

# Art

MONTHLY

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Putting on the Style  
Brit Art: avant-garde or radical chic?

LA Story  
Movies are not the only game in town

Conceptual Art  
A chance to reconsider

Making a Spectacle  
Is bigger better?

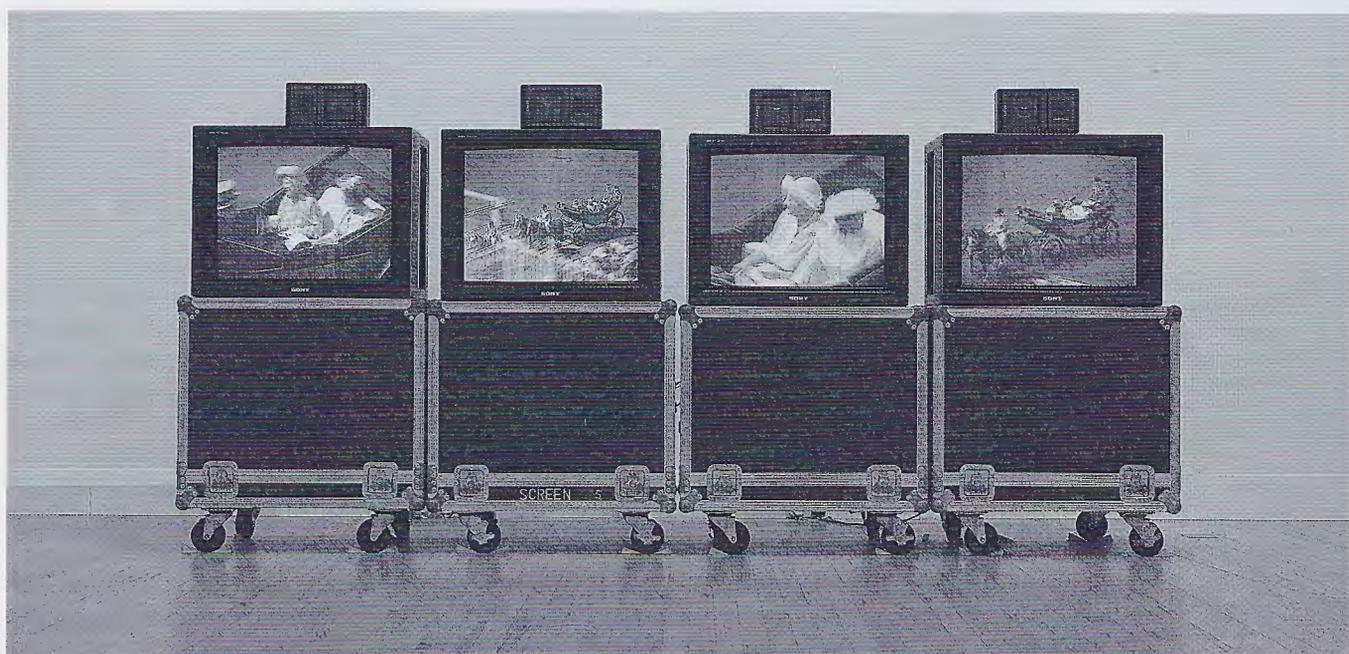
LIKE YOU,  
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DESPAIR



