

# Of Hype and

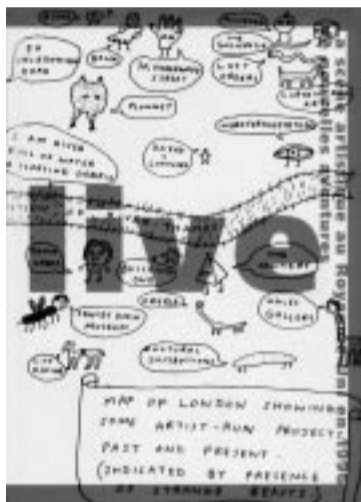
## Peter Suchin

### review

## *Life/Live*

### *La scène artistique au Royaume-Uni en 1996*

Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris,  
October 1996–January 1997



SPEAKING AT A symposium on Terry Atkinson and conceptual art in March 1996, Seth Sieglaub noted that 25 years ago one might walk into a gallery and remark, after a quick perusal of the work therein, that it was bad work. In the present situation, Sieglaub continued, one's reaction upon seeing "bad" work would more likely take the form of saying the work was bad but that perhaps it was meant to be.<sup>1</sup> In a different context, Philip Hensher, discussing Liz Arnold's contribution to the prestigious John Moores Exhibition commented:

"They were quite revolting pictures to look at, painted in flat, clashing colours, and executed with a neatness which did nothing to mitigate the limpness of the drawing. But those criteria are not relevant any longer. Rather, the viewer must contemplate his own distaste at looking at a work which gives so powerfully the impression of aiming at something which it then fails to accomplish."<sup>2</sup>

Hensher is pointing out the current rhetorical stance expected of the "ordinary" viewer and indeed the critic when considering contemporary artworks, a position of consideration that is now, indeed, a well-established orthodoxy of sorts. I say "of sorts" because the existence of a certain insecurity of judgement is precisely

the point being raised by Hensher, and by Sieglaub too. No one, now, seems to be too sure of what kind of response they should have regarding incompetent work. If the act of incompetence is deliberate then the seeming inadequacy of execution is mitigated. Certain examples of such deliberately clumsy work come to mind. The work of Dada activists in the early years of the century are a clear example of the refusal to conform to the assumed long-lasting patterns of bourgeois taste. And in the 1980s Terry Atkinson made a series of pictures in which the drawing was intentionally incompetent when read against the established conventions of western art.<sup>3</sup>

There is plenty of evidence to support the view that Dada was an all-out attack on bourgeois values; and Atkinson's titles, along with other texts in which he refers to the "botched up" nature of the drawing, make it clear that something that at first sight appears as incompetent is in fact a carefully selected mode of approach.

But as regards the recent Paris exposition of contemporary work from Britain, *Life/Live*, little evidence of deliberate incompetence was apparent. Much of the work in the show was, rather, just badly made, clichéd, trivial and (for my money) uninteresting. Whilst a small number of the contributions to the exhibition were exceptions to the rule, by and large little of the work on display could be favourably described. To place this somewhat sweeping assertion in some perspective an extract from Thomas Crow's recent book, *The Rise of the Sixties* might be of help. In his introduction Crow remarks that:

"Ordinary viewers of today, hoping for coherence and beauty in their imaginative experiences, confront instead works of art declared to exist in arrangements of bare texts and unremarkable photographs, in industrial fabrications revealing no evidence of the artist's hand, in mundane commercial products merely transferred from shopping mall to gallery or in ephemeral and confrontational performances in which mainstream moral values are deliberately travestied."<sup>4</sup>

What Crow is referring to here and elsewhere in his introduction involves an, as it were, conventional sense of outrage being expressed about and around contemporary art. How can such rubbish or such so obviously non-art concatenations of materials be taken seriously as art? These are the kind of questions that are being raised, if implicitly, within the emotional reactions of the uninformed viewer, who according to Crow's sketch, are the victims of their own incomprehension. For obviously, to those "in the know" such things as Crow describes are today well within the established parameters of art. But what we have with *Life/Live*, and indeed with a large proportion of the work that has fast become associated with the "young British artist" myth is not another knowing lesson in superficially "conceptual" practices modified by the present generation of successful artists, nor is it a return to the confrontational hammerings of Dada; what, rather, we have here is no parody or critique or blushing subtle re-presentation within the museum walls of "real life" but, in fact, one hell of a mess.

