

# Tired of the Soup du Jour? Some Problems with 'New Formalism'

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'Early one Morning', Whitechapel Gallery's 2002 summer exhibition featured work by the artists Jim Lambie, Eva Rothschild, Shahin Afrabassi, Gary Webb and Clare Barclay. The exhibition was hailed by Whitechapel director Iwona Blazwick in its catalogue introduction as a "paradigm shift in contemporary art." The work of these featured artists, along with Roger Hiorns and an American contingent including Jason Meadows, has been identified by the writer and artist JJ Charlesworth as representing "a new kind of sculpture."

So what is all the fuss about? Fortunately the answer lies close at hand. In his recent articles in *Art Monthly* and *Artext*,<sup>1</sup> Charlesworth provides a tentative critical bedrock on which to build the promotional machine for the 'new paradigm'. These articles chart the recent historical conditions within the (mainly) British art world, which gave rise to this "new formalism". They also provide a generic overview of the concerns and tendencies which unite the disparate strands of a dozen or so individual practices.

Whilst accepting the broad thrust of Charlesworth's analysis of the recent historical conditions within British art, I wish to look more closely at a number of his assertions regarding the necessary conditions for the ascendancy of the new formalism. I wish to outline the way the artistic co-concerns within new formalism, identified by both Iwona Blazwick and Charlesworth, often rely on problematic systems of representation. I also wish to highlight Charlesworth's apparently benign acceptance of the evacuation of critical content from the contemporary art gallery.

First, a summary of the historic trajectory behind the new formalism, as outlined by Charlesworth: Charlesworth identifies the return to abandoned realms of '60s formalism as a phenomenon that flies in the face of recent practice that deals with issues of social, political, institutional and cultural representation. The abandonment of critical discourse in the late 1980s is a result of an impasse reached when the expanded field of critical discourse found itself limited through its integration into institutional norms. The institutional norms came out on top, as critical perspectives were assimilated into gallery modes of presentation. This led to a deepening disillusionment on the part of artists since no one could quite decide how to deal with the problems of institutional assimilation they were facing. Into the breach leapt the yBas, who couldn't really care less, just accepted the conservative norms, and indulged themselves and their audience with anti-critical, populist modes of production. This in turn was great for the art market, which mushroomed. The consequent expansion of the British art scene allowed previously marginalised critical perspectives, with artworks often sited outwith the gallery, to be integrated into the mainstream. (Charlesworth cites Landy's *Breakdown* and Dellar's *Battle of Orgreave* as examples.)

This is all very well, provided one disregards all those 'alternative' practices which continued to work outwith the mainstream, enacting strategies which paved the way for the eventual 'acceptance' of Dellar or Landy. Charlesworth's proposal suggests that the continuing marginalisation of seminal figures active prior to the yBa generation, such as Terry Atkinson, is due to the continuing and inevitable historic repercussions of the

critical/institutional 'impasse' reached as a result of the integration of '80s critical discourse into the institutional mainstream. This is untrue, far from passively accepting their marginalisation, artists such as Atkinson worked, and continue to work, to avoid such assimilation. Charlesworth's acceptance of a supposed impasse is convenient for his historical thesis, allowing him to accept simulachral spectacles such as *Breakdown* and the *Battle of Orgreave* as examples of the re-integration of "marginal radical perspectives." He bolsters their status as the 'critical voice' of the 'radical academy', affirming the position of Dellar and Landy within it.

Charlesworth correctly identifies the shift in values which has enabled the cultural hegemony to expand in line with the increasing professionalisation, careerism and commercialisation of the artworld, leading to the integration of previously marginal interdisciplinary forms. However, blithely accepting works such as *The Battle of Orgreave* or *Breakdown* as paragons of contemporary critical practice is expedient. He uses these examples as a form of rhetoric, allowing himself the room to present the emergence of the new formalist 'paradigm' as an 'inevitable' response to his defeatist thesis. This thesis proposes that the move towards 'abstraction' amongst a younger generation is a natural progression of the late '90s commitment towards material preoccupations: "the reinvention of popular or amateur idioms, the return of the handmade and of the craft aesthetic." The gallery becomes the site for the 'abstract', formalist paradigm: it represents one of many possible 'products' available to the cultural consumer. Although Charlesworth recognises the new formalism as "pragmatic and often cynical...and conservatively reconciled to the commercial locus of the unique object", he justifies the importance of the position it represents on the grounds that it is "one of the plurality of practices in which questions of form, experience and context may once again be negotiated."

