

Art

MONTHLY

Crème Anglaise
The best of British sculpture?

Accommodating Art
Michael Archer redefines installation art

The Big Screen
Catherine Elwes on video projection

Scene and Herd
A letter from New York

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horse splashed. The horse splashing is a bit like a book. A closed book is very different from an open book, its physical nature changes when it's actually opened, like the horse's splash.'

Jubb's thinking rebelled against the notion that a sketchbook was secondary material on the path leading towards a work on the wall, and even one of the rare larger pieces that he made during his foundation course contains an exploration of one of the main themes which has come to the fore in his development as a book artist – 'the privilege given to depth over surface'. Jubb suspended sheets of paper approximately seven by three feet in dimension, lighting them in such a way that the watermarked life-size images of human figures (images of our long-buried earliest ancestors) could be discerned. His recent work has involved film and it is the quality of the reel itself as well as the projected images which intrigues him. His work in some respects takes the investigation of 'in the page' which Telfer Stokes has pioneered into a slightly different direction and Jubb's *Titanic*, 1993, is a beautifully honed essay on depth and surface, reality and illusion, gently raising the volume of a story told in a whisper so that it resonates on levels both private and public. The modesty of the book (and indeed of the later film version) is highly seductive.

Control is very much a part of Jubb's best work and, although his science background seems to be something in abeyance, the clinical nature of several of the books is one of the elements which makes them haunting. As with the most memorable artists' books, they articulate an environment nowhere else consciously accessible, albeit one in which the components are recognisable. The displacement of everyday objects is one of his potent strategies, often evoking a kind of grief, although for what or whom is rarely obvious. *Anatomy of Objects*, 1992, has the feel of the mortuary about it, presenting bottles and a mug and some blind oblongs wrapped in bandages, their surfaces mottled with paint or a plaster-like substance, lying lonely against a black background, their only companionship a typewritten label denoting an internal injury. While it plays games with scale and with our instinct to make associations between word and image, for all its matter-of-fact presentation, this slight-seeming book is extraordinarily emotive. A similar technique is employed for *Book of Knots and Splices*, 1993, in which forlorn household utensils and fittings are pictured tied up with thick string or other binding, accompanied by captions accurately recording the type of knot securing their imprisonment. In this case, they evoke not sadness but a strong sense of disturbance and dereliction.

Whatever else it is, the world one finds inside a Daniel Jubb book is definitely odd. Even the comparatively light, open-air filled *Hot Springs*, 1993, is disarming. As previ-

ously, Jubb shuns the use of anything as self-revelatory as a sentence – this time the text is the listing of names of spas in various countries – but he uses the lay-out of images in this case to suggest more design questions than usual for him. Some of the black and white photographs fill their pages, others have differing margins and there is an entirely white double-spread part way through, while the outer covers dare to be silver – a relatively loud statement compared to Jubb's other low-key activities – although the overall presentation is as 'ordinary' as possible, a thin, white wire ring-binding and unexceptional notebook proportions. The silver covers relate to the 'story' which unfolds inside, the filling of a kettle in a stream, the lighting of a camping heater, the boiling and implied whistling of the kettle and the preparation of a hot drink in an enamel mug. As with *Titanic* Jubb connects the example of a single, household object to an observation of universal application using the most elegant and minimal of means, telescoping and containing philosophical implications in the same way as the shining kettle reflects the wider panorama of the meadow in which it is photographed.

If Jubb had done nothing else, he would have earned a place in the history of British book art in the making of *Bookcase*, 1994, a flip book in which the case containing the collection of artists' books at Chelsea School of Art is immortalised. The collection at Chelsea was started by Clive Phillpot and continued by Steve Bury and is itself one of the visiting posts for the new generation of institution-bred book artists. Jubb's work (normally self-published in unlimited, unsigned editions at low cost) can be found there as well as in the Tate, the V&A and the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. ■

Books

Greed is Not Good

Mark Harris

Gargantua. Manufactured Mass Culture, Julian Stallabrass, Verso, London, 1996, 244pp, 35 illus, £14.95, pb, 1 85984 036 1.

