiety, it says a lot about our whole concept of what kind of concept a concept really is, it says a lot about everything and a lot about nothing. And it says a helluva lot about the here and now. Hey! Let’s take another look at it: It could be an eye. It could be an arsehole.[2]

Based on his writings for *New Left Review*, *Art Monthly*, *Art & Design* and a vast body of primary and secondary literature, Julian Stallabrass’ *High Art Lite* is a sustained critique of London-based Young British Artists of the 1990s, a manufactured ‘movement’ obsessed with commerce and cults of the personal “purchased at the price of triviality.” (p2) Stallabrass coins the evaluative term “High Art Lite” to describe this body of work rather than settle for more commonly used terms such as yBa, Brit Art and the Britpack. “Naming a tendency is easy,” he writes. “Showing that it deserves a name, is coherent and distinctive enough to need a category to contain it, is another matter.” (p2) Stallabrass should be commended for having chosen to evaluate the work in such a transparent fashion. The “lite” of Stallabrass’ term obviously relates negatively to two key issues of this art: commercialism (sponsorship from leisure industries such as Becks) and quality (Stallabrass’ claim that this work is not really high art but a branding exercise, a mediated, dumbed-down substitute for fast-living lifestyle junkies on an art diet who have “made a very smooth ride for themselves.”). (p217)

In order to substantiate these claims, Stallabrass begins by focusing on the role of personality in *high art lite*, looking at Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Tracy Emin and Gavin Turk. Hirst, who is simultaneously a media darling and an enfant terrible sensationalist, is his main target here. There is little doubt that Hirst’s work mixes the spectacular with the literal, and in this sense, is a great boon to the British tabloids and the lifestyle industries. This simultaneously appeals to the art cognoscenti in the widest sense: “...Hirst in a naive, sincere way does appear to be caught up with the big themes of the human condition.” (p23) “Hirst, then, despite his Goldsmiths training, serves as the tendency’s Douanier Rousseau.” (p25) Such facile, faux-naive philosophising does not mean Hirst’s work must therefore be facile, as Stallabrass implies. To argue this would be to commit the intentional fallacy. Hirst, like most artists since the 50s, is, of course, wise to this, adopting a highly successful Warholian “what you see is what you see” approach. This allows him to be all things to all men. In order to evade the triteness of Hirst’s personal references to “life and death” and popular culture — which Stallabrass disparagingly characterises as “hammer-horror” — sympathetic critics have constructed a lineage with “the authentic sources of his art”, (e.g. The Cabinet of Curiosities, Protestant Iconoclastic still-life painting, Burkeian and Lyotardian theories of the Sublime, Francis Bacon and post-war European Existentialism, Museological Art of the 80s, etc.). (p25)

Characterising such sources as ‘authentic’, risks intimating that the world as known through the mass media fatalistically confirms the actual world. The mass media may be fatalistic (it would like to think so) but this does not entail that this is true of all popular culture which demands a diverse range of factionalised, active consumers. According to a hard-line materialist reading, art and popular culture are both superstructures, myths which disguise the ‘real’ workings of the world. An attempt to discredit the yBa as a whole by revealing their ‘real’ workings will be reductionist insofar as it seeks to reinstate the legitimacy of the Theory industry as an arbitrator of the real over the fragmented praxis of cultural production. Stallabrass is more than aware that criticism is just another form of representation or myth:

“...for criticism to be truly effective, it must take on the art world as a whole, showing how it is thoroughly entangled with the society, its economy and politics. Such criticism will have to start with an examination of its own apparent powerlessness in the market-led vacuum.” (p272).

However, while calling for artists and their promoters to be more reflexive and critical, Stallabrass is often just as reluctant to examine the Marxist premises of his own judgments. Of course, this in no sense mitigates his concern with the lack of active negotiation of such critical issues in *high art lite*. Indeed, Stallabrass’ overtly critical stance is a long overdue corrective to what he characterises as the “schoolboy relativism” which has long plagued the art world. (p264) The urgency of this task exonerates his tendency to avoid the paralysing self-reflexiveness of much recent art historiography.