The implications of adopting a position such as this are ultimately limiting. It entails a casual shrugging off of the retreat of political content from the gallery, and an acceptance of a limited field of engagement as Charlesworth disengages contemporary practices' formalist concerns from other areas in the "plurality of practice." This is presented as a re-investment in the formal conditions of arts' presentation, but its effect is to close down the gallery as a site for the more important matter of allowing artists to discuss, head on, the contextual terms of their works' presentation. Accepting the gallery as one of a number of sites

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Turmoil and anxiety in the financial markets: environmental damage.

within a pluralised field of cultural activity is all very well, but limiting the effectiveness of the gallery to the celebration of formal conditions is not. This is especially important when the conditions are presented as being beyond analysis or contestation:

"The shape these [formal] resolutions take may appear to reiterate earlier terms, but they do so only in as much as they articulate the contemporary aesthetic and institutional possibilities and limitations of gallery art – the ambiguity towards reference and representation, the hallucinatory excess of material form and the syntax that develops between elements once they are placed in relation to one another – all echo the past but are discovered because these aspects are *default values*, so to speak, the *pragmatic reality* that was once mistaken for an essential." (Emphasis added.)

This sounds remarkably close to the philosopher Richard Rorty's position, with his brand of neo-pragmatist anti-philosophy, and it further exposes a kind of cultural determinism. The values are default and the reality pragmatic only through a given work's dependence on code signals recognisable between class and knowledge sectors, and reflecting the power and influence of a predominantly middle class, art school educated cognoscenti. The "possibilities and limitations" of gallery art identified here are a depressing invocation of the status quo.

The works of the new formalists themselves do the most to undermine Charlesworth's claim that the new formalism has moved on from the preoccupations of previous paradigms. Whilst they generally rely on tropes and systems of representation that are coded to appeal to the cognoscenti, and they are undoubtedly reconciled to and reliant on their gallery context, it is clear that the new formalists *do* embrace an institutional critique of sorts. Their critique may not be based on dry '80s conceptualism but it nonetheless relies on double coding in an attempt to undermine and parody itself. Rothschild's piece *Early Learning* takes the tropes of New Generation sculptor Philip King and conflates these with articles reminiscent of children's toys. Jim Lambie's renowned floor piece

Eva Rothschild, *Early Learning*, 2002; 'Not Neo but New', *Art Monthly* no. 259, September 2002

*Zobop* is reminiscent of hard edged abstraction, yet its form is dictated by the constraints of the gallery space in which it is located. This pushes it into the realms of a 'critical regionalism', a critique of the international style and the 'non-place'. These strategies are however, hardly paradigm shifting and they do little to support Charlesworth's claims that the new formalism has "no ancestry to be traced" nor that it is being "constructed from the ground up, in a landscape uncluttered by the relics of history."

Charlesworth claims that the growth in use of handicrafts or idiosyncratic manufacture through the late '90s led to a new generation "representing a particular kind of investment" in art making, and this, along with the idea that craftwork will make the artwork more "authentic and resistant to a depersonalised and media saturated culture", revels in a kind of bourgeois primitivism. In fact this tendency towards primitivism is borne out in much of the work by the artists identified by Charlesworth. We can observe the use of neo-primitive identifiers such as "extremes of combinatory invention"<sup>2</sup> in the work of Gary Webb, an attraction for "ancient images and artefacts"<sup>3</sup> in the work of Roger Hiorns or Clare Barclay, and a "[p]alaeolithic sensibility of shamanic magic"<sup>4</sup> in Lambie's psychedelic soul sticks. Such references are surely quite deliberate; the titling works such as Meadows's Bald Eagle after an animal totem (and the symbol of the U.S), or Hiorns, Barclay and Rothschild's use of crystals and other new age paraphernalia indicate a knowing appropriation of the problematic signs of earlier shamanistic art practices and an understanding of new age culture and shamanism as practiced in broader culture. The use of such loaded signifiers (with a few notable exceptions) does not necessarily imply a critique of the appropriation of exotic imagery. Neither is the appropriation entirely naïve. It is more as if the use of such signs allows the artists to summon up a notion of the artworld as a 'totemic' community, where through the process of an art education and shared sets of cultural and class values, artists and art lovers may develop a kinship between all things in the 'artworld-cosmos'. The acceptance and repeated use of visual stereotypes to communicate with like minds becomes sentimental cliché; a nod towards difference which affirms the new formalists' position within the status quo. In the end these strategies seem to function better as attempts to bolster the artworld's self image. They reaffirm and uncritically extend its codes, further reifying itself as 'cool' and hermetic, thereby placing the broader issues of representation it inadvertently (or sometimes advertently) raises beyond concern.

