

## review

*British Rubbish*

Sue Webster and Tim Noble

Independent Art Space London, June 22–August 3.

A Union Jack rubbish bin, flattened to resemble an oversized cod-piece, greeted visitors to *British Rubbish*. I wanted to ask where the safety pins were but I resisted the temptation, not wishing to offend the two artists invigilating their show. I shouldn't have worried. A catalogue featuring biographical fragments included ironic references to Punk and a number of crudely drawn self-portraits portrayed Noble and Webster as foul-mouthed misfits. All this served to reference the zenith of white, teenage rebellion as a vanishing point for the pair's work; a period revisited by more than a few artists and critics of late. Neville Wakefield has argued that Punk's legacy is a crucial component of the new art currently being produced by the Brilliant generation, particularly Punk's DIY entrepreneurial spirit, but also its promotion of shock tactics, which Wakefield has unfortunately attempted to place in a tradition of détournement. Noble and Webster's unashamedly hammy performance as white trash, however, was without romance and raised questions about other artists behaving badly.

British Rubbish was a collection of crude allegories and cheap jokes and the exhibition appeared as something not all together wholesome amidst the diversions offered by the 'Capital's' other summer shows. The installation *Everything Was Wonderful* was one such allegory: hidden behind an impeccable privet-hedge, this Tamazipan induced utopia presented a suburban or country garden, populated by a family of mechanical rabbits. The rabbits ate, fucked and bobbed out of holes, but they seemed far from wild. The slow repetitive movements of these petite-bourgeois animals indicated that they were probably pets belonging to the children of the Stepford (or Cheltenham) Wives. This installation, comparable to the occasional displays of paradise in shopping malls, could have been interpreted as a timely reminder that 'England is still dreaming', but there remains a possibility that the artists were celebrating the unproductive and the useless as well.

While Noble and Webster's exhibition did employ a liberal dose of vernacular culture, by labelling themselves and their work *British Rubbish* the pair managed to distance themselves from the hiatus surrounding the 'Britishness' of new British Art, or at least the hip, swinging Britishness currently being celebrated both here and abroad. Through this act of self-degradation, Noble and Webster cultivated a negativity at a time when the feel the good factor had reached endemic proportions in Britain's art scene. As Julian Stallabrass has recently written, new commodities are trash waiting to happen, and Noble and Webster similarly repudiate the new, tarnishing the high production values of their installations in the process. Despite this negativity though, Noble and Webster did not distance themselves from a vernacular of British popular culture as their allegorical installations clearly located the artists in a specific geopolitical space.

The theme of non-productivity was pursued further in Noble and Webster's other installation, entitled *Idealistic Nonsense*, which featured a collection of mechanically powered workmen. Inane grins and kindly eyes gave the workers something of the appearance of Haséks Good Soldier Svejek, the infamous imbecile who spread disaster whenever his masters called upon him to perform his duties and whose reck-

less stupidity was often matched by a knowing cruelty. Standing amidst white plinths, the workmen could have been mistaken for DIY enthusiasts, stupidly spending their leisure time working, but they were far too uniform in appearance. They could have been a team of Minimalist sculptors too, but they were clearly trying to waste time and had no love of the materials before them. One worker hammered, one painted and another sawed; all laboured ineffectively. Another workman was squatting with his trousers around his ankles behind a large plinth at the back of the installation; he was enjoying the sensation of a small turd nearly, but not quite, plopping out of his arse on to the painted white surface. A fifth worker hidden inside a plinth revealed his presence by moving his finger in and out of a small hole drilled in the plinth's side. The pleasure gained from this mindless activity may have lain in its crude sexual connotations, but it was just as likely to be pleasure accumulated from avoiding hard work in a dead end job.

*Idealistic Nonsense* exhibited a clear lack of commitment to get down to the difficult tasks of constructing ideals, building the future or confronting the present and it serves as a good example of the propensity to be useless that Noble and Webster share with a good many others. If this lack of commitment infuriates those Post-Conceptual critical types, who see such attitudes as an abandonment of hard won theoretical positions, then it is worth remembering that those Avant-Garde projects that refused to be functional were collective experiments in doing nothing; which, as Denis Hollier has suggested, was a way of avoiding an aestheticization of politics: something that artists employing a Post-Structuralist paradigm often failed to do at the turn of the decade.

This experiment in irresponsibility, however, does not account for the specific voices and narratives being adopted by a growing number of artists. Like Sarah Lucas, Gavin Turk and Bank; Noble and Webster use narratives and voices that employ a vernacular of British popular culture to evoke, what Slavoj Žižek has called, a fantasy of a collective existence. Perhaps it is no coincidence that at the same moment new British Art developed a successful and distinctive voice, something of a fantasy of collective life emerged in 'Brit Pop' culture too: the most recent and voracious example of this collective fantasy in England must be football's 'homecoming' for Euro 96. Žižek suggests that such collective narratives erupt after being repressed by cultural institutions and he concludes that this experience of repression is felt as a theft of enjoyment. The return of the repressed is sometimes liberating and sometimes ugly, as in Žižek's own country of origin, the former Yugoslavia. In Britain's contemporary art scene, the return of specific everyday voices and narratives has acted to frustrate those institutionalised and aestheticised Post-Modern sensibilities cultivated in the eighties, but at the same time the current hiatus risks an affirmation of stereotypes and cultural chauvinism. This is where the more astute new British artists resist such dead-ends, by problematising identity whilst still enjoying the luxury of bad behaviour and irresponsibility. In contrast to an artist such as Sam Taylor-Wood, whose piece *Slut* is a one-dimensional celebration of a stereotype, Sarah Lucas's adoption of an aggressive, and often derogatory, vulgar male voice impacts upon her identity as a female artist, creating a complex and contradictory voice. This complexity is also found in the early work of Gavin Turk whose appropriations of British popular culture and the products of fame, through such objects as a wax work Sid Vicious and a heritage plaque, are confounded by the museum format Turk uses for the display of his work:



Turk presents his work and himself as already being dead; that is, as already being consumed by the culture industry. Following the lead of their contemporaries, Noble and Webster similarly refuse to affirm the vernacular that they embrace and thus complicate their identity as British artists.

There is though another level to Noble and Webster's work, but it is one that they have less control over. It concerns the fabrication of identity, which is something that has become an important feature of new British Art. From the bad boy posturing of Hirst to the recent successes of Tracy Emin and the Chapman Brothers, there has been an emphasis on the 'personality' of an artist, which has greatly assisted the successful reception of contemporary art by the media. Considering the emphasis placed upon the individual in the economic and social culture of the eighties and early nineties, this is perhaps not surprising. Noble and Webster address this 'personality factor' in their drawings and their catalogue by portraying themselves as foul-mouthed wannabees and labelling themselves 'The Shit and The Cunt' after the patron saints of new British Art, Gilbert and George. However, although Noble and Webster attempt to construct themselves as negatives, they still want success, quite reasonably, as a lack of success can equal marginalisation and silence; and to achieve visibility entails making the right moves and knowing the right people, which contradicts their representation of themselves as misfits. This is a dilemma faced by any artist attempting to maintain a negativity within their work and it is a contradiction that can not be easily resolved. In a timely intervention Noble and Webster take this contradiction to its limit. The duo wear their petite-bourgeois career aspirations on their sleeves and, through their second-hand Gilbert and George posturing, flog a dead horse to good effect.

David Burrows