Stallabrass charts how artists became less interested in controlling or contributing to the critical debate surrounding their work, demonstrating the numerous ways in which the 90s witnessed the re-emergence of the traditional division of labour between critics and artists, with a concomitant dwindling interest in the practice of Theory. In one sense this is a result of the failure of critical postmodernism in the 80s, which became increasingly totalitarian and predictable in its deconstruction of the postmodern trinity of race, class and gender: “It was not cheery stuff, and only rarely did it allow the viewer any leeway, any response other than the sanctioned one, or any sense of its subjects other than as powerless victims.” (p86) Stallabrass contends that, in its critical relativism, 90s art was equally predicable, being little more than an empty collage of ready-made elements. For Stallabrass, abdication of critical responsibility is as much a travesty as it is a symptom of postmodernist relativism: “It is as though this generation have learned their postmodern lessons too well, ditching its persistent but ungrounded moralising in favour of its licence to sanction anything except judgment.” (p95) Hirst, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Sam Taylor-Wood, Marcus Harvey, Matt Collishaw, Abigail Lane and Douglas Gordon among many others are all guilty of utilising this debauched “feature of the tabloid press: the knowing exploitation of their subjects, the indifference to their subjects’ feelings or their fate when set against the imperatives to produce spectacular copy, to best rivals and pull in profit.” (p139) This formulates shallow, ‘lite’ art, spectacular, clear products and crude puns tailor-made to attract the attention of Charles Saatchi as is “most clearly seen in the prevalence of the one-liner work of art [which] makes its points swiftly with conventional signs.” (p99)

On the face of things this is a fairly convincing argument. However, we need to ask how important it is for artists to make “judgments”. Favouring poetic, unstable signifiers does not necessarily mean that the work has to be shallow, it could equally be read as signalling a commitment to complexity. Stallabrass distrusts intuitive decision-making because, being a vague and mystificatory concept, it grants art relative autonomy, meaning that it cannot be readily subjected to materialist institutional analysis. This is highlighted when he illustrates his thesis with an embarrassing attempt to produce a series of ‘Hirsts’: “A large cabinet with shelves on which stand jars of brightly coloured sweets—gob-stoppers, Smarties, Refreshers and the like. The title: Knows Candy.” (p27) This lacklustre satire indicates that something needs to be said in defence of praxis, that there needs to be an acknowledgement of the difference between thinking about things and making things. Recognition of this factor is lacking in Stallabrass’ discussion which means it risks becoming histrionic, destructive rather than constructive. Stallabrass’ critique of *high art lite’s* lack of self-reflexiveness may be justified, but it perhaps confuses the ways in which art and criticism can operate. While artists’ readings may be questionable from an historical materialist viewpoint, we must consider criticism as being of no more importance than any other influence. Distaste for *high art lite’s* historicism only demonstrates that the hierarchies of art historians and artists are not identical. Crucially, however, Stallabrass sees this familiar issue as having gone beyond mere disagreement and recondite dispute:

“the attitude is not only of a repudiation of arcane jargon, of language that excludes the majority, but also of a suspicion of whole categories of knowledge, of the process of acquiring learning, and even of sustained thought itself.” (p105)

In this sense, Stallabrass’ dislike of the populist lack of critical ambition of London-based scene of the 90s is warranted.

“To play dumb is not just to defend yourself against attack for being high-brow but to take the first steps from saving your art from being ignored. The new art provoked conservative critics, certainly, but also learned a good deal from them, accepting as valid their attack on liberal (and previously left-leaning) art as obscure, elitist and boring.” (p86-87)

Certainly, in much 90s art, the free play of the signifier was little more than a marketing tool (bigger audiences) and peer group aesthetic (who know better). Poststructuralist inspired polyvalence and pluralism became serviceable tools “for saying everything and nothing, for stamping a work with a mark of value, while never being reductive, never subjecting discourse to closure, never trampling on anyone’s subjectivity, never completing a thought.” (p123) Failing to recognise the irony of this situation, Liz Ellis made a similar point in the feminist journal *n.paradoxa*:

“Sarah Lucas makes it clear that she is not making work of social or political or critical meaning, she says: ‘Just look at the picture and think what you like.’ [...] [We are therefore] returned to the old, tired familiar notion of artist as moral relativist, removed from the rest of the world, at liberty to make and say and do without the necessity for explanation or intellectual framework. This role does have social-political implications, and however weary these graduates of Goldsmiths may be, many others are passionately involved in these poststructuralist debates. To choose not to join the messy debates over the language of experience, the themes of difference and otherness is to adopt a political and intellectual position. The narcissistic self-referential, free-enterprise nature of the work to the exclusion of any other outside factors ultimately locates the work as politically right wing.”[3]

