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Real/Life: New British Art* and the Reception of Contemporary British Art in Japan

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Brilliant! New Art from London, Walker Art Center, 1995–96

Article by **Richard Flood**

There can be little doubt that the accepted origins of the Young British Artists (YBAs) began with *Freeze*, the exhibition organized by Damian Hirst in 1988. It was packed with graduates of Goldsmiths College where the artist and educator Michael Craig-Martin had recently revamped the curriculum to allow students to choose from a buffet of courses, rather than using the *prix fixe* menu. Hirst turned out to be a natural entrepreneur and guided his fellow Goldsmiths' graduates into the public eye well before the traditional art world machinations would have allowed. After *Freeze* came *Modern Medicine*, spearheaded by Hirst, Carl Freedman, and Billee Sellman, and *East Country Yard Show*, devised by Sarah Lucas and Henry Bond, both in 1990. A year later, the Serpentine Gallery endorsed what was beginning to feel something like a movement in its *Broken English* exhibition, overseen by Hirst.

In 1992, the artists came to New York for a politely titled exhibition—*Twelve British Artists*—curated for the Barbara Gladstone Gallery by the freelance British/American curator, Clarissa Dalrymple. At the time I was the director of the gallery and saw the show come together. The quiet title was, I think, a decision to de-sensationalize a selection of artists who were hopefully to be presented on a level playing field. In preparation for the show, Barbara and I joined Clarissa in London for a round of studio visits made remarkable by the incredible loyalty of many of the artists to each other. Accompanying us was the private dealer Helen van der Meij-Tcheng, who was a mentor to a number of the artists. I remember all of us having intense conversations about what the artists were up to, what was bratty and what was genius, whose work defined the moment, and what work looked disposable. The artists were all at the beginnings of their careers, so the curatorial intention was not to set up a horse race between them. In the end Clarissa made her choices, and the young Londoners (as indeed they all were) came to New York.

Twelve British Artists was composed of work by Lea Andrews, Keith Coventry, Anya Gallaccio, Liam Gillick, Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Abigail Lane, Sarah Lucas, Steven Pippin, Marc Quinn, Marcus Taylor, and Rachel Whiteread. Some I thought were extraordinary; others not so much. Nonetheless, it was bracing to see who stood out for Clarissa and to hear her selection reasoning, which was an invigorating mix of impulse and sociology. Helen, who had worked for many years with Sigmar Polke, Anselm Kiefer, and Georg Baselitz, introduced a number of the artists to the Valhallan aspirations of contemporary German painting. To be sure, it was antithetical to the British, anti-Thatcher social critique, but for some the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* stuck. Years later (just prior to *Brilliant!*) I remember Helen hiring a bus to take a raucous group of artists (the usual suspects) to see the Polke retrospective at Tate Liverpool (January–March 1995), and the enormous impact it had on us all. At one point, Gary Hume declaimed that every young British artist should be thrown on their knees in front of

Polke's paintings. At the same time, Polke's hand-made, easy-peasy sculpture must have felt very familiar and heartening.

Back in New York, I thought that Sarah Lucas and Anya Gallaccio offered the freshest statements on the virtue of directness. While Lucas had an astringent tabloid vocabulary, Gallaccio was collecting flowers from a Gothic graveyard. Steven Pippin was the poster boy for a British eccentricity that was part Monty Python and part Pickwickian. In the one interesting review by an American writer, Peter Schjeldahl commented that Pippin was the author of "the single most beautiful object in the show" (*Wow & Flutter*, now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York).[1] The only other attempt at beauty was Damien Hirst's *Still Pursuing Impossible Desires*—a very maudlin title for such a young artist. The work was an enormous vitrine filled with hatched larvae and dead butterflies, as if millions of these exquisite things had no other destiny than to perish for art's sake. Marc Quinn also trended morbid with what looked like a flayed skin, auto-portrait, punningly titled *You Take My Breath Away*. It was, in its way, a disturbingly pathetic version of the satyr Marsyas after the skinning. I remember the reaction of one visitor who pointed to it and commented to her friend, "This is what my last husband looked like after I finished with him."

The other artists—Keith Coventry, Liam Gillick, Gary Hume, Abigail Lane, Marcus Taylor, and Rachel Whiteread—showed work that was already signature and, in most cases, acted as a critique of classic modernism. The one exception to all the rules was Lea Andrews, who created an installation in the gallery basement. The space was left in near darkness and featured three enlarged back-and-white photographs of a young boy with a mop of blond hair. In two of the images, the child (short pants, knee socks) is alone. In the central image, he is held by a man in a pose that looks uncomfortable but is otherwise open to interpretation. There was also a soundtrack of a child crying that echoed very softly in the space. In a way it was too much, but at the same time it was spookily effective. Even viewers who were annoyed with it succumbed to its awful ambiguity. The show received a lot of attention, caught the eyes of both curators and collectors, sold well, and seeded the New York art yard with a small wave of young artists. Seven of the group went on to join New York galleries and most continued to be regulars in the always-developing international market.

