

BLOCK

Capitalism

The BLOCK Reader in Visual Culture

As we rapidly head towards the impending millennial deadline of the year 2000 all sorts of people, in all kinds of contexts are, it would appear, becoming increasingly addicted to the characteristically nebulous notions of the 'spiritual' and of the 'soul'.¹ The sphere of the arts has, predictably, more than its fair share of such subscribers to vagueness and to the unexplained. In the art schools, metaphysical patterns of perception and ideologies of self-expression hold stronger-than-ever positions of influence, gullible clusters of students being more than keen to swallow as 'gospel' the ravings of certain mindlessly inspired teaching staff. What might be referred to as the long-term nonsense of the pious and priestly image of the artist has been, in recent years, further supplemented with the equally pernicious 'mindset' promoted by glossy potboilers such as Matthew Collings' "Blimey!", a book that is in many ways the practical antithesis of "The BLOCK Reader".² Both works exist as examples of writings produced in intimate relation to the art school environment but this is just about where the similarities begin and end. Whilst Collings' terse and lackadaisical tract acts to reinforce mainstream, often unconvincing ideas about artworks and those who produce them "The BLOCK Reader" offers, in contrast, an entirely different 'take' on the context, attitudes and strategies found to be operating in art and design institutions today. For one thing, Collings' contribution is an intended easy read, a short and slimy account of the London 'scene', supportive of its central trends, antagonistic to theory, which it presents as the enemy of art practice as such. Whilst trying to don the mask of an up-to-the-minute intimacy with Brit art's increasingly-pungent dumbness, Collings' croaky prose poses, no doubt without intending to do so, the question of its own inadequacy as a fashionable guide to current art fashions. It is already the case that within the Fine Art department of London's Goldsmiths College, a key site in Brit art mythology, the abbreviation 'yBa' has taken on the resonance of (italic) 'yesterday's British art'.³ Fashion, by definition, contains its own near-instant disintegration of values: what was, only a moment before, pertinent and true becomes, inevitably, that which is passé and bland, having lost the vigour, presence, glitter and pitch of its previously unproblematic qualitative distinction. "Blimey!", first published in 1997, has now been issued in a second edition but its cutting edge image is already blunted and broken. Furthermore, the prominent themes of the book looked from the start somewhat 'old hat', its author scratching around for evidence of the novelty of his chosen corner of the scene when little of genuine novelty was there to be had. The same old naive musings on the extra-linguistic nature of art, the same stupid mutterings about how art 'speaks' for itself: it was really these clichés and cracked beliefs that Brit art had attached itself to all along, its plug-in 'punk' inanity popping up as a defense claim whenever it had to deal with anything approaching a serious critique of its credentials as interesting art.

So much, then, for the novelty of the 'new'. The paradox of this comparison between "Blimey!" and "The BLOCK Reader" is that the latter publication is in many ways the more timely of the two books, emphasising as it does an interrogative approach to art and design practice that is not a little needful in today's narrow-minded, tightly-clannish climate. Making its first appearance in 1979 and, ten years later, closing its run with its fifteen th issue, "BLOCK" was, as the opening sentence of the book's general introduction