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# Putting on the Style

Mark Harris on avant-garde style in recent British art and advertising

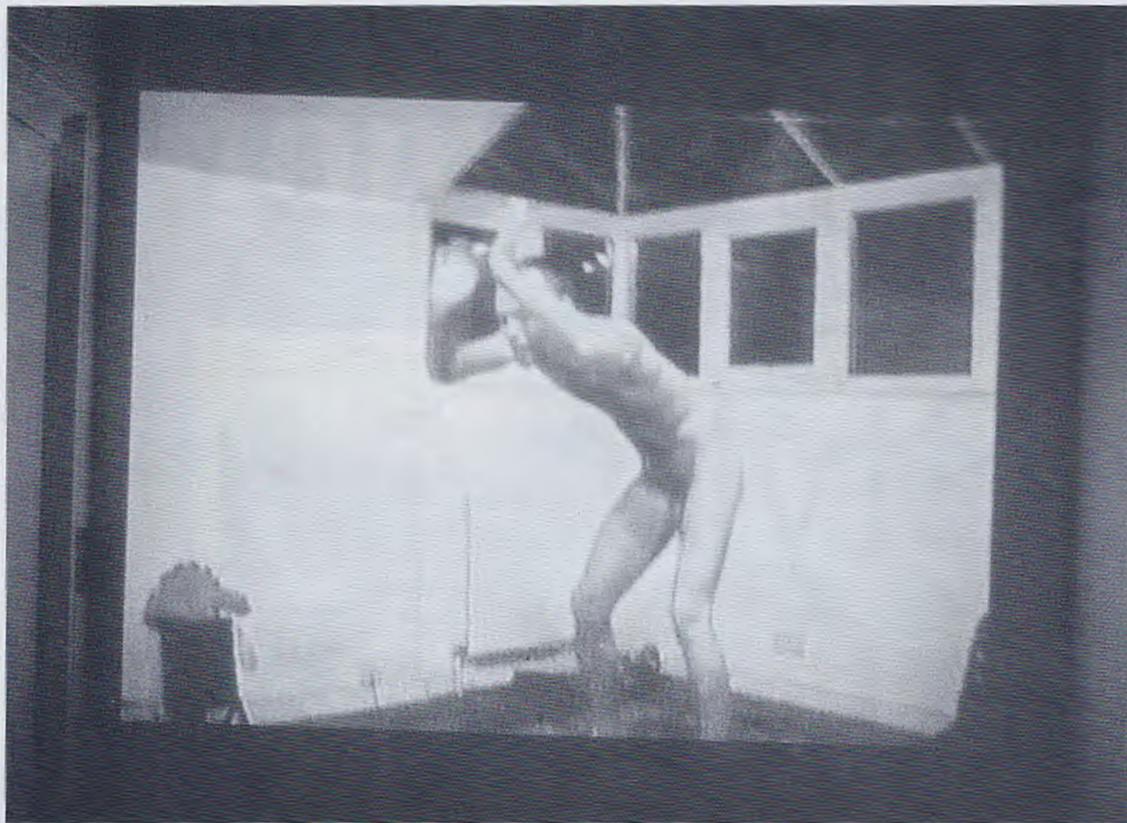


**As a discourse exploited to the point of incoherence the theory of the avant garde refuses to dissipate.** Its currency as a marketing device still evident, the notion of avant-garde practice rattles around critical writing on the new British art, still assuming a collision of political and aesthetic radicality, even sustaining an anachronistic belief in shock and offensiveness, not just as feasible achievements (in a society that instantly embraces such qualities) but even as strategies potent enough to influence social change.

That the avant garde cannot, even early this century, be simplistically applied as a categorisation was shown by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky who from 1917 fought for the Bolsheviks as he wrote *Theory of Prose* which while not recognising a sublimation of art into political life nevertheless advocated a

revolutionary approach to literary theory. Even where an avant garde is cautiously identified as having made an effective challenge through art, as with Peter Bürger's account of Dadaist performance, its radicality is interpreted as the (failed) attempt, through unmitigated iconoclasm, to dissolve the

Mark Wallinger  
Royal Ascot  
1994



Sam Taylor-Wood  
*Brontosaurus* 1995  
 (video still)