When I arrived at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in 1994, I spent weeks in the painting racks taking copious notes and trying to understand the trajectory of the collection. Two of the things that immediately piqued my interest were a residue of work by Italian and British artists working in the early to mid-1960s. As it turned out, the Italian material had come into the collection in anticipation of an exhibition to be curated by Martin Friedman, the Walker's then director. The paper trail is fascinating, including an almost comic series of letters between Friedman and Germano Celant, the critic and entrepreneur, which is a narrative of missed appointments and misunderstood agendas. The show never happened and it is not totally clear why, other than a probable Italian/American collision of expectations and language. The 1965 exhibition of British art, *London: The New Scene*, seems to have come off without a hitch with most of the artists in attendance. It was also perfectly timed, coming as it did on the heels of *Time Magazine*'s legendary cover story on "Swinging London".[2] The young artists selected by Friedman were not known in the US and, in some cases, were still defining their artistic identity. The works which entered the permanent collection at the time were paintings by David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, Bridget Riley, and Joseph Tilson (for Hockney, the exhibition was the beginning of a long and productive relationship with the Walker).

What occurred to me after learning of Friedman's show was that it was only a year away from its thirtieth anniversary in 1995. The temptation to update *London: The New Scene* was an exciting possibility, and I was happy when Kathy Halbreich, the Walker's director, allowed me to take it on. Part of the pleasure was to revisit the London artists and see those whose work I wasn't aware of previously. I continued to listen to Van der Meij-Tchen and added Michael Craig-Martin. Douglas Fogle (then a National Endowment of the Arts Curatorial Fellow) became a complete partner and sounding board at every stage of the project. From Clarissa's checklist, I continued on with eight of her twelve artists and eventually added another twelve (I'm counting the Chapman brothers—Jake and Dinos—as one). Aside from the Chapmans, the new group included Henry Bond (collaborating with Liam Gillick), Glenn Brown, Adam Chodzko, Matt Collishaw, Tracey Emin, Angus Fairhurst, Michael Landy, Chris Ofili, Alessandro Raho, Georgina Starr, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Gillian Wearing. The same feeling of solidarity that I had noticed in 1992 was still the norm. One studio inevitably led to another, and the artists' unity, superficial or sincere, made it seem as if something quite new and collectivized was taking place.

Figure 1

, *Brilliant! New Art from London*, view during the installation of at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Oct. 1995, showing (from left) works by Dinos Chapman, Richard Flood, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Jack Chapman. Digital image courtesy of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

It was also a time in London when the response to anything was "Brilliant!": an expression of bereavement, an insult, whatever; all were met with "brilliant". In the end, the word meant nothing; it just filled up dead space in a culture that needed to keep the conversation going at all costs. I loved the word because by the time I encountered it, it was almost as vacant as a sneeze, and I thought it was the perfect title for the exhibition. I asked Stuart Morgan to write an essay on the word for the exhibition's publication and he made a brilliant job of it. From our studio visits, we ended up with a core group of exhibitors who were mostly all friends. There were also those artists who were resistant to the clubby inner circle, and functioned best without those distractions that provided energy for the others. During this time we began working on the exhibition's publication, which assumed the form of a newsstand tabloid which was then, as now, unavoidable on the streets of London.[3] We poured over British tabloids and let their tawdriness be our guide. The unfortunate controversy that came out of the publication was set off by its cover, which portrayed the aftermath of the Bishopsgate bombing in London in 1993. The British

Council, who had been a supporter from the get-go, was deeply unhappy, as were a number of the artists and supporters. For me, the cover was an expression of the horror of the times (just as the tabloid was) and the brand-new reality of terrorism in our cities. In the US it began with the bombing of the World Trade Center (also in 1993) which left six dead and one thousand injured. It was impossible not to acknowledge that everything had suddenly changed; the art of the young as well. Even as we worked on the exhibition, domestic terrorism hit Oklahoma City in a bombing that killed sixty-eight (many of them children) and injured well over a hundred people. Was *Brilliant!*'s cover justified? I thought that the image said everything about the new world we were entering, much more than any essay could Here it is: this is our reality. It wasn't intended to be an insult but to make a statement.

Figure 2

Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Ubermensch*, 1995, fibre-glass, mixed media, and paint, 144 × 72 × 72 cm. Digital image courtesy of Jake and Dinos Chapman.