Unfortunately, like previous neo-primitive practices, the new formalism relies heavily and for the most part uncritically on a notional 'other' in order to generate value. The 'others' in this case range from the assumed values ascribed to a piece of leather which allow it to slip between signifying a state of nature or a sex fetish, to the desire to render art ('represented' through the tropes of '60s formalism) into the realms of a supposedly more authentic field of visceral experience via pop music or culture. Iwona Blazwick, writing in the catalogue introduction to 'Early One Morning', maintains that the use of a car body shop that is frequented by pop stars to finish the surface of a Webb sculpture gives the artwork 'appropriateness'. It presumably then relates to a more authentic (working class and/or pop cultural) setting, a garage on Old Kent Road.

The 'others' appropriated as signifying mecha-



Shahin Afrassiabi, *Display with Table*, 2002; 'Not Neo but New', Art Monthly no. 259, September 2002

nisms by the 'New Sculpture', however, do not hold a dialectical position within the work. The 'other' has become integrated into the work's field of signification to the extent that it is in fact presented as 'the same' but, in the words of Hal Foster, "erupts into the field of the same as difference."<sup>5</sup> Thus, for example, Jason Meadows can combine the:

"possibilities of the abstract formalist paradigm with an anti-transcendent attitude to the ordinariness of materials and the everyday accessibility of representational elements [in this case Spider Man and basketball hoops]. Yet rather than being set in critical opposition these different perspectives are brought into collaboration."<sup>6</sup>

This 'mixing' of high and low culture does not really raise the artistic stakes for any emerging 'paradigm'. Neither does the holding up of such a futile 'collaboration' as a model practice on Charlesworth's part encourage any hopes for a more politically engaged or intellectually stimulating gallery practice in the near future. 'Mixing' high and low culture in this way can seem liberatory when one assumes that the cultural values being confronted rest on pure notions of identity and stark oppositions. Playing with high and low culture has long been a given strategy within the visual arts. Far from representing a paradigm shift such collaborations between high and low culture taken at face value, without critical interpretation, are in danger of backing the new formalism into an artistically predictable, politically reactionary cul-de-sac.

Charlesworth is sensitive to such criticism. But he maintains that the strategies adopted by the new formalists enable them to embrace idiosyncratic ways of working which could be seen as an "assertion of cultural separation or independence by the artist." He places the blame for potential readings of his position as reactionary and market-oriented firmly in a historical court. He claims that the historic failings of formalism have tended to be based not only upon an idealisation of form, but on a mystification of the contexts and conditions of gallery presentation. Charlesworth is quick however, to reassure us that it would be an impossibility for the new formalism to repeat this mistake. Unlike its precursor, the new formalism relies on "practical accident" rather than a "rationalised appeal to an ideal" and therefore "reveals" the conditions of its presentation:

"What [the new formalism] reveals, by practical accident rather than the rationalised appeal to an ideal, are the actual conditions of presentation that formalism sought to mystify as essential to the object, rather than the context of its presentation."

Even if we forgive Charlesworth the absurd proposition that the new formalists are busy generating "practical accidents" in order to reveal the context of their works' presentation, it is clear that the confines of gallery context have nevertheless become a precondition for the smooth running of the new formalist mechanics. 1960s formalism slipped into a mystification (tantamount to an outright denial) of the institutional politics of the

gallery; this is not so different from the new formalism's reliance upon the entrenchment of the unchallenged gallery as a necessity for the survival of the work in the first place. This entrenchment makes it increasingly hard to think adversarially about the gallery from within its four walls, and seems to preclude the making of a work which 'bites the hand that feeds it'. Worse, in becoming an apologist for the new formalist paradigm, Charlesworth seems to quickly accept and benignly anticipate the evacuation of *any* critical content from the gallery context.