Indeed, it is a truism to say that apolitical stances are political. The problem with this view is that it does not tell us anything about the specific

ways in which 90s models of 'apolitical practice' were political. This is vulgar materialism, characterising *high art lite* as the direct 'reflection' of the base in order to make the 'critical' claim that it must be bad because its defenders are bad critics, and capitalist collaborators. Given that art was and is the product of capitalist societies, this should lead swiftly to the conclusion that all art is inherently reactionary. Holding to this (essentially accurate) belief would mean failing to distinguish between promotional strategies and the differing qualities of *high art lite* since it encourages a complacent unwillingness to pay any detailed attention to culture. Such stagnant materialism is hardly dialectical. It is equally unwise to claim that ideology is such a direct form of cultural exchange that it can be tokenistically illustrated (narcissism is not necessarily right wing). Assuming that the historically ambivalent attitude of the political avant-garde towards consumerism, is 'acted' out ad nauseum by the yBa myth declines to consider the fact that the belief that art can have a transparent relationship with the 'political' and the 'ethical' has been thoroughly reworked since the late 60s. Materialist criticism must now face up to a (convenient) postmodernist orthodoxy which asks questions such as: "Why should the ethical and political dominate cultural praxis, and who is in a position to decide what is political and ethical?" Given the "disappearance of any agreed perspective from which to judge things", Stallabrass' critical intervention is a hazardous project. (p270-271)

Rather than adopting a static, vulgar Marxist position, Stallabrass seeks to verify the reactionary character of *high art lite* by examining the issue of image to gauge the value of its intentions. For Stallabrass, the yBas were not interested in the production of art as a site of conflict but as a media identity which could be clearly defined and marketed: "as long as the work is considered only as the product of a persona rather than of a wider culture, it becomes impossible to place." (p95) As such, Hirst's cigarettes mainly represent a 'Hirst' rather than 'death,' Hume's door paintings mainly represent a 'Hume' rather than 'life and death', Turk's autosculptures mainly represent 'Gavin Turk' rather than 'fame', Emin's tent mainly represents 'Tracy Emin' rather than 'sex and death'. While this is certainly true, it does not render other readings of the works obsolete (even if they tend to be bland and predictable). Art requires the humanist concept of signature/authenticity to concur or reject, *high art lite* just happens to be childishly obsessed with this factor. Are the art objects of Hirst and Turk "critique or exemplification or both at once?" (p46) This is an old chestnut. Such works are not overtly critical of commodity fetishism, but, given that all objects in a capitalist society are commodities and fetishes anyway, how could they be otherwise? Is *high art lite* nothing more than yet another literalist Warholian employment of the Catch-22 of 'new' art, a bourgeois construct used to 'critique' bourgeois constructs? Yes and no. The difference, Stallabrass indicates, lies in ambition. Hume's paintings are mirrors; he either defends his work with "brief ambivalent remarks" (p98) or his presence is non-existent. Warhol was passive in every respect. For Stallabrass, then, Warhol's interviews do not compare with Hirst and Hume's since they are not authentically committed to inauthenticity. "...once a certain complexity of bluff and counter-bluff is reached, there is no way of knowing what any statement really means." (p95-96) This strategy is autoerotic, rather than rhetorical, "well digested Baudrillard, turned to deeply conservative ends." (p151) It could be a hall of mirrors. It could be an arsehole.

Taking on the relativist arsehole gazing either/or alogic of 90s art is a thankless task which haunts this book.

"For theory, the combination of a false but ineluctable authenticity from which the art is supposed to issue and the neutral, non-judgmental position that it adopts, is lethal. [...] While it dethrones critical thought, irony enthrones the artist, for to see irony in the work is to believe that the individual creator has taken an attitude towards their work, and towards the viewer. The masks, then, do finally fall away in the grasping of irony, for we have to believe that the artist is at least serious about irony (or if ironic about irony, at least serious about the irony with which irony is taken—I could go on.)" (p96)

This double bind was unquestionably at the heart of the mystifying accounts which supported the yBa. Again, this way of thinking is clearly a product of the critical postmodernism taught in art schools in the 80s and early 90s. Critical strategies designed to disrupt the production of meaning and knowledge, such as deconstruction, tended towards aestheticism in practice. Accordingly, *high art lite* often fails to properly consider contradiction, the desire to demonstrate the impossibility of judgment leads to idealism—i.e. every work is seen to contain contradiction, end of story. To see a difference between things is to see specific qualities uniquely contrasted with each other. To see unspecific, indeterminate differences is a contradiction—it is to see nothing at all. *High art lite* tends to come down on the side of (supposedly) irreducible complexity as the universal result, the only thing that is new is the element of certainty.

Stallabrass argues that this came to be seen as the only available position for criticism in the 90s, a position exemplified by the ironic double-coding of Matthew Collings' writing.