All of the artists came to Minnesota with the exception of Hirst, Lucas, and Whiteread. The happy-puppy syndrome didn't survive the journey and there were underlying tensions throughout the installation. I think part of the problem was the shifting hierarchy among the artists. Things had begun to change as some of their work grew increasingly sought after. The early publicity about the exhibition came from publications like *Interview* and *Vogue*, which indicated the beginning of a branding problem. It was fine PR, but the American art journals were nowhere to be seen; the exhibition simply wasn't on their radar. There was a small wave of enquiries asking if Hirst would be represented by "any animal things". He wasn't, because I didn't want the exhibition to be overwhelmed by angry animal rights groups which were already poised to react. The local media was most taken by Tracey Emin's welcoming tent, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*, and viewed it with affection rather than opprobrium.

The exhibition's *Gesamtkunstwerk* was Michael Landy's installation, *Scrapheap Services*, which, from our first conversation, was clearly not going to be effective in a formal space. Michael came to Minneapolis well in advance of the show and we took him to a succession of spaces that might

be adapted for the work. He eventually settled on an abandoned soap factory that had decades of built-up fat on the floor. A not-for-profit arts group had just taken possession of the building and agreed to help scrape up the debris together with a force from the Walker. It was a model partnership, and during the opening buses ran between the Walker and the Soap Factory. The work itself was a vast meditation on the homeless, the indigent, the ill, and the infirm—anyone who was a drag on the anchor of progress. There were enormous piles of tiny, uniformly cut, tin men. There were uniformed workers brooming them up and feeding them into huge compacting machines. It was an enormously powerful piece of agitprop in an exhibition where social critique was an insistent throb (Figs. 3 and 4).

Figure 3

Installation views, *Brilliant! New Art from London*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 22 Oct. 1995–7 Jan. 1996, showing Michael Landy, *Scrapheap Services*, 1995, mixed media installation with customized chipper/shredder; two silk-screened baked enamel street signs; five mannequins with standardized uniforms; seven trash bins; trash bin carrier, dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of Michael Landy.

Figure 4

Installation views, *Brilliant! New Art from London*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 22 Oct. 1995–7 Jan. 1996, showing Michael Landy, *Scrapheap Services*, 1995, mixed media installation with customized chipper/shredder; two silk-screened baked enamel street signs; five mannequins with standardized uniforms; seven trash bins; trash bin carrier, dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of Michael Landy.

Sarah Lucas and Gillian Wearing both pledged allegiance to the other, the disenfranchised, with, in the case of Lucas, a comradely irony, and, in the case of Wearing, an agressive sympathy. Wearing's *Signs That Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say* (1992–93), is arguably one of the great conceptual works of the early 1990s. With its recognizable chorus from the streets, its people are impossible not to identify with. The pink, pudgy-cheeked chap with jacket and striped tie looks like management, but the sign he holds reads "I'm desperate", and completely undercuts the apparent reality. Other signs are silly or clever; still others are heart-breaking, like "I signed on and they would not give me nothing." The *Signs* series was also one of the most imitated of the decade, turning up on television and in magazine advertisements.

Figure 5

Installation view, *Brilliant! New Art from London*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 22 Oct. 1995–7 Jan. 1996, showing, left to right: Sarah Lucas, "Hello Stranger" (part of *Shine On*), 1991, Damien Hirst, *Alphaprodine*, 1993. Digital image courtesy of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

By the end of the exhibition, much of the work had found its way into private collections and prices for some of the artists had escalated. Relationships had changed and friendships were both strengthened and weakened. If I could do it over again, I wouldn't change a thing. Even mistakes become an important part of the narrative. Today, almost everyone in the exhibition is still making art—and, yes, "Brilliant!" is still tossed around like coin of the realm."

About the author

Richard Flood is the Director of Special Projects and Curator at Large at the New Museum, New York. From 2005 to 2010 he served as Chief Curator and curated *Rivane Neuenschwander: A Day Like Any Other, Double Album: Daniel Guzman and Steven Shearer*, co-curated (with Benjamin Godsill) *The Last Newspaper*, organized *Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone and Intersections Intersected: The Photography of David Goldblatt*, and co-curated *Unmonumental*, the New Museum's opening exhibition at its Bowery location.

Prior to the New Museum, Flood was Chief Curator at the Walker Art Center for nine years and subsequently Deputy Director and Chief Curator for two years. At the Walker, he curated *Sigmar Polke: Illumination, "Brilliant!": New Art from London, Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962–1972*, and *Robert Gober: Sculpture + Drawing*. He previously served as the director of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, curator at P.S. 1, and Managing Editor of *Artforum*. Flood has taught at the Rhode Island Institute of Art and Design, the Royal College of Art in London, and the National College of Art and Design in Dublin. His writing has appeared frequently in *Artforum*, *Parkett*, and *Frieze*.

Footnotes

1. Peter Schjeldahl, "Twelve British Artists: Barbara Gladstone Gallery, NY", *Frieze* 7 (Nov./Dec. 1992): 45.
2. *Time*, 15 April 1966.
3. Stuart Morgan, Richard Flood, and others, *Brilliant: New Art from London* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1995).

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