

Young British Artists: The Legendary Group

Given the current hype surrounding new British art, it is hard to imagine that the audience for contemporary art was relatively small until only two decades ago. Predominantly conservative tastes across the country had led to instances of open hostility towards contemporary art. For example, the public and the media were outraged in 1976 when they learned that the Tate Gallery had acquired Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII (the bricks)*. Lagging behind the international contemporary art scene, Britain was described as 'a cultural backwater' by art critic Sarah Kent.¹ A number of significant British artists, such as Tony Cragg, and Gilbert and George, had to build their reputation abroad before being taken seriously at home. To make matters worse, the 1980s saw severe cutbacks in public funding for the arts and for individual artists. Furthermore, the art market was hit by the economic recession in 1989. For the thousands of art school students completing their degrees around that time, career prospects did not look promising. Yet ironically, it was the worrying economic situation, and the relative indifference to contemporary art practice in Britain, that were to prove ideal conditions for the emergence of 'Young British Art'.

Emergence of YBAs

In 1988, in the lead-up to the recession, a number of fine art students from Goldsmiths College, London, decided it was time to be proactive instead of waiting for the dealers to call. Seizing the initiative, these aspiring young artists started to curate their own shows, in vacant offices and industrial buildings. The most famous of these was *Freeze*; and those who took part would, in retrospect, be recognised as the first group of Young British Artists, or YBAs.

Diverse in style and practice, there was no formal group, and certainly no manifesto for the YBAs. One of the major ties between them was that most of the 'core' YBA members had attended the fine art course at Goldsmiths during the mid-1980s to early 1990s.² Goldsmiths differed from other London art colleges in that it no longer kept the traditional boundaries between individual fine art disciplines. The freedom, and the breadth of choice and exposure that this afforded, enriched the students in their exploration as artists. Under the direction of the principal, Jon Thompson, students

1 Sarah Kent, senior art critic for *London Time Out*, wrote in a review in the October issue of 1974. Quoted in her own essay "Nine Years", in, Richard Cork and Sarah Kent ed., *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., p.9.

2 Notable exceptions include Rachel Whiteread and Tracey Emin, who trained at the Slade School of Fine Art and the Royal College of Art, respectively.

were taught to reflect on their social position as artists, to adopt a critical approach to art history, and to engage with the art market. Most importantly, Thompson, and other artist-lecturers such as Michael Craig-Martin, Yehuda Safran and Richard Wentworth, were inspirational as mentors and visible as practising artists. The liberal and spirited atmosphere at the college produced a close group of confident young artists, sixteen of whom participated in *Freeze*, including leading figure, Damien Hirst, and other such as, Mat Collishaw, Angus Fairhurst, Gary Hume, Michael Landy and Sarah Lucas.

Freeze, has now attained near-mythical status as the defining moment of the YBAs' emergence. It was not the line-up at *Freeze*, or the exhibited works, but simply the act of self-promotion on the part of the participants that gave the show its significance in the history of British art of the 90s. Unembarrassed about promoting themselves and their work, the organisers went to great lengths to put on a professional-looking show, and to get the right kind of people – key dealers and promoters – to attend. These included Nicholas Serota, Norman Rosenthal and, famously, Charles Saatchi. Such artist-curated shows at abandoned factories became a plausible and successful means of countering the harsh economic conditions of the early 1990s. *Freeze* came to epitomise this astute survival tactic. Following its success, other warehouse shows were staged; for example, *Modern Medicine* (organised by Carl Freedman, Billie Sellman and Damien Hirst), *East Country Yard Show* (by Henry Bond and Sarah Lucas) and *Market* (a large-scale installation by Michael Landy).

The Artist's Persona

In organising *Freeze* – choosing the artworks, finding the sponsors, publishing the smart catalogue, fixing the opening party, etc. – Hirst presented not only the exhibition, but also himself: 'Damien Hirst', a constructed yet evolving public persona. In fact, Hirst is perhaps as well known for his lifestyle as for his art, making sure that the two are often entangled. He always manage to make headlines with his astonishing and intriguing actions; to name a few, Hirst's purchase of Toddington Manor, a rundown 300-room gothic mansion with £3million in 2005, intended as his country retreat and a venue to house his own works and art collection; in 2007, Hirst's interest in buying a Victorian collection of stuffed animals for £1million caused the owners to sue the auction house, Bonham's, for not having accepted the offer; and Hirst's successful auction at Sotheby's, *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever*, right before the economy crashed in 2008 etc. Topping these with his outrageous and wild behaviour (attaining the title of the 'bad boy' of the modern Brit art), Hirst obtains great presence over the media (and often not limiting to the arts section), formulating

a remarkable prevalence of Hirst's own image – which has probably not been practised or achieved by any other living artists at the time. This must have originated from a combination of Hirst's strong desire to be noticed by others and his eccentric, charismatic and sociable character. A feature in *Tate Magazine*,³ for instance, devoted a full page to a portrait of Hirst, shaven-headed and sucking on a cigarette, rather than to a gallery shot of his artworks; but he and his works are part of the same package. Grim and extravagant, his installation works tackle head-on the big issues of love and death, which includes the iconic series such as the spin, dot, and butterfly paintings, medicine cabinets, and pickled and stuffed animals. The 'Hirst' brand is as deftly and clinically packaged as his *The Last Supper* series (1999). Through his prominent media presence, Hirst became, for many, the embodiment and spokesman of the YBAs.