"One of the virtues of Matthew Collings' book, *Blimey!*, is that it offers a consistent pastiche of conventional art world talk. His meandering prose, inability to sustain an argument and thinking in soundbites is an exemplification of that talk, and its careless but consistent mislaying of all that is important." (p105)

Can Collings' version of events be challenged effectively? The Collings satirized by *Private Eye* is virtually indistinguishable from the real Collings, whose writing is already a "pastiche of the tyranny of received opinion that governs the art world." (p106) Even Stallabrass' garish pink book jacket, compete with Chapman brother's illustration, and soundbite chapter headings in a borrowed font pay homage to Collings while deriding him. This does not prevent Stallabrass from shrewdly examining the "Decline and Fall of Art Criticism". Numerous indicators of decline are cited: published idiocies are growing in number, pop stars have become critics, lifestyle magazines produce feeble features on art, art journals have become picture sheets for the purposes of name-dropping, criticism is anodyne promotion, "an adjunct to the business of art, and the art of business." (p266-267) *Transcript* is rightly castigated for its use of the interview form, which in feigning authenticity is consequently lacking in critical distance and intellectual responsibility. That which does profess to be theoretically reflexive and critical is found equally wanting. John Roberts and Dave Beech's construction of the 'philistine' as a defence of the yBa is taken to task for its patronising attempt to validate the "pure pleasures of the body [...] against the corrupt machinations of the intellect" as though this bourgeois cliché was the 'voice of the excluded', a 'proletarian' challenge to the hegemony of institutionalised theory in the '80s." (p119)

"The working class is allied with the wild body, with unregulated hedonism, with violence, drug abuse and filthy sex. For the majority of working class people who are not fans of the *Sunday Sport*, this simple-minded identification of their culture with the products of pornmongers and media monopolists is pretty insulting."[4] (p121)

Is *high art lite*'s non-reflexive form of cognition totalising, or are there alternatives? According to Stallabrass:

"theory's standard configuration of intellectual disciplines may not be the most effective tools to use, since the art has thoroughly inoculated itself against most of them in advance." (p122)

Either this bleak picture is correct or Stallabrass is immoderately close to the culture he rebukes. Just as the apathetic modernist flaneur's fascination with 'low culture' was inseparable from life in the big city, exorbitantly ironic double-coding and an overwrought obsession with conspicuous consumption are predominantly products of London. Elsewhere in Britain, where this theatre of ostentation is of little importance, many artists have been able to ignore metropolitan peer group aesthetics and promotional criticism to produce work which, intentionally speaking at least, is romantic (though not naively so). Like the art he analyses, suffering as it does from falsely presenting parochial situations as though they were the products of national consensus, Stallabrass' critique becomes less meaningful outwith its mega-municipal context. His detailed discussion of the relationship between art and private capital in "The Market and the State" and "Saatchi and Sensation" are mainly relevant to those intimately involved with the machinations of the promotional sectors of the London art scene in which there is a massive boost of capital from the City's corporate purse. Equally, institutional critique of soundbites such as "Young British Art", "Cool Britannia" and the "Third Way" do not apply easily in Scotland on cultural and constitutional grounds ("yBa" and "Cool Britannia" oversimplify a complex set of post-colonial identities which are based primarily on London's diverse ethnographic and economic constituency; Labour does not have a majority in the Scottish Parliament.) Moreover it is clear that Scottish-based artists, working predominately in the public domain, have, for several years, been able to establish international reputations while maintaining a distance from London, and therefore must be approached differently. The chapter entitled "The Britishness of British Art" is an astute analysis of the unitary and nostalgic images of the working-class and the "corpse" formally known as Britain (read non-gentrified inner-city London, its suburbs and pastoral South East England) which forms the aestheticised subject matter of much *high art lite*, but could, perhaps, have introduced more into the debate over what is meant by the use of terms such as "British" and "Britishness" outwith this area of the UK.

With regard to Saatchi's sovereignty over such litigious terms as "British Art", Stallabrass comments that "the reduction of state funds to the public sector has played a role in the appearance of a more populist art, though hardly rendered in the polite colours that would pacify the conservatives" who argued at the end of the 70s that minimal and conceptual art were the expression of state bureaucracy. (p222) It is true to say that *high art lite* is the consequence of a fully fledged mone-

tarist policy for arts funding, the new (publicly unaccountable) orthodoxy. However, the critical attacks on the institutionalised art world in the late 70s were initiated by Marxists principally inspired by Raymond Williams, Herbert Marcuse and the *New Left Review*, not, as Stallabrass argues, by conservatives.[5]

"Ironically the conservative trend in the visual arts ran riot. This was due, above all, to the confusion and paranoia left in the wake of an onslaught against modernism launched by pseudo-Marxist-writers, some of whom never understood the basic problems (confusing art with the market). They left destruction in their wake with no practicable alternative. The few theories that did emerge were difficult to apply to the traditional media to which they were by and large addressed, and misinterpretation brought the old reactionaries out in strength."[6]

The major problem with Stallabrass' pessimistic criticism might be that it fortuitously echoes the Marxist critiques of the end of the 1970s. The highly negative, combative assertions made then served as the main catalyst for the factionalisation and privatisation of British art in the early 1980s, a corollary of which was the suffocation of 'critical postmodernist' discourses on British practices.