The structure of *Life/Live* is perhaps its most interesting aspect, unless your concern is that of analysing how pictures of particular artistic moments are constructed by the managers of culture. A reading of both the catalogue and the show reveals some contradictions. *Life/Live*, Susan Pagé

records in her catalogue essay,

"Marks a new stage in our European survey, which, from Germany to Holland, Belgium, the Czech Republic and beyond, aims to capture the spirit of contemporary art at its most vital and urgent. This is reflected in the title-cum-manifesto of this look at a scene that is both effervescent and down to earth, impelled by a determination to get to grips with the thick of life—the everyday, society, existence—but also to survive, to which end it has developed a remarkably inventive and open range of professional strategies."

Pagé's praising of the British "scene" is to be expected; after all, she was hardly going to suggest that nothing much was going on in the UK in a catalogue for a large survey show funded in part by the British Council and on display for three months in a prestigious Paris Museum. But the seeming inability or deliberate refusal to make a distinction between the "scene" and the actual work selected for the show is one of the contradictions—and an important one—to which I above refer. Reviewing *Life/Live* in *Art Monthly* Andrew Wilson suggested that:

"Discussion of British art has recently been subject to a largely ill-informed, journalistic hyperbole that treats the "scene" almost as if it is the art rather than just its less interesting by-product...In such a situation, content, meaning, the reinvention of life, political or social purpose, a concern with the artificial or the very complexity of artistic practice is neither here nor there. The decor and props of the "scene"—the gossip, the parties, the mayhem...are everything."<sup>5</sup>

In his substantial analysis of the myth of the "young British artist" Simon Ford has similarly raised the issue of the promotion of select aspects of contemporary British art.<sup>6</sup> Carefully tearing to tatters the characteristic claims that have been made for the so called "yBa" "scene", Ford offers a number of examples of the ideological utterances whose existence effects the actual framing of the "scene". He discusses, for example, Andrew Renton's influential anthology of 1991, *Technique Anglais*. Writing in that book

"Andrew Renton said that a "certain kind of irresponsibility seems to me to be a very key concept that brings all these people together, aesthetically." Although such a heterogeneous body of work should be difficult to categorise the seemingly effortless way that it has been categorised is not surprising; myth suppresses heterogeneity by co-option: the yBa is confident, ambitious, irresponsible, accessible and heterogeneous."<sup>7</sup>

And Ford continues:

"One strategy for countering the myth would be to provide social and financial information about the relationships between artists, editors, dealers, and collectors involved with the yBa. This project was offered but ultimately dismissed by Liam Gillick...The manufacture and nurturing of the myth are more productive than the phenomenology of facts, figures, and social relationships."

In his article Ford does not examine in any conventional sense the works produced by any of the artists to which he refers. Indeed his concern is a Bourdieu-like account of the practices and institutions of those institutions whose status and power allows them to confer value upon whatever it is that is actually going on in the UK at the present time. As the lines from Wilson quoted above make clear, to give one's attention to the ostensible products produced from within the "scene" itself looks a somewhat secondary concern in a context that is, one feels, largely an artificial fabrication, a structure constructed of hype and hearsay. This linguistic "picture" has at its central core notions of a

# Hearsay

nation called "Britain" and, attached to this, an essentialist claim about the Britishness of British art.<sup>8</sup> Even though *Life/Live* was not entirely a display of "young British artists" the ghost of that designation haunted the Paris show, bringing with it the holy spirit of confirmation, the sign of an "authenticity" and "seriousness" which was pretty difficult to detect during an actual visit to the exhibition.

According to Michael Archer: "It is true to say that one problem with showcase exhibitions is that they ultimately overvalue Britishness as a criterion of authenticity."<sup>9</sup> And, as Ford again points out:

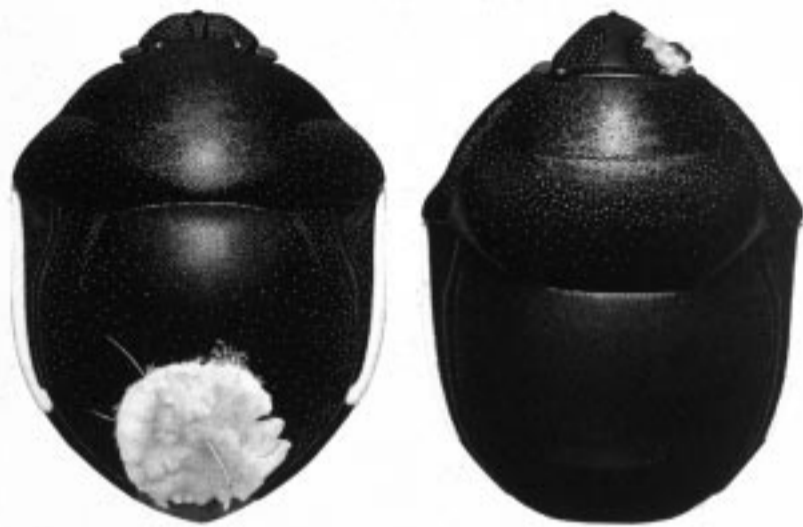
"By appealing to national pride the myth of the yBa seeks to instil in its audience a sense of national identity which is where myth fades into ideology. This group has been utilised as cultural ambassadors representing and defining "British" culture abroad." It is promoted as entrepreneurial, opportunist, confident, resourceful, independent and non-political, representing Britain in full "enterprise culture" bloom."<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the attributes ascribed to the yBa are precisely those values reiterated in the media by British politicians wishing to convince the public (including representatives of foreign business) that Britain has returned to a 1960s-style economic boom.<sup>11</sup> The thriving British "scene" thus turns out to be a literal materialisation of Conservative values, wearing the mask of an oblique (but of course uncritical) rebelliousness—or is it just a novelty of forms? Laurence Bossé and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, the show's curators, begin their catalogue essay by remarking on: "The unique vitality of today's British scene, the stirrings of which were first perceived in the late 1980s..."<sup>12</sup>

I mentioned the structure of *Life/Live* as being one of its most praiseworthy features. Sixteen artists were given individual mini-shows within the overall display, this being complemented by the contributions of eight mainly artist-run spaces, a video room showing the work of nine artists, and a "kiosk" area in which were displayed copies of twenty contemporary art and theory journals. These latter included *Mute*, *Art Monthly*, *Variant*, *Circa*, *Everything* and *Frieze*, the artist-run spaces had among them presentations by *Locus+*, *Transmission*, *City Racing* and *BANK*, videos were contributed by Gilbert and George, Damien Hirst, Leigh Bowery and Sarah Lucas amongst others, and the artists given individual spaces included Mat Collinshaw, Douglas Gordon, John Latham, Sam Taylor-Wood, Gillian Wearing, Gustav Metzger, the Chapman Brothers and Gilbert and George.

Most of the artists shown in *Life/Live* were probably in their 20's or 30's. Four older artists, Gilbert and George, Latham, David Medalla and Metzger were included as "father figures" for the younger contributors, ostensibly because the socially-concerned nature of the senior artists' practices gave them avant-garde status with respect to a "scene" that, as the title of the show proposed, looks directly towards everyday life as subject matter and general frame of reference. Gilbert and George have long proclaimed that it is their intention to transform life through art. I've never understood why this means that everything they make has to consist of rigidly figurative imagery—many abstract artists, Mondrian and Malevich, to name but two—have expressed similar commitment to cultural transformation. But this supposedly straightforward (yet ridiculously simple) connection between "figuration" and the everyday ran through much of *Life/Live*.

But this love of quotidian was one of the reasons why *Life/Live* was such a tedious exhibition. The blunt presentation of poorly-produced pieces negated the



possibility of transformation. Much of the show was about as well-made as a lazy 1st year fine art student's end of semester exhibition, cobbled together in a few hours or less—or that's what it looked like. It didn't appear so badly put together by choice, to make a point or transgress established convention: it simply looked pathetic. This isn't to say that it really had to be well crafted because it was "top quality" work; rather, it should have appeared convincing—and this is what much of *Life/Live* did not appear, on whatever terms one could muster. When one encountered the politically complex and technically sophisticated productions presented by *Locus+*—works by Stefan Gec, Gregory Green, Cornelia Hesse-Honegger and Paul Wong—one experienced a kind of shock: the shock of realising that much of the rest of this "blockbuster" show was as rubbishy as one had initially considered it to be. *BANK*'s gathering of papier maché zombies looked rather tame amongst a panoply of exhibits equally crude in their construction, though in some contexts their work has at least had the virtue of attempting some kind of critique.