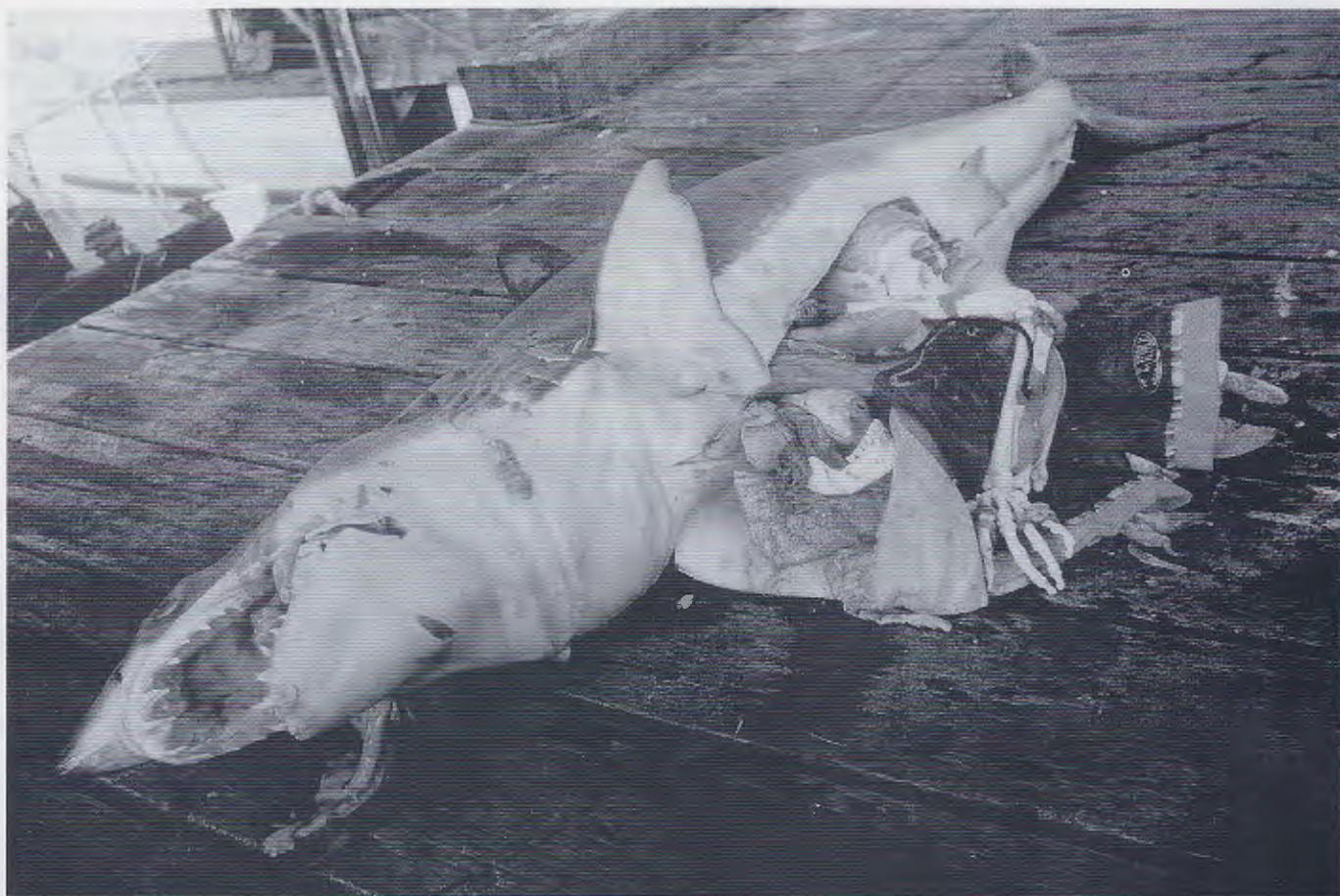
institution of art into life.<sup>1</sup> It is a diluted and simplified version of this theory that resurfaces in current enthusiasm for British art involving apparent collusion by some of the artists themselves. Dinos and Jake Chapman, Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Chris Ofili and others depend on a persistent tolerance of this trope for their work to gain meaning. As an atavistic avant-gardism it can be understood as a stylistic device, a vestigial offensiveness that designates participation in a broader submission to abrasive imagery and language, especially in current advertising where, in order to promote commodities, these devices are developed most effectively.<sup>2</sup>

It is no irony then that one of the most revealing examples of this phenomenon is an advertisement for *Brilliant!* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, where an aerial photo of the aftermath of a 1992 IRA bomb in London has the names of the exhibiting artists, randomly superimposed as if claiming for their own, in the sense even as collaborators, the infrastructure's devastation. Beyond the obvious resonance this image would have for Americans still pondering the bombing in Oklahoma City, it reveals an institutionalised aestheticisation of violence, as if such explosions could be interpreted not simply as the environment we now have to put up with, but rather as avant-garde interventions on a scale desired by, but eluding, these artists. If this association seems far-fetched it's worth weighing some of the language used to describe the work in that particular exhibition. Richard Flood: '... that unholy interest [from the British press and public] allows the artists to operate with a very well-defined programme of subversion. They can actually make work that, within the culture, is quite anarchic and that's

important'. *Frieze* (November-December 1995). Neville Wakefield: '[British artists] have adopted an aggressive guerrilla approach to both art-making and its display, and their 'fuck it', do-it-yourself attitude gives much of their art its bite.' (catalogue for *Brilliant!*). Roberta Smith: 'the British contingent embraces with particular enthusiasm the belief that art ... has a responsibility to be disturbing and adversarial ...', (*New York Times*, 23/11/95)

This photograph, supplied by Mat Collishaw, is falsely used by the Walker to radicalise the exhibition. That such an established institution feels comfortable playing at avant-gardism, at the expense of a more complex appraisal of these artists, is a sign of how degraded the term has become. The very institutions to be challenged or at least 'reframed' (to use Hal Foster's term of what remains for an avant-garde role<sup>3</sup>), are instead allowed to perpetuate such tropes in this mythologising of contemporary art. Little different in its oversimplification of affect is the documentation accompanying the Tate's Turner Prize.<sup>4</sup> Without scrutinising the history that legitimates these claims, both exaggerate the assumption by some of these artists that new form, or in some instances simply new attitude, engenders radical content.