This account of visual mass culture is framed by two characteristic segments from Rabelais' 16th-century novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. The first recounts Gargantua's gorging of vast amounts of food and the second lists his inventive solutions to arse-wiping as he covers the world's material in his shit. For Stallabrass these are hyperbolic images anticipating capitalism's ruinous effects. His critique is the more lucid for

being outspokenly Marxist and for emphasising his position against postmodernist theory that assumes mass culture can be analysed independently of underlying economic conditions.

One wishes that the final, and very moving, autobiographical chapter, 'Capital to Capital', had opened the book since it articulates the passions driving Stallabrass' determination to peel back the vacuous flow of mass culture to make it disclose meanings it usually obscures. He recounts how a 24-hour journey from Bucharest to Munich contrasted the extent to which commodities mark the character of each country. In one of many perfectly narrated revelations he notes the contrast between the proficient arrangements of commodities in Munich and the awkward failures of Eastern European shop displays that try to get capitalism right, but inadvertently highlight only the particular oddities of the goods on sale.

For Stallabrass these kinds of 'error', these cracks in the apparent seamlessness of commodification, are the locus for revealing the ideology of capitalist culture. It is at these points that commodities present themselves for what they truly are: false projections of desire and value whose veneer is momentarily stripped away showing the structure that diverts wealth away from the poor.

These faultlines have determined the layout of the book with its chapters on amateur photography, cyberspace, computer games, graffiti, trash and television, among other examples of the aestheticisation of mass culture. Stallabrass' focus on visual culture is due, he says, to the ascendancy of visual comprehension over literacy. In spite of this emphasis he omits any discussion of print although there has been a relevant shift, conspicuously in popular music and internet publications, towards page layouts that can be scanned, rather than read, for information.

The two chapters on software are most convincing about commodification's destructive logic, beyond the control even of those profiting from it. Perhaps because it is still more speculative than functional, virtual reality makes the current behaviour of commodities and their anticipated effects transparent. For Stallabrass it is in the contradiction between its probable use and the mythology behind its marketing that the true role of virtual reality is seen. He points out how the promise by internet developers that information will be democratised rings the same false tone of earlier utopian hard sells. As he makes clear, given what you need to get online – cash, free time, telephone, computer – access is hardly going to reach those who can barely afford to eat, with the result that resources will become even more concentrated in a few prosperous communities. Masked by the hype about increased freedom to information for individuals is the speed with which business is

already ~~requiring~~ ~~ing~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~resale~~ of that information while the enthusiasm for a virtual environment of simulated experience tends to ignore the fact that this will only perfect the conditions under which products can be sold to consumers.

Stallabrass often cites Adorno on commodification and Benjamin for his writing on allegory; the references are frequent enough for this book to be a valuable commentary on these aspects of both writers' work. In the case of allegory, which in *Gargantua* becomes an essential interpretative structure, we would have benefited from an early explanation of the concept's intended meaning and the method behind its application. As it is we have to glean an understanding cumulatively from each chapter, and not until the eighth, titled 'Trash', is there a fuller outline. For Stallabrass an allegorical potential is revealed by dysfunctionality, by those faults detected in the structure of commodities. Because products are marketed as mythic entities, perfect and fulfilling, the economic system producing them allows us no easy grasp of their actual function, promoting instead an idea of their pure inevitable presence. Only when they slip from use can we look back from them to the system they have momentarily escaped but to which they refer allegorically, as if reaching beyond the mask of the identity they were initially assigned by commerce. Graffiti's overlaid signatures, colonising overlooked corners of the city, advertising invisible identities which cancel each other out, point us to the travesty of billboards that successively advertise identities purchasable as commodities. Discarded street rubbish, freed from its symbolic function as commodity, identifies the falseness of its earlier promotion as a discrete product with no hint of the conditions of its manufacture.

In this way Stallabrass is proposing a critical system which will unveil these manifestations of mass culture as hopelessly complicit in capitalist economy. Allegory allows an uncovering of the commodity which broken and outside the system can, in

its true guise as it were, reveal objective meanings retroactively. Outside of allegory those meanings remain subjective.