The exploration, and manipulation, of the artist's persona is a recurring theme within the work of many YBAs. Since his years at art school, Gavin Turk has been interested in stereotypes, the cult of personality, and the construction of the artistic myth. *Cave* (1995) is a reworking of his degree show work (1991): a blue imitation English Heritage plaque bearing the words 'Gavin Turk, Sculptor, worked here 1989–1991'. Merging his own image with celebrities and historical figures, Turk's works address issues of identity and authenticity. Taking a different tack, Sarah Lucas explores sexuality, and challenges gender stereotypes, often through crude jokes and visual puns, and often involving furniture and food, or found objects and material appropriated from the mass media. Realising that she could exploit her tomboyish look, too, as an element in her art, she adopts 'masculine' poses to create a series of confrontational photographic self-portraits (1992–1998) full of sexual innuendo (eating a banana, for example, or loitering outside a public lavatory armed with a large salmon).

The Saatchi-Branded YBAs

Co-founder of the Saatchi & Saatchi advertising agency, Charles Saatchi, played a crucial role in the success of the YBAs. As a famous adman, he is believed by some to favour works with immediate visual impact. He visited *Freeze*, and although he did not buy any of the artworks, he was very much impressed, and subsequently modified his collecting priorities, to target a younger generation of British artists.

³ Sarah Greenberg and Andrew Wilson, 'Art Gets in Your Face', in *Tate Magazine*, no. 2, Spring 1994. Mentioned in Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, expanded edition, London (Verso), 2006, p. 20.

Saatchi started to acquire Hirst's works in the 1990s, including *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), a tiger shark suspended in a glass tank of formaldehyde; and *A Thousand Years* (1990), a microcosm of the life cycle of a fly, featuring maggots, flies, a rotting cow's head, and an 'insectocutor'. In fact, Saatchi became an aggressive collector of British contemporary art. Visiting student art shows, art schools and studios, he would bulk-buy works by young artists at low prices, sometimes even purchasing the whole show. He became the modern branded collector and patron of British art, to the extent that once an artist's work was tagged 'Saatchi Collection', speculation of a rise in value would usually follow.

To house his collection, Saatchi set up his own gallery in London. It has been open to the public since 1985 (moving premises twice), and serves as an important venue for the art world. In 1992, the Saatchi Gallery mounted the first exhibition of the series *Young British Artists* – the title that now designates the group as an art historical term. It was here that the press first encountered Hirst's shark, foreseeing instantly – if not quite unanimously – its future status as the iconic work of YBA art. Other works in the Saatchi Collection have achieved similar prominence; for example, Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998) and Marc Quinn's *Self* (1991).

Notoriety! Showcasing a new face of British Contemporary Art

In 1997, the controversial exhibition *Sensation: Young British Artists* from the Saatchi Collection was shown at the Royal Academy of Arts (RA), London. The exhibition included Marcus Harvey's *Myra* (1995), a depiction of the child murderer Myra Hindley, made from children's handprints; Jake and Dinos Chapman's disturbing group of mutated child mannequins, *Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, De-sublimated Libidinal Model (enlarged x 1000)* (1995); and Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), a painting that incorporates cut-out pornographic images and elephant dung. Such provocative works – *Myra* in particular – led an angry crowd to demonstrate outside the Academy and prompted the resignation of four RA Members in protest. Meanwhile, ticket sales just kept on rising. The controversial exhibits drew in a younger audience, who perhaps had never entered the Academy before. Of nearly 300,000 people who attended the show, 80 per cent were under the age of thirty.

Part of the fascination may relate to the appeal of tabloid newspapers. Certainly, the works of YBAs frequently reference topics that the tabloids tend to treat in a sensationalist way: child abuse, violent death, sex, etc. Earning notoriety from the *Sensation* show, some YBAs were considered to have revealed, through their works, an amoral and irresponsible attitude towards sensitive topics.

Douglas Gordon quotes, 'Morals are conditioned ... they are relative like everything else is today', in the context of his own work.⁴ In *10 ms-1* (1994), looped film footage shows a First World War shell-shock victim's repeated attempts to get up from the floor. The work causes us to reflect on our changing attitude as observers of the man's evident plight: evolving from puzzlement perhaps, through pity and discomfort, to a chillingly detached impatience – despite which, still we are compelled to look. No resolution is offered: the viewer is placed at the centre of the dilemma, with no way out – only a direct confrontation of the dreadful side of society and our own natures.

The YBAs' relationship with the media could be said to work both ways. Painter Gary Hume traces images from magazine spreads to produce his spare and seductive paintings and prints. Sarah Lucas enlarges tabloid double-page spreads, to highlight the exploitation of the female body. In reverse, advertising companies have appeared to 'borrow' from YBA works. For example, the subjects of Gillian Wearing's series of photographs, *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say* (1992–3), hold up cardboard signs on which they have written whatever was on their mind ('I'm desperate', etc.) – precisely the technique that crops up in a Volkswagen advertisement. Famously, if less specifically, Hirst-like spots were adopted by British Airways to advertise their low-cost airline, Go. On whatever level, lofty or base, the intertwining of the YBAs with the wider culture seems to draw their art closer to the general public.

Amidst the media frenzies and the controversies, the YBA generation has changed the face of British contemporary art practice. Their diversity of style may partly account for their enduring prominence, even while their well-publicised social interconnections reinforce their perceived coherence as a group. Although shock and awe are sometimes the only appropriate response, these artists command our admiration for their sheer honesty. Disdaining the comforting but hollow parable, they opt for reality, in a raw and literal form.

⁴ Originally from an American TV detective series. Quoted in Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, p.142.