

# Exhibition Reviews

## London 'Sensation'

*Sensation*, the survey of the advertising magnate Charles Saatchi's private collection of recent British art at the **Royal Academy** (to 28th December), has been thought of by some in the UK as cynically engineered for the mutual benefit of the two parties concerned – officially underwriting Saatchi's young British art ('yBa') holdings while injecting capital and street credibility into the cash-strapped Academy. Such views have provoked an addendum to the press release in which the Academy defended its inclusion of a portrait of the child murderer Myra Hindley, denying any financial motive in the staging of the exhibition. Undoubtedly, popular media controversy over the sex-and-violence content of much of the work has served to swell the box office. An irony not much commented on is that through the 1970s and 80s the typical call from the British press, in the face of avant-garde 'outrages', was for a shift to private patronage, as being a more democratic form of arts support than the bureaucratic allocation of 'the tax-payer's money'. It is just such a shift that has allowed Saatchi to establish a hegemony in a somewhat parochial art scene.

On the face of it then, *Sensation* might be expected to have a significant impact on the long-standing ethos – the ritual meanings – of the Royal Academy's galleries, as well as on the popular perception of contemporary art. At the start of the show there is the suggestion, too, of some critical self-awareness on the part of the creators and the curators of this art, a potentially cogent examination even of their mutual dependency. Notions of a 'cabinet of curiosities',<sup>1</sup> as well as of related 'vanitas' themes, are invoked and reworked in the central hall of the exhibition, by the juxtaposition of Damien Hirst's formidable *The physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living* (1991; cat. no.35), a shark suspended in a tank of formaldehyde, with Marc Quinn's *Self* (1991; no.80), a cast of his head in his own frozen blood isolated within a refrigeration unit. The mimicry of the paraphernalia of anatomical diorama and of museological display, and reference to arbitrary categorisation of specimens, is evident. Mark Wallinger likewise suggests trophy collecting, tableaux formats, and questions of classification and identity, in his four paintings of thoroughbred horses executed in the manner of Stubbs. Horse breeding here is used to allude to a holy trinity of post-modern ideological concerns, *Race, class and sex* (no.102; Fig.58), but also to issues of connoisseurship and pedigree that pertain in the art arena.

The telling conjunctions set up between such pieces recall Damien Hirst's own curatorial work. When creating his celebrated group shows, such as the 1988 warehouse event *Freeze* (accepted as epochal in the *Sensation* catalogue)<sup>2</sup> or the Serpentine Gallery's 1994 *Some went mad, some ran away*, he has spoken of wanting 'a lot of activity between things in the show'.<sup>3</sup> There is a difference, however, between acknowledging that con-



58. *Race, class and sex*, by Mark Wallinger. 1992. 230 by 300 cm. (Saatchi Collection; exh. Royal Academy, London).

text is a governing factor, and asserting that art is totally context dependent. Mark Wallinger has talked of his 'irritation at this lazy response to the Duchamp inheritance of the readymade',<sup>4</sup> in which, far from being conceptually subversive, recent 'readymades' end up falling back, conservatively, on the ratifying power of the art institution. Such considerations are not just significant for the credibility of *Sensation's* self-referential statements about the definition and function of art. Similar principles are crucial in separating the genuinely meaty from the meretricious in those works that aim to address 'real life' social issues. Certainly much in the exhibition does attempt to engage with a vast fund of human, philosophical, political and social issues, and as such deserves praise for avoiding the drily cerebral. Yet the spurious conflation of general iconographic promiscuity with some stance of democracy and anti-elitism is too easily made. Gavin Turk's *Pop* (1993; cat.no.100) – a museum cabinet of the artist dressed as the Punk star Sid Vicious while adopting the posture of Warhol's gun-slinging Elvis – may be a concise report on the appropriation of the insolently avant-garde by the establishment, but it achieves its final fulfilment only passively, in being collected and displayed as another of the cased trophies hunted down by the collector. Mark Wallinger's more refined art-historical references acknowledge the difficulty of addressing social questions – of class, or nationality – without resort to cliché, and eventually self-parody. He is fully aware that he is not himself one of the alienated proletariat, and explores at a purely symbolic level the mechanics of oppression. Somehow his work seems both less dependent upon and less compromised by its context in *Sensation*, even while he too

can comment that 'Saatchi was the perfect buyer, because inevitably within the work there is a critique of any kind of art as a radical presence . . . it is supported and paid for by rich people with their own agendas, and always has been'.<sup>5</sup>