An alternative to avant-garde theory that nonetheless retains the sense of resistance may be Mikhail Bakhtin's evaluation of the carnival. His identification of an irrepressible opposition to hierarchical institutions originating in medieval celebration, in laughter, ribaldry, blasphemy and travesty, is easily enough traced in this country through its literature, music hall, television, and comedy to some of these artists. Bakhtin's claim that the anti-authoritarianism implicit in carnival excess had a disrupting centrifugal



Tough clothes by Kadu — Triple stitched. Strongest material available, Home grown and sewn.

effect on institutional discourse has parallels with some of the work here. In terms of Bakhtin's categories the abusive language of the market place is evoked by Sarah Lucas's invective, street cries by Michael Landy and by Gillian Wearing's placards, the celebration of bodily degradation by Damien Hirst's installations, laughter at the community's institutions and leaders by Mark Wallinger's videos, while the sideshow aspect to much of the work, in terms of theme and installation, places emphasis on provocative entertainment rather than on setting out conditions for contemplation or praxis.

With reference to Bakhtin's 'heteroglossia', where innumerable competing discourses jostle for efficacy to form the language used by any society, it is possible to assess the effectiveness of this art by comparing the extent to which it counters dominant centripetal forms of speech in which we all participate by default. Seen from this point of view Sam Taylor-Wood's *Brontosaurus* sets the naked male dancer against a Samuel Barber soundtrack as apparent incompatibles, overlaid as a representation of emotional limit — the carnival dance resisting from within — while appearing at times to take its cue from the authoritative determination of the classical music. Characterising some of the most effective work, especially where there is an intentional excess of content as with Gillian Wearing's 'documentaries', the 'I' of the artist as author changes to an 'I' located in the enunciations of other people, people usually from outside the artworld. This use of

the 'unauthorised' voice resists authority on several levels, granting a momentary outlet for the speechless (while indicating how speech is relentlessly oppressed institutionally) and opposing designations of how art should be made.

We are frequently reminded that this art, this avant garde, is 'British', though since most of the work under scrutiny is London-based this means less geographically than culturally. Such an intense cultural relativism has obvious marketing value, and yet the declared characteristics — offensiveness, irony, humour, paradox, sexual frankness — identified as British, are hardly unique to this country. Maurizio Cattelan, Karen Finley, Martin Kippenberger, Jeff Koons, Annie Sprinkle and The Wooster Group use similar devices. Aside from the retrogressive chauvinism of this phenomenon (how long do you have to be living here to qualify and do you count if you live abroad?) what might be most British about the traits it identifies is the one it reveals about itself. By commending national idiosyncrasy it rewards the same provincialism that insulated other generations of British artists from exposure to innovative work from abroad.

As the borders of the nation have grown permeable there appears an increasing need for this culture to recognise value in an anachronistic category — Britishness — and the artists themselves offer no lucid critique of this use to which they are being put. The implication that this celebrated nationalism might be a retreat from a trans-national style, into

.....  
**Ben Nott and  
 Paul Bennell**  
 Advertisement for Kadu  
 Sportswear 1993  
 .....

Can it be that the same institutions defining this avant-gardism are overlooking examples of a more profound collision of aesthetic and political radicality or has that possibility just been ironed flat by 16 years of conservative rule?

what is locally potent, is hardly tenable given this participation in the conventions of avant-gardism, now clearly the orthodoxy of art institutions. Along with certain other characteristics this aspect reveals a focus common to much international contemporary art suggesting a continuing impossibility for regionalism and the subsequent irrelevance of this acclamation of Britishness.

One of these characteristics is the conceptual emphasis shared with much recent American work. With the British artists considered here it is often accompanied by an essentiality of form, often described as minimalist, though lacking that earlier rigour where material *was* concept and its ontological basis, and was used with necessary sensitivity, as with Richard Serra, Carl Andre and Walter de Maria. Here by contrast the material has little presence though much bulk and is only notationally used as a sign of rigour, as minimalist style that serves to present, while keeping out of the way of, a conceptual directness.