Iwona Blazwick (again in her catalogue introduction to *Early One Morning*) claims that the works in the exhibition "trigger associations of pleasure and pain which go beyond language."<sup>7</sup> This seems to suggest that, counter to Charlesworth's claims, the new formalism is far from a retreat from ideals. This contradiction is an outcome perhaps of Charlesworth's privileging the new formalism's place in an art historical lineage over an attempt to deliver us first-hand analysis of the works in question. When the actual work is discussed we tend to get readings that err close to mystification.

Thus the new formalism is described as possessing a visceral ability to universalise experience. Blazwick describes Lambie's work as having a "sheer visual presence" which is able to "carry us out of the here and now and to transport us somewhere else."<sup>8</sup> Charlesworth has written that Roger Hiorns' work "refuse[s] to speak...their sense...bound up in their function, in the very fact of their presence."<sup>9</sup> These interpretations make a mockery of any common sense potential claimed for new formalism. Instead we see it carrying on abstraction's tradition of seeking affirmation through mysticism and maintaining the 20th century's love affair with the spiritual in art.

Max Kosloff wrote on Rothko that it is necessary to "find that lever of consciousness which will change a blank painted fabric into a glow perpetuating itself into the memory."<sup>10</sup> The bringing to, and the perpetuation through commentary, of the notion of abstract art as the purveyor of a higher truth in a secular society is a necessary tool in the maintenance of market value:

"spiritual atmosphere as a surplus of indefinable uniqueness added to the materially unique abstract work of art – further enhances the work's commercial value and social status. Spirituality legitimatises the abstract works worldly success."<sup>11</sup>

Spirituality not only legitimises an abstract work's success, it can also prevent too many conclusions being drawn from its systems of representation. This obfuscation is enhanced by Charlesworth's assertions that for Gary Webb the "final resolution of allusion and form [is] something to be actively fought against"<sup>12</sup>, or that "Hiorns' use of materials emphasises the paradoxical power of non-reference to signify in new and unpredictable ways."<sup>13</sup> In the catalogue accompanying 'Early one Morning' Clare Barclay's works are acknowledged as pertaining to environmental, sexual or gender issues, their relationship to these issues, however, remains "loose and ambiguous...partly as a result of the formal rather than literal level at which they are played out"<sup>14</sup>, whilst Eva Rothschild's fascination and healthy scepticism for new age mysticism is rendered "ambivalent."<sup>15</sup>

This inflation of the transitory nature of the signifier to an ideal blurs the distinctions between the practices of artists identified as sharing in the new formalist paradigm, and renders fundamental signifiatory possibilities within individual works

impotent. Charlesworth, however, posits the retreat into non-signification as a liberatory experience by heralding it as an acceptance on the part of young artists of the conditions imposed upon art making in the unassailable context of the commercial world of the art gallery. He claims that what this in effect leads to is an opening up of the possibilities for art making, forging a new path separate from the "critical and institutional dead end of the previous decade."

