

# NEW OBSERVATIONS

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GUEST EDITOR:  
*Theresa Chong*

## DEATH AND THE WILL TO LIVE 죽음, 그리고 생에 대한 의지

- Nam Jun Paik*
- Lilly Wei*
- Beom Kim*
- Javier Piñón*
- Michael Brennan*
- Luca Burvoli*
- Heejung Kim*
- Gregg Baker*
- Bruce Nauman*
- Lucio Pozzi*
- Mark Harris*
- Gust Vasiliades*
- Eric Magnuson*
- Sang Nam Lee*
- Yannis Ziogas*
- Jim Hodges*
- Robert C. Morgan*
- Theresa Chong*
- Archie Rand*
- Mark Zimmerman*
- Christina Bothwell*
- Damien Hirst*



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# DEATH AND THE WILL TO LIVE

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Mark Harris

## BANK'S DEATH

God opened in London last year on Easter Sunday. Coming into it from the street, the warehouse space seemed empty apart from the sci-fi painting by Liz Arnold. You had to walk across the gallery and turn around to see the three crucified figures, hidden behind the columns facing the back wall. One was a white female, the other two were male figures, one black one white. The realistic life-sized wax bodies of this multi-racial crucifixion were otherwise presented in standard New Testament form: crowns of thorns, loincloths, covered in gore and in their final agonies. In the gamut of crucifixion models it was more Grunewald than Tintoretto. The earnest realism of this *reductio ad absurdum* of political correctness made any enjoyment of its irony problematic — Crucifixion: women and minorities encouraged to apply.

In the last four years Bank's iconoclasm has won them a latitude which allows their contradictory representations and sampling of idioms to become a signature style. Every few months they curate wildly unpredictable shows in their own space at 30 Underwood Street in London, inviting other artists, of different generations and practices, to participate. In a city where artist-run galleries have become the standard, Bank's project is a kind of guerrilla activity in their own living room, pretty off-center here, but far off the edge of the map if compared with the well-charted waters of New York's spaces.

Aware of the paradoxes of a project that flaunts irreverence and avant-gardism from the safety of their own space (or still worse to some minds, from the safety of public galleries and backed by public funding, most recently at Paris's Musée D'Art Moderne and London's ICA) Bank have implicated a kind of reflexive criticism in their work. On the one hand they expose themselves and their work to ridicule while on the other hand they ridicule the pretentiousness and failings of the British art establishment through their installations and their satirical newspaper *The Bank*.

What might have come from the Dadaists, is repeated in *The Bank* as if personal venom and shrill hectoring still had currency. There is invariably an absurd humor to the writing, and Bank attacks their friends and potential supporters just as they lay into their primary targets, the artists that are most prominent in the British art scene and the institutions, magazines, and funding bodies that support them. The newspaper's lurid tabloid headlines and slacker layout make fun of its own authority but the irony doesn't do much to neutralize the sharp attacks.



BANK *God*, 1997, detail



Bank work as if these methods were still genuinely effective and not just empty strategies underlying artistic practice. This "as if" determines their curated shows which are sometimes accompanied by hilarious parodies of critical theory. For *Dog-u-mental* eight discrete exhibitions were organized in the same space, separated only by paint-splattered plastic sheeting. None of the sections had anything in common, as the wad of disparate announcements, with ludicrous titles and premises, made clear.

Yet each was carried through as if the presentation was without irony. More recently *Mask of gold* was a salon-style show of thirty-five or so figurative paintings of cranked up expressionism, hung on an improvised lattice of two-by-ones, laid out in narrow corridors. The walls behind the lattice were fluorescent colors so that the paintings could be backlit with ultraviolet light, and there was a functioning waterfall as a window installation. During my visit a Mahler symphony was playing loudly. The artists had been asked to make a meritorious attempt at thematic paintings as if the show, even though appearing parodic, might constitute a genuine appraisal of the expressive possibilities of late 90's painting. Although both shows were lavishly dosed with humor there is the likelihood that beyond the entertainment lie real possibilities, familiar enough to early 20th-century avant-gardes, but which recent art has more or less given up on. One of these possibilities is freedom: freedom from the sting of post-modernism and the determinacy of the "institution," but also freedom from the immobilizing notion of relevant and irrelevant media. Bank also propose the possibility that irony might be a way of dealing with heavyweight themes rather than merely displaying one's suspicion of representation. One of these themes is death and God, and Bank is wondering about the possibility of its representation.

If this article is starting to sound like the usual recuperation of what should be allowed to remain a cynical and puerile enterprise, I'd suggest that Bank are themselves interested in bringing questions of value to their work. If their project reinstates the idea of value in art then Bank want that to include irreverence, intolerance, and the evacuation of responsibility at every moment that the meritorious is demanded or just too prominently visible. They want to be able to depict death without this excluding puerility as a serious parallel concern. For all their display of irreverence, Bank have a tolerance of pretentiousness provided it is humbled by the carnivalesque. All those earlier representations of the crucifixion perilously blending

the grotesquerie of the crowd with the divinity of the victim — think of Hieronymous Bosch and James Ensor — present death as a hilarious and squalid spectacle, whose ennoblement can only be after the event. Bank's politically-correct version, the dying inappropriately flanked by a sci-fi fantasy and surrounded at the opening by London's partying art crowd knocking back the beer and cigarettes, is a contemporary version of those earlier insightful depictions.

This brings us interestingly close to Nietzschean and Bakhtinian models for artistic representation. Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* presents Western intellectual accomplishment as based on the accommodation of animal passions and excessive appetites, as mired in what it pretends to have transcended. This imprint of the negative also underlines Adorno's seductive explanation of the enduring importance of art which, in defining its territory of autonomous form, retains the impression of that social matrix from which it separates. In this context, mentioning Bakhtin's notion of the carnival as the temporary submersion of structured life into uninhibited celebration may overstress the wild subversive aspect of Bank's work. The best of their installations twist the codes of aesthetic interpretation to open up meaning, not to destroy it altogether. As I already mentioned, the paintings in *Mask of gold* may look dreadful if judged by any external standard, and the concept of redeeming subjective expression through oil painting may make you want to go back to bed and curl up in horror. Yet once knowledge of these expectations is built into the project which is then carried through regardless, a transformation occurs and a different future emerges. Back to God, Bank's death is the death you can't have without the drunken riot at the foot of the cross, where even its quotient of righteousness is bureaucratically determined. It is a concept of end as a coincidence of all possible earthly indignities, including the enticement of redemption.



BANK *God*, 1997