There is an argument that this art fills minimal form with content, as in the case of Damien Hirst or Mona Hatoum, implying incorrectly that its earlier incarnation had little content of its own. Such work fails though when it assumes its ontology has little to do with materials and all to do with concept. The unintended torpor of Hirst's and Hatoum's Turner prize installations was due to their subjects screaming for attention from within structures that warranted none. In other work there is a too ready settling for the superficial referent in the way reductive means is used to focus attention on the legibility of subject, in the sense of something literally read from the work. This veers towards unintended obviousness, as with Mat Collishaw's recent installations showing views of homeless people through Christmas souvenirs (a valid overlaying of a Victorian ethos onto a contemporary plight but which unfortunately is here imbued with a distracting nostalgia), Kerry Stewart's ingratiating figures and Hermione Wiltshire's *Seamen II* and *Casanova* with their dead-ending iconography. The signifying brick delivered swiftly to the forehead rather than the multiple allusions of a signifying chain.

At its most effective this surfaceness permits oblique and unexpected penetration into a density of cultural references as with Mark Wallinger's *Royal Ascot*. At its worst it leads to obfuscation and irrelevant ascription of meaning – as with Hirst where it remains to be proved what his work reveals of death other than its idle referencing, especially if compared with any number of other representations (most notable recently would be Tina Keane's 1995 video *Transpositions*, shown at Plummet, of her journey

across America, a period of mourning her mother's death). Confining meaning to the utterable or legible has the virtue of it needing no translation as it crosses mediating structures, from artwork, to gallery, to newspaper, to television, to collector, to museum. Its significance, fixed at the start as essence, remains intact along the journey, reiterated by each agency promoting and in turn deriving purpose from the work. There is no room for difference, for dispute, because there is nothing other than what was stated as the authentic subject at the beginning. The authenticity of the artist's body probed by cameras is declarative at outset and cannot easily be diluted or challenged in its subsequent passage into commentary. What it says about itself it *is*. As its own commodity the art sells itself with the clarity of advertising, and as noted earlier, shares some of the provocative methods sanctioned by the trade. The irony of John Frankland's sham corporate elevator lobby, *You Can't Touch This*, as installed in the Saatchi Gallery is that, because its meaning is so transparent at the outset, it fails abysmally to resist what it critiques by becoming, rather than negating, its own negation.

By way of a conclusion it might be worth considering what possibilities of political radicalism are concealed or found intolerable by the acclaim shown this now familiar group of artists making work that 'thumbs its nose at authority'.<sup>5</sup> Other than glancingly, the following issues, randomly chosen but critical to the period marking the emergence of these artists, are just not in evidence. Aids. Racism. Gay and Lesbian activism. The consequences of the Gulf War. The intentional creation at government level of a new economic underclass. Economic colonialism. The evisceration of organised labour. The evisceration of the welfare state.

From artists regarding themselves as 'Thatcher's children'<sup>6</sup> and described as transforming 'boredom into the impetus for action and provocation'<sup>7</sup> you'd expect to see occasional instances of deep engagement. Can it be that the same institutions defining this avant-gardism are overlooking examples of a more profound collision of aesthetic and political radicality or has that possibility just been ironed flat by 16 years of conservative rule? ■

1. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

2. Some examples of recent advertising, appropriate in this context, are the controversial cinema slots by Adam Scholes and Joe Public, made for John Warr's *Harley-Davidson* dealership (independently produced, but suppressed by *Harley-Davidson* themselves); the banned London Transport poster by Alan Page of 13 Ten 51; TBWA's Wonderbra posters for Playtex; and work by Ben Nott.

3. *What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?*, Hal Foster, *October*, Fall 1994.

4. On Mona Hatoum's *Light Sentence*: 'The entrancing pattern of the shadows co-exists with a sense of the dehumanisation imposed on individuals by technology, utilitarianism and bureaucracy'; and on Damien Hirst's work: 'For Hirst, the cigarette is a multi-layered symbol suggesting beauty, luxury, danger and death.' *The Turner Prize 1995*, Virginia Button, Tate Gallery.

5. Stuart Morgan, *Brilliant!*

6. Anya Gallaccio, *Ibid.*

7. Neville Wakefield, *Ibid.*

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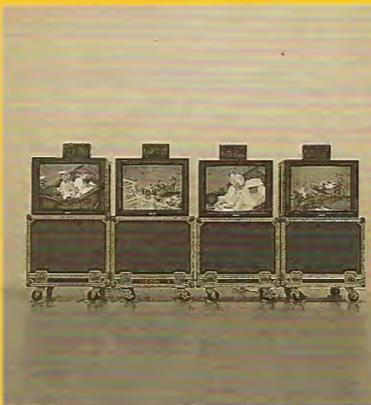
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