As the exhibition progresses, however, any self-reflexive potential in the display fades in favour of a series of more familiarly 'themed' rooms of a sort common in much recent curatorial practice. Gallery 2, for example, attends to 'the body and its cultural representation', a concern which crops up again in Gallery 10 as 'the body as an object of desire'. What is introduced under such vague rubrics is also, increasingly, a range of familiar artistic strategies and styles transported into current British art straight from the 1960s–80s international art market. Jake and Dinos Chapman's *Great deeds against the dead* (no.15; Fig.60), a department-store-window version of one of Goya's *Disasters of War* etchings, would seem to owe everything to Jeff Koons. Chris Offili's repetitive 'blacksploitation' paintings, incorporating elephant dung and pornographic magazine fragments, are essentially 1980s 'Transavant-garde' performances, while occasional 'pure' abstractions, for example by Mark Francis or Jason Martin, recycle formalist and minimalist formulas. Certain pieces in particular look revealingly at home in the Royal Academy, such as Jenny Saville's worthy and bombastic images of the body. They have a 'blue chip' aura, encouraging the viewer to luxuriate in seductive paintwork. What raises the stakes here, again, is the socio-ideological intent of the work, referring of course to the ambivalent relationship women are now routinely understood to have with their bodies. Yet contrary to claims made for it, her practice no more indicts than it relies upon society's



59. *Proud of his wife*, by Marcus Harvey. 1994. Oil and acrylic, 198 by 198 cm. (Saatchi Collection; exh. Royal Academy, London).

stereotypes of the female. For we are forced to read the extreme distortions of her figures against the 'conventional' female nude, and thus to accept as granted an 'ideal' from which her depicted anatomies diverge.

The anti-idealism of Saville's gender depiction is another version of the bathos which characterises so much in this exhibition, and which underlies the most erroneous and frequently-made claim about the work here – that it is populist, a version of popular culture. Sarah Lucas's treatment of the female body, more iconoclastic than

Saville's, is also more typical of her peers. *Two fried eggs and a kebab* (1992; no.55) is a consciously puerile, crudely anthropomorphic assemblage of fast food. Again, though, such work functions critically (or humorously) only when viewed, as art, by the bourgeois art world. It relies on the high art 'frame' to make it subversive, but is drained of subversiveness even as it enters that frame. Similar problems accompany Lucas's *Sod you gits* (1990; no.52), which enlarges a page from the *Sunday Sport* tabloid reporting on a midget stripper. Is she 'exposing' forms



60. *Great deeds against the dead*, by Jake and Dinos Chapman. 1994. Mixed media with plinth, 277 by 244 by 152 cm. (Saatchi Collection; exh. Royal Academy, London).

of exploitation or merely relaying images from a world of pervasive mythological representations (in the Barthesian sense) which her ironic perspective cannot in fact redeem? Despite the claim made in the catalogue by the artist-critic (and *Sensation* exhibitor) Martin Maloney that Lucas's work redresses the fallacies of the modernist male artist by absurdly aping them, in its claim to unmask (and thereby master) cultural attitudes, it remains tied to familiar romantic aspirations for art. Again, Richard Billingham's candid photographs of his obese and drunken parents, elegantly juxtaposed with Rachel Whiteread's casts of a Victorian room (read working class domicile), do not 'expose the harsh realities of his family's life', they merely fetishise it for a privileged audience. Nor does Marcus Harvey's *Proud of his wife* (no.31; Fig.59) appropriating abstract expressionist brushstrokes to recreate 'readers' wives' from pornographic magazines, 'confront the male gaze with the machismo of the gesture'. It could equally allow the viewer conveniently to keep separate the categories of high art and pornography (the joke requires the distinction); or it could permit a glibly democratising reading of action painting: it may be macho masturbatory modernism, but at least anyone can do it.