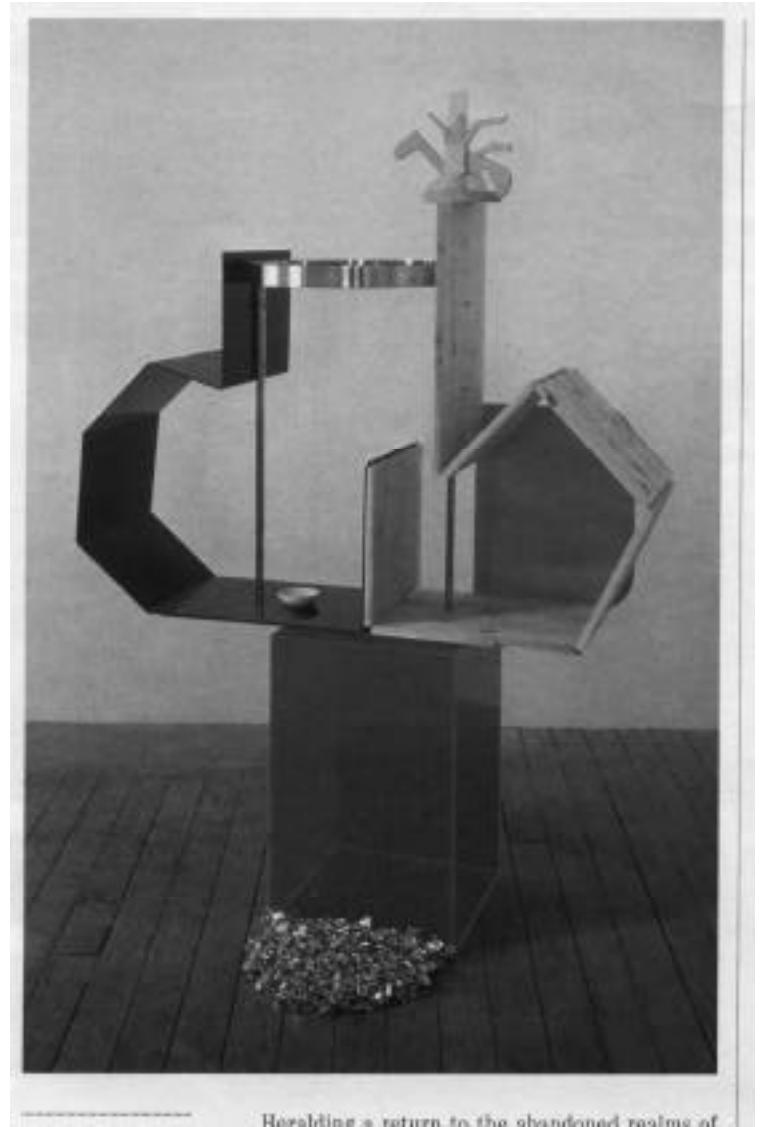
Unfortunately such a refusal on the part of artists to signify, or on the part of commentators to exploit the signifiatory potential that does exist within the work, plays heavily into the hands of the right-leaning political status quo. I do not argue here for a heckling, consciousness-raising work (although a bit of consciousness-raising would not go amiss). But the new formalism and its commentators need to be aware of its language of signification, especially when there are class, gender and race issues involved. Emptying out the negotiation of obvious class or racial assumptions within the work in favour of the play of signifiers or aesthetic and formal matters consolidates these assumptions whilst reassuring cognoscenti of their 'right' to adopt exotic stereotypes or make class representations without being challenged or self-critical. This can only further consolidate the already problematic hierarchies of consumption and representation within broader culture.

The argument for the new formalism Charlesworth pursues is highly historicised, and actually leaves little room for critical negotiation. It seems to propose an easy going assimilation of the 'tropes' of familiar postmodern paradigms (the mixing of high and low culture, an awareness of difference, a critique of pure form), and attempts to move on from these via the liberation of the signifier, embracing instead the realm of the poetic allusion and the reinvention of 'popular' and 'amateur' uses of materials and techniques. Charlesworth rightly praises the re-emergence within the new formalism of the discursive object, and the possibilities this raises for making "new meaning proceed from the presence of things." He does not, however, adequately deal with the problematic nature of the meanings actually created. The only potential avenue for a critical reading within Charlesworth's analysis relies on a passé critique of the conservatism of the radical academy, which absolves the need for the work to force the viewer to "think dialectically about cultural exclusion and the popular."<sup>16</sup> Instead, in favouring allusive interpretations Charlesworth seems to engage in a critique of metaphysics that seeks immunity from the possibility of being read as essentialist. This position reflects a nervousness on the part of new formalism; it does not want to be seen as overly 'authorial'. It is as if by taking control of the meanings and implications of its signifiatory materials they will cast a totalitarian shadow over the author.