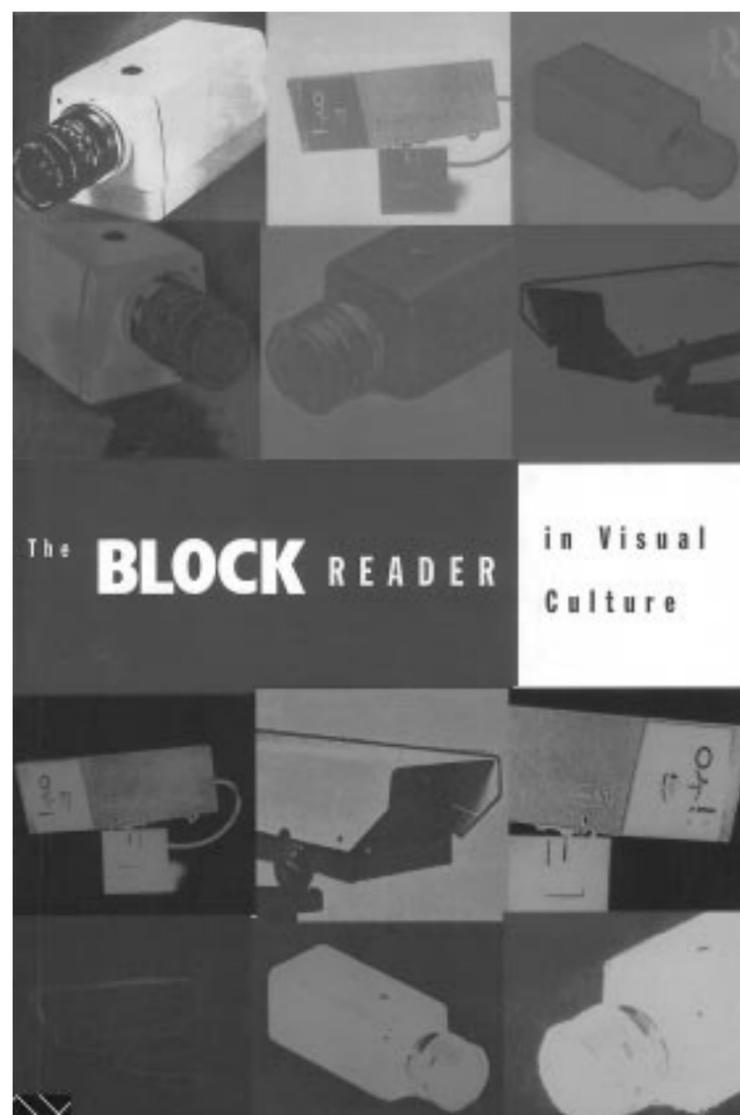
indicates, "...an initiative that was very much of its time and place: a manifestation of the cultural logic of a newly self-conscious, historicised, and politicised initiative in the cultural realm; and a simultaneous allergic reaction to the idealism of academic art history."⁴

The irony is that, notwithstanding the point about the chronological and geographical specificity of their production, the essays comprising this anthology mark out, and by their re-publication, reassert, the relevance of certain key theoretical, critical and methodological concerns which have, it is true, been somewhat marginalised by recent art-world trends.

The "Reader" contains seventeen essays, placed under the three distinct categories of "Art history", "Design history" and "Cultural theory", each section being introduced by a short, unsigned, editorial text. These section introductions contain a number of noteworthy remarks and encourage the view that the anthology has been assembled not only in order to bring to a broader audience material first published within the journal, but also in an attempt to intervene in present-day institutional structures and beliefs, in that is, "the institutions of knowledge and their increasing capitulation to the logic of the corporate mentality..."⁵ The individual essays in each section are presented in order of their first publication. The book opens with Lucy Lippard's "Hot Potatoes: Art and Politics in 1980", from "BLOCK" 4, 1981; and concludes with Judith Williamson's interview with Jean Baudrillard, "BLOCK" 15, 1989. There is an appendix listing the contents of all fifteen issues of the journal and an excellent index. Twenty-four black and white reproductions are employed within the text. Physically the book is well-made, sewn with only the minimum of printing errors. The cover carries a colourful grid of closely-photographed closed-circuit TV cameras, signifying spectacular society's rage for surveillance and self-policing, whilst recalling too the quirky diversity to be found amongst the products of industrial design. Warhol, appropriately, is also suggested.