Hirst's play with action painting – his spin paintings made by pouring paint onto a rotating surface – is less pretentious, more genuinely popularising (he has happily participated in 'fun' events in which the public make their own spin paintings). In general his understanding of what could make art popular is more persuasive than that of his peers, looking forward to an era in which people, made visually sophisticated by advertising and mass media, visit galleries as they do cinemas. Repeatedly, though, in the exhibition there are unresolved ambiguities and (self-) deceptions as the artists' identifications with 'low' culture struggle to democratise these artworks, while in fact reiterating their sanctified status as high art. The 'faceless rabble' is ultimately condescended to and – how loaded the word is here – patronised. Far from being critical of capitalist hierarchies, this art is itself the rhetoric of post-modern, post-industrial capitalism, and its collector knows instinctively that it will safely continue to cast the underclass as Other, while giving an illusion of assimilating it sufficient to drain its potential for radical discontent. Into such a predicament, yet again, fall Gary Hume's capricious paintings of *Tony Blackburn* (no.44) and other popular magazine personalities, or Peter Davies's *Text Painting* (no.22) listing the 'Brit Pack' artists as a pop chart.

The same kind of unresolved ideological confusions lay behind the showing, and *de rigueur* defacement,<sup>6</sup> of Marcus Harvey's *Myra* (1997; no.31), the well-known mugshot of the Moors murderess Hindley, recreated in large scale using the imprints of a child's hands. The physical attack on the picture may testify (perhaps encouragingly for artists, and advertisers) to the enduring 'reality' of images in people's minds. Yet Harvey's engagement with sex crime is nothing new in British art. Aside from historical precedents such as Sickert's Camden

Town Murder paintings, one thinks of the performance group COUM Transmissions claiming in the mid-70s that crime is just 'art without theoretics' and eulogising Charles Manson.<sup>7</sup> By 1977 punk entrepreneur Vivienne Westwood was manufacturing chic 'God Save Myra Hindley' T-shirts. Within such a tradition, Harvey's motif is certainly *passé*, and its sensationalism depends entirely on the context of the Royal Academy with its curious mix of old-world establishmentarianism and popular accessibility. Only in such a venue, perhaps, could this exhibition manage a re-enactment, yet again, of the cliché-ed process in which avant-garde art becomes enshrined in art history.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Its significance would be best illuminated by DAVID CARRIER: 'The origins of museums, the cabinet of curiosities in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe', *Leonardo*, XX [1987], p.83–86.

<sup>2</sup>*Sensation*. Texts by Norman Rosenthal, Richard Shone, Lisa Jardine, Martin Maloney and Brook Adams. 224 pp. with many col. and b. & w. pls. (Thames and Hudson, London, 1997). ISBN 0–900–946–57–1.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in A. WILSON: 'Out of Control', *Art Monthly*, [June 1994], p.8.

<sup>4</sup>In an interview with Marcello Spinelli for the *British Art Show 4* website, 1995.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>In 1976 Carl André's *Equivalent VIII* (the 'Tate Bricks') was sprayed with blue food dye; in 1994 Damien Hirst's *Away from the Flock* (*Sensation* no.37) was contaminated with blue ink when shown in *Some went mad . . .* at the Serpentine Gallery. Harvey's *Myra* was attacked with eggs and ink. In all cases the assailants were themselves artists of some kind.

<sup>7</sup>See GENESIS P-ORRIDGE: 'COUM 34 Missions', *Flash Art*, [December 1976], p.36.

<sup>8</sup>There is surely a sense that the term 'Sensationism' is being planted as a usefully pejorative term, for rehabilitation as an accepted art-historical nomenclature in due course, à la 'Fauvism', 'Cubism'.