Along with the rejection of postmodernist theorists, the constant emphasis on classic Frankfurt School and Marxist writers, including Lukács, to underpin this critique does, by the end, give the arguments an undeserved predictability. It would have helped to have a more specific citing and dismissal of those writers one imagines lurking in the background: Jameson, Lyotard and Baudrillard. It would be interesting to hear Stallabrass commenting on the latter's remarks about the oppositional force of 1970s New York graffiti in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* since for Baudrillard this was one form of engagement that capitalism could not subsume. In the context of the chapters on photography and computers it is surprising that Lyotard's writing on the avant garde and the sublime has been overlooked given his critique of capitalism's manipulation of experience, especially its effects on amateur photographers and on the shallowing of information. There is also an uncanny analogy between Stallabrass' Marxist allegorising of dysfunctional commodities and Heidegger's early ontology. Heidegger proposes that we are made aware of the nature of our being when tools we are using break down or objects interfere in some way with their everyday use, thus showing the seams of existence. However, no doubt the size of *Gargantua* would have grown impracticably to match its title had the book included a broader context of this kind for its critique.

This is nevertheless a much-needed clear assessment of the state that capitalism has lured us into now. Stallabrass insists that this privileged condition of a commodity-rich West is profoundly degrading because of its dependence on the misery of 'our servants', the poor in other countries. This gives his arguments a concrete relevance distressingly underlined each day by press reports of the consolidation of unprecedented wealth by the rich as the incomes of

the poorest decline.

Stallabrass' sustained pessimism is the reason for this refusal to acknowledge anything positive in mass culture. Under this stricture the appreciation of any qualities in commodification would be a surrender to the seductions of capitalism and unfortunately it obviates any possibility of a history of surplus qualities that have not been subsumed by commerce. Some of the agencies for example that design the magazines mentioned earlier, promoting the internet and rock music, have developed a radical typography that makes a new artefact of text. Its very excess, developed as a style in pursuit of illegibility, engenders an aesthetic that is not circumscribed by the commerce it springs from. In the well-observed chapter on photography Stallabrass explains how a market for cameras, ensured by irrelevant definitions of truthfulness and technical improvement, is being undermined by digitisation which shows how 'truth', once guaranteed by photography, can easily be faked. In his account of how video displaces the photographic market with its own myths of verisimilitude Stallabrass overlooks the repercussions of videos like that of the Rodney King beating which set new standards of truth, well in excess of what could be claimed by commodification.

For Stallabrass however, the stakes are too high to speak of pleasure derived, or of victories gained, from this destructive system. Mass culture corrupts, irredeemably, and his critique grows out of the difficulty, as he explains, of holding this realisation steadily 'before the mind which is the constant target of the culture of distraction'. A sign's injunction 'Shop like you mean it', which I would see every time I exited the Holland Tunnel on the way to New Jersey, sums up the ignorance of the irresponsible and ultimately self-annihilatory craving so well exposed by this book. ■

Mark Harris is an artist working in London and New York.

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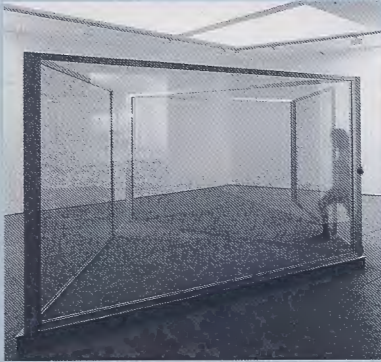
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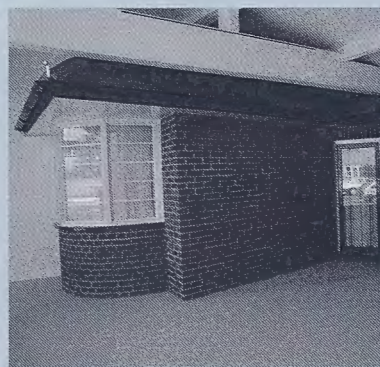
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