In the introduction to the second section of the "Reader"⁶ we are told that "BLOCK" evolved in an art school where the majority of students were engaged in design practices..., and also that the journal "set out to treat design, like art, as an ideologically encoded commodity, the value and significance of which were dependent on dominant modes of consumption." "This approach", the text continues, "was in opposition to prevailing versions of design writing which adopted untransformed art historical notions of univocal authorship, inherent meaning and received hierarchies of value." "Critical perspectives", it is also proposed, "acquired an early relevance in the drive to provide a social context for various components of everyday life."⁷

These remarks comprise but one example of the editor's attempt to give an account, however briefly, of the founding of and approach utilised within BLOCK, as well as highlighting the current relevance of the material chosen for inclusion, and perhaps, by implication, those writings carried by the journal but not reproduced here. (Of the approximately one hundred essays included in "BLOCK" some eighty remain available exclusively by accessing back issues of the journal). They also point up a recurring theme, that of the position of design history as a supposedly coherent discipline, one claiming independence from that of art history. This is not a matter of merely academic dis-



pute so much as the raising of a question about the relationship of design to broader societal factors. It further suggests a welcome recognition that knowledge produced within academic institutions can be used to criticise and reformulate prevalent capitalist trends. Now that academic institutions are at the mercy of managers whose chief interest is in the production of company profits (their self-image as 'barons' of industry being one of the more laughable, though also most alarming aspects of recent changes in the education sector), this awareness needs to be most vigorously asserted. As Fred Orton notes in his essay on Jasper Johns: "The production of meaning is social and institutional, differential and dispersed, contestable and continually renewed."⁸ It is a virtue of many of the essays in "The Block Reader" that they address how it is that meanings and values are fabricated and distributed through the particular physicality of a given project or design strategy, as well as much as by individual works of art and design. The articles by Fran Hannah and Tim Putman, and by Necdet Teymur do this directly, through an examination of prevalent design-world attitudes and corresponding forms of teaching practice, whilst the pieces by Kathy Myers and by Philippa Goodall attend to matters of object commodification and to gender-connected values inscribed within individual designs, as well as to the contexts of their consumption.

A recognition of how important it is to attend to the rampantly ideological nonsense promoted within the confines of fine art education is displayed in Griselda Pollock's essay on "Art, Art School, Culture". Pollock

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observes that: "Bourgeois concepts of art celebrate individualism by means of the idea of the self-motivating and self-creating artist who makes things which embody that peculiarly heightened and highly valued subjectivity. It is fundamentally a romantic idea of the artist as the feeling being whose works express both a personal sensibility and a universal condition. What art schools today actively propose or promote any other concept of the artist, for instance, as producer, worker, practitioner?"⁹ The implied negative response to the question closing this extract might well be similarly negative if again raised today, a dozen years after this essay was first published. Brit art's boastful dumbing down is the jewel in the crown of the art school establishment's pro-stupid stance. In what other educational framework would one find so many participants proposing that to be informed about the history and parameters of one's practice was anathema to the further development of that practice? Similarly, several of the issues examined in Jon Bird's analytically astute discussion of "Art History and Hegemony" remain of considerable relevance. Amongst other things Bird touches upon definitions of the public and the private (often found in a muddled form within the art schools but here clearly and concisely expressed), the supporting of 'blockbuster' art shows by 'blockbuster' beers such as Beck's, the radical potential of Foucault's ideas as tools of critique, the inescapable nature of language (art students please note!), Virilo's reading of the nuclear age as one in which a sense of the sublime has resurfaced through a recognition of the potential extinction of the human species, and the spurious claims made for the autonomy of aesthetic value judgments. Bird is, furthermore, perceptive enough to be aware that not only are certain conservative ideas well-entrenched within capitalist social life, but that there are other dangerous frames of reference, action and aspiration, equally demanding of vigilant consideration: "It is easy to forget, outside of Left-intellectual art historical circles, just how fixed, particularly in relation of questions of gender and race, are the terms "art", "artist", "history", "society", etc... in the broader context of the dissemination of high culture. On the other hand, in street-wise, post-structuralist, post-modernist deconstructive circles, questions of truth, political morality, cognition, etc. are dumped as outmoded referents in the celebration of image, spectacle and surface."¹⁰ This passage displays a complex and intelligent relation to the academic world, which can easily be, even today in the 'age' of modules, learning contracts and money-motivated research interests, a context that is relatively isolated from the vicissitudes of the marketplace, at least insofar as intellectual fashions are concerned. Following fashions of any sort is a way of rescinding responsibility, the examples given by Bird being especially problematic, since they have an ambience of political correctness about them, notwithstanding the fact that they may involve a moving away from values of greater political pertinence.