One often hears how young artists working today have attitude. "When Attitudes Become Form" was the title of a large show of conceptual work held in Berne and London in 1969. Today, nearly 30 years on, it is attitude, and seeming little else that has become the most prominent "form" constituting the work, just so much guff and bluff masquerading as an ever so fashionable avant-garde.

## notes

1. The symposium was held at Norwich School of Art & Design on Wednesday 20th March, 1996, to accompany Terry Atkinson's exhibition, "Histories Biographies Collaborations 1958 to 1996".
2. Philip Hensher, "Bad Art," *Modern Painters*. Vol. 9, No. 4, 1996 p. 83. Quotation of this passage should not be read as implying a general agreement with claims made in Hensher's text.
3. See Terry Atkinson, *Work 1977-83*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1983.
4. Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996. p.7.
5. Andrew Wilson, *Life v Art*, *Art Monthly*, No. 194, March 1996.
6. Simon Ford, *Myth Making*, *Art Monthly*, No. 194, March 1996.
7. Ford, p 5.
8. On this point see Stewart Home, *The Art Of Chauvinism in Britain and France*, *Everything*, No. 19, 1996. It is interesting that only ten years ago Matthew Collings and Stuart Morgan were suggesting that there was no such thing as a coherent entity called "British art". see their discussion "True Brit An Enquiry into National Character", *Artscribe*, no. 61, Jan/Feb 1987.
9. Michael Archer, *No Politics Please We're British*, *Art Monthly* No. 194 March 1996, p 12.
10. Ford, p. 5.
11. The dealer Jay Jopling, very much associated with the yBa "phenomena" is, as Ford mentions (p.7) the son of a Conservative MP.
12. *Life/Live La scène artistique au Royaume-Uni en 1996*. Vol. 1, p 13. Susan Pagé's remarks quoted above are from the same source (p. 8).

CORNELIA  
HESSE-  
HONEGGER  
*Two Negro Bugs  
from Swartara,  
USA (Cydnidae)  
1992.*

The left bug has a growth on its wings. The right bug has a growth out of the right eye. Swartara was heavily affected by fall-out from the accident on Three Mile Island on 29 March 1979.

## manifesto

FIRST OF ALL we think the world must be changed. We know that this change is possible through appropriate actions. We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. My life is its own definition. So is yours.

The spectre of annihilation of humankind and of all life on planet earth haunts us all. I mean we are sitting here waiting on a powder-keg and I don't think that is what we want to do with our babies. I am convinced that ours is indeed a time of crisis. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relation with his kind.

There is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce, We will sing of the vibrant nightly fervour of arsenals and factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke. The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. The independence we seek is taken for granted by other nations. We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom—bringers of beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women. A woman not only takes her identity and individuality for granted, but knows instinctively that the only wrong is to hurt others, and that the meaning of life is love. It is only a loveless world that is crazy after sex and a world crazy after sex is loveless.

The streets of our cities are as safe today as those in any throughout the world. They must remain so. Kill, plunder more quickly, love as much as you wish. And if you die, are you not sure of being roused from the dead? Die with respect. Lay down your life with dignity, don't lay down with tears and agony. There's nothing to death. Let yourself be led. Events will not tolerate deferment. You have no name. You look better than I've seen you in a long while, but it's still not the kind of peace that I wanted to give you ...Everything is inestimably easy. Self-forgetfulness should be one's goal, not self-absorption.

Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Art, infact can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice. Our aim is to make sure that enjoyment of the arts is not something remote from everyday life or removed from the realities of home and work. A degenerate can only produce degenerate "art". Artists must be chased out of the cities into the villages ...If they do not leave, do not supply them with food. Famines are of no importance. Poverty is a blessing. Come on! Set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the museums! Oh, the joy of seeing the glorious old canvases bobbing adrift on those waters, discoloured and shredded! Whatever is repugnant to the people, people have a right to resist against, so long as they do it non-violently.

Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly! Non-violent Civil disobedience is the reservoir of people's power. Many will destroy themselves. I'm speaking here not as the administrator but as a prophet today. If anyone says that I know everything then it is not true. The government will automatically collapse. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. Dropping out is not the answer: fucking-up is. They have the illusion of continuing something worthwhile. They have a world to win. There's no point, there's no point to this ...we have ...we are born before our time.