Stallabrass' negativity nonetheless raises anxious questions about what 'real' art might be. Following George Walden, Stallabrass cites *The Simpsons* as a model:

"The Simpsons critique is radical because it implies that fallibility and corruption are not just a matter of individuals but of systems, and it offers some small and faintly glimpsed positive elements to set against the dystopian vision, particularly the feelings of the main characters for each other. The challenge such a programme offers to high art lite is the following: is there anything that it does that art can do better (other than sell unique objects to millionaires?)." (p168)

This much might imply that Stallabrass is seeking catharsis or redemption. He is happy to settle for art which is 'critical', sympathetically citing BANK for their policing of the yBa with "distinct curatorial interventions." (p66) It could be argued to the contrary that BANK were highly conservative artists, entirely reliant on the inadequacies of the London art scene, and that their parasitic work only helped to reinforce the status quo. Besides, BANK were tiresome, *The Simpsons* is entertaining.

If the 90s lead to a reintroduction of the old hierarchies of artist (passive producer of autonomous objects) and critic (explicator of objects), it also created hybrids such as the artist-curator, much heralded as the model of 90s art practice. Stallabrass is sceptical regarding the value of such developments:

"While there is a certain radical charge in the act of negation against the industry of high culture, nothing is recommended in its place except the loosest and hippest of liberalisms, defended but also defanged by irony. [...] The result is a lot of shows which all claim to be unique but which all say much the same thing: that they are 'alternative'. The most important claim that these exhibitions make is negative: it is to proclaim what they are not." (p65)

As an "alternative alternative" Stallabrass praises the South London artist run space *Beaconsfield*, claiming that the "extraordinary variety of detritus which [Tomoko] Takahashi had assembled was a reminder or the capitalist economy". (p77) Mark Wallinger is commended for using the techniques of *high art lite* to "convey a message without patronising the viewer or settling into propaganda." (p227) Michael Landy's *Scrapheap Services* (1995) is handled benevolently, mainly because Landy is unambiguous about his political commitments. (p287) This, again, raises difficult questions concerning intentionality. If all yBas had resolutely announced leftist sympathies would this improve the standing of their work? In this light, Stallbrass' defence of Takahashi, Wallinger and Landy is far from convincing, but it does at least indicate that there is a possibility of adopting a different model to that which he denigrates with great clarity:

"To refuse to offer neatly packaged solutions, to recognise complexity and ambiguity, does not have to entail refusing to say anything at all." (p152-153)

Notes

1. Michael Baldwin, Manuscript notes from a diary kept during the production of Art & Language's Museum Paintings, early 1986.
2. "Matthew Collings' Diary", *Private Eye 918*.
3. Liz Ellis, "A critique in three parts of the Britpack phenomenon and particularly the critical reception of Bank, Sarah Lucas and Sam Taylor-Wood", 1997, @ http://web.ukonline.co.uk/members/n.paradoxa/ellis.htm Stallabrass writes: "Since Lucas makes no adverse comment on the material she uses, the work enacts what the newspaper itself does, glorying in its own bad taste and stupidity, amusing its readers with its crude and philistine attitudes. If the work has an effect, it is in placing the viewer in a situation where voyeurism and the pleasures of looking collide with conventional liberal attitudes." (p93)
4. A comparable critique of Roberts and Beech can be found in Stewart Homes' *Disputations on Art, Anarchy and Assholism*, Sabotage Editions, 1996.
5. "Modernism is the realisation of the 'progressive' ideology of the New Class and the modern state as an evaluative and ordering view of art." Andrew Brighton, "The Radicalism of 'Falls the Shadow'", *Artscribe International*, No. 59, September/October 1986, p50. Richard Cork and Peter Fuller also heavily promoted such ideas between 1976 and 1978
6. David Hall, "Artists Thoughts in on the '70s in Words and Pictures", *Studio International*, 1980, p31. For more on this see my "The Fall and Rise of Crisis Criticism", *Visual Culture in Britain*, No.3, Summer 2000, University of Northumbria.