The structure of "The BLOCK Reader" is such that it can be easily read as either a series of discrete essays or as a more extended and interconnected panoply of issues. It is clear that the editing work has been assiduously carried out, the selection working well as a whole, with themes appearing in individual papers and then being again, later on in the book, further developed. Individual essays do not appear to have been altered since their first publication in "BLOCK", with the single exception of Teymur's article, which is a "revised version" of the piece published in 1981. The

section introductions emphasise recurring themes without distorting the emphases made within individual contributions, and it is not difficult to see why the book is divided up into three distinct, if interlocking parts. Since one of the issues under discussion in several places within the Reader is the debt owed to art history by the (still insubstantial) 'discipline' of design history, and another involves debate about the reading of more extensive, less discipline-restricted fields of cultural production, the gradual move from an examination of art and the artist to 'culture' via analyses of what exactly 'design' and 'design history' might be is convincing and to the point.

This double act of division and, in effect resolution, is all the more impressive for the diversity of contributions. This is not to suggest that the pieces of the jigsaw always neatly interlock, or that the book is entirely lacking in points with which one would disagree. But given the nature of the project, which is at one and the same time an act of historical documentation and an attempt at assembling a work of some contemporary relevance (irrespective of whatever changes have occurred within our culture since the texts collected here were first published), given these conditions, the value of this work is considerable. "The BLOCK Reader" is not an easy, quick or shallow read but it is an interesting and informative one. I take it that the febrile aficionados of "Blimey!" and of Brit art will disagree.

The BLOCK Reader in Visual Culture,
Ed. Jon Bird et al
Routledge, 1996 (ISBN 0-415-13989-9) 342 pp. £14.95
(paperback)

notes

- 1 For a discussion of the analogous late c.19th obsession with metaphysical matters see James Webb, "The Flight From Reason", Macdonald, 1971.
- 2 Mathew Collings, "Blimey!", 21, 1997. See the October 1997 issue of "AN" for a review of this work by present author.
- 3 Simon Ford has examined the 'mythological' aspects of 'young British art' in his essay "Myth Making", included in Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass (Eds.), "Occupational Hazard", Black Dog Publications, 1998.
- 4 The BLOCK Reader in Visual Culture, p. xi
- 5 Ibid., p. xiv
- 6 Ibid., p. 131
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., p. 109
- 9 Ibid., p. 53
- 10 Ibid., p. 79

Red Rebel Song

sing boy
sing
dere's more to you
dan skin

ya DaDa's fingers
witlow
from years of cleaning corners
where brush an dustpan couldn't reach
Some han
would tap ya shoulders
wid hope an Dreams
of some rainbow future.

Nikki the warrior

When all my stolen moments
from all the memories of
me and you
gather to form a shape...
your smile begins to appear
on a single soft sheet
of paper
I could almost taste ya kiss
if I put my lips on them
sheet of paper
I could scent ya smell,
And feel ya gaze
but be careful not to gaze too
long or your brown eyes
might start to water

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I wanna be westernized
I'm Indian, I'm Chinese
Polonese
Jamaican, from
Dominican Republic of
Nigeria, Algeria

But I speak YOUR twang
I just wanna be accepted
I need not be protected
from my roots, cos
I'm sellin out 5662 years of
civilisation
achieved by my nation
And will be one of you guys
with NO ties about,
your spiritual being
And that feelin'
Deep inside. needing to belong
to a culture
I'm a vulture
And I'll eat ya if ya
Don't give me my rights
I'll behave...Not like the
Slave my DaDa was
I'll hunt ya down.
Make ya see the Real me
An Arab, Polonese,
Afro Chinese.
Syrenese
With mutilated thoughts
AND A MAGNUM 45:

R.E. Sammi