This slave-like adherence of the new formalism to its Derridean inheritance is frustrating. A paradigm shift suggests a new beginning; a moving on from a re-appraisal of what has come before, a sense of progressive engagement with the trinity of form, content and context. Instead what we seem to get with many of these loosely grouped new formalist works is a sense of retreat, a sense of taking comfort in the assumptions of the white cube, of re-invoking a host of nostalgic references from British 'New Generation' sculpture, through to retro-design/craft /pop-culture. Why is it that whilst the world outside spirals in ever tighter circles of terror and repression, and the potential

avenues of avoidance or resistance become squeezed by the growing dominance of capital and its civil and military bulldogs, artists retreat further into a hermetic world of abstraction, formalism, deferred meanings and latent spiritualism? Do artists really, as Charlesworth seems to propose, have no choice but to accept that the gallery is now fit solely for the exploration of formal issues? Are young artists really faced with a stark choice between the play of unlimited semiosis or the supposed dead-end street of late '80s critical discourse? That the world is a different place since 9/11 is a truism, but it could (and has) been argued that there is a need now, more than ever, for artists and writers to engage with the moral and ethical parameters of our globalising world. This is certainly not the time for a rehashing of single-issue driven 'politically engaged' practice. And we need to be wary of artists jumping uncritically on the bandwagon of the relational aesthetic. The social context of human interaction can be activated simply through the relationship between an art object and the viewer. It is not always necessary or important to foreground the events of everyday interaction in order to deal with the 'social interactivity' of art.

Instead of throwing the baby out with the bath water, and seeking to hive off political concerns 'somewhere else', free from the limitations of the gallery context or the autonomous object, we need to look at the means through which artists can make politically pertinent contributions in whatever field they are working in. This does not necessarily mean that abstraction is out and social realism is in. Such mutually exclusive dichotomies are long redundant. Instead we need to be investigating the potential for cultural representations that are open to the viewer, and seek to engage in a social debate. Socially concerned artists working directly through objects and painting need not (and cannot) be excluded. In fact, by accepting the limited frame of interaction inherent within the confines of a painting or sculpture, they may be uniquely placed to deepen the level, if not necessarily expand the parameters, of engagement with the viewer. Works which are genuinely critically engaging, that do not embrace subterfuge, will undoubtedly find breaching the walls of institutional gallery spaces difficult, if not impossible. But the institution is by no means the only 'white space' available to the artist. If it is possible for idiosyncratic formal experimentation to have a positive impact on critical discourse, then artists will have to invest time and effort in making gallery conditions (even ad-hoc ones) available to themselves and others. In seeking to reinvest in the critical potential of gallery based art, artists will be forced to acknowledge that coding within work remains an important, thorny, and inevitable part of visual representation. But we have to be careful not to restrict the nature of the coding to meet established expectations, be they the expectations of the cognoscenti, the market, historical reactionism, or peer group. Comfortable as it may be in the short term, culture simply cannot afford to restrict itself through a 'knowing' adherence to familiar tropes, it needs to be braver than that.



Heralding a return to the abandoned realms of

## Notes

1. J Charlesworth, 'Not Neo but New', *Art Monthly* no. 259, September 2002 (from which all quotes are taken unless otherwise attributed) and JJ Charlesworth, *Artext* no. 78, Fall 2002.
2. Moffit p.62,
3. Lippard, 'Overlay', p.4
4. McEvilly, 'Art in the Dark', *Artforum*, 1983
5. Foster, 'The Primitive Unconscious of Modern Art', from 'Art in Modern Culture', p.207
6. Charlesworth in *Artext* No. 78, fall 2002
7. Iwona Blazwick, Catalogue introduction to 'Early One Morning—New British Sculpture in the 21st Century', Whitechapel Gallery, 2002.
8. *Ibid*
9. Charlesworth in *Artext* No.78, fall 2002
10. Kozloff, 'Mark Rothko', *Renderings*, 1969. Quoted by Kuspitt in 'Concerning The Spiritual in Modern Art', 'The Spiritual in Art, Painting 1890-1985', p.317
11. Kuspitt, in 'The Spiritual in Art, Painting 1890-1985', p.314
12. *Artext* no 78, fall 2002
13. *Ibid*
14. Andrea Tarsia, catalogue essay for 'Early one Morning', Whitechapel Gallery, 2002
15. *Ibid*
16. Roberts, 'In Character' from 'Art and Language in Practice vol 2' p.120.

Gary Webb,  
*Cock and Bull*,  
2001; 'Not Neo  
but New', *Art  
Monthly* no.  
259, September  
2002