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Babes in Toyland

review

Becks new contemporaries '97

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I SUPPOSE I STARTED THINKING, not unlike the Turner Prize, another year, another newcontemporaries exhibition. Reading through the catalogue my initial feeling was that this year there at least appeared to be an attempt to address the parameters of the New contemporaries exhibition ethos. This is currently situated as 'a' highly publicised (as regards the art world) selected exhibition of newly graduated and soon to be graduating artists. Parallel to this, there seemed to be an inquiry into the purposes and conditions of the art educational institution within a European context today. The catalogue consists of discussions between the selectors of the exhibition: Sarat Maharaj, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Gillian Wearing, and responses (invited letters) to the selectors' statement: *"The art school closes in 1997; imagine its reinvention"*. These are by students, critics, artists and educationalists, based predominantly in Europe.

However, this feeling of optimism was short lived. The amount of actual examination appeared a flippant gesture. There are deep rooted issues concerning the

commissars. A quick and easy celebration of this year's new model, the 'only' qualitative judgment undertaken being grounded on the artists' 'natural' inclusion in the 'hallowed halls' in the first place. The accusation is that this 'phenomenon' not only forecloses on the possibilities of a more expansive dialogue to exist around the 'presentation' of artists' 'work', but also on what forms/strategies the production of 'work' may take and what a relationship to an 'audience' may be.

Over the newcontemporaries' various incarnations, from the Young Contemporaries through to corporate sponsorship with BT and now Becks, it has ossified into a template of patronage. The artists/critics/curators on the selectors' panel over the years, perhaps through the expression of their own particular 'tastes' within a group dynamic, have appeared, sometimes blatantly, to select applicants who best reflect their own practices and positions—a legitimising, 'naturalised', historic linearity the result.

"The establishment of a canon in the guise of a universally valued cultural inheritance or patrimony constitutes an act of 'symbolic violence'...in that it gains legitimacy by misrecognising the underlying power relations which serve, in part, to guarantee the continued reproduction of the legitimacy of those who produce or defend the canon." 1

Where has this left the spaces within newcontemporaries for 'anything else' to happen when there appears to be no challenge to the circus of the myopic exhibition circuit?

Within the catalogue there is a challenge to the newcontemporaries' applicants' belief in a 'formula for success' (that belief being interpreted as the apparent mimicking of recent work and approaches by 'leading' contemporary artists), and the college and market encouraged 'artistic practice of repetition' (the artist emerging from college with a 'whole', 'complete' practice, their years spent in education in perfection of it and continued thereafter in the production of easily quantifiable and advertised commodities). Instead of this, Sarat Maharaj desires work that is "eccentric", "erratic", "obsessive", "quirky", and "plain daft". This in itself has no escape velocity, if that is the intention. Given the product placement of 'the' young-british-artists, such work (if we see it as "eccentric" etc.) has been consolidated in just such a formulaic way. Hasn't the 'unique artist genius' been reinvented under the guise of the 'integrity of the individual'? In a market that values originality as an expression of authenticity isn't novelty 'the' prime trading point? The same fetishism of originality, originality for originality's sake.

There is also the feeling from the newcontemporaries catalogue discussion that a shifting, dynamic practice is 'just' that of the student in search of 'their own' voice, implying that they will find this most perfect and personal means of expression, in time—the value of the process only being legitimised by the evidence of the final product in 'the' marketplace. However 'understated' in presentation, this is reinforced by Gillian Wearing's confession that she was rejected four times from the newcontemporaries: from not fitting in, somehow her aspirations and newcontemporaries' seem to have magically converged.

Perhaps in some quarters there is also a backlash against what appear to have been acceptable, not undeviant, distortions of an '80s critique of 'masculine' 'originality' (a critique perhaps 'typified' by Sherrie Levine) and Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author' (where the 'viewer' is seen as an active reader of the work, integral in constructing meaning). The distortions being "everything's been done, therefore..." and "it's a free-for-all" 'respectively', saw the lines of individualism redrawn, the specificity of history evacuated, and the 'empty' husks treated as nothing more than entries into a visual backcatalogue for re-use, ready to be 'personalised' with a new 'charisma'. But

perhaps far from being a 'fad', a blip, this is the culmination of the contradictory constitution of UK arts education: of socialised learning, still not overtly dissimilar to the apprenticeship tradition; of the therapy session reinforcement of the imperative for 'unique' individual expression—which together 'happen' to reflect the markets' requirements for peculiarity while maintaining a continuity.

The apparent distancing by the selectors from the actual act of selecting this year is perhaps also an attempt to generate precisely a space in which to 'entertain' the thoughts of 'other' artistic practices and activities, other than what is presently 'encouraged' symbiotically through newcontemporaries and 'the' educational system: to 'explore' other forms of 'exhibition' strategy that don't 'just' lead to a validation of the international-bright-young-thing, quick sale mentality. Sarat Maharaj's comments in the catalogue best pursue this, for example, on the changing role of the tutor, the critic, the visiting artist and the historian he states: "It seems to have become less easy to distinguish their ideal function of offering critical challenge and debate, of raising difficult, sticky issues from the rather more narrow business of promotion", and his view that newcontemporaries should not become, "...simply a site for high-speed endorsement of work with an eye to market trends", which I take as a polite suggestion that he feels it already has. Unfortunately this year's show does little to counter this. In at least raising the spectre of art education, the catalogue starts to bring to the fore the questioning of the specific process of cultural transmission and training, and "the process by which the realisation of culture becomes 'natural'." 2 There appears to be a presumption in the catalogue, though, that all discourses in art schools (within the UK) are the same. That presumption is the universalism of 'the' London experience, an ignoring of geographical specificity. However spurred on by the government through a replacement funding system based on prescriptive research assessment (where colleges are attributed points primarily on the grounds of staff 'performance' through exhibiting and publishing, and, in a game show manner, these points converted to cash) and art colleges half-hearted attempts at imitating a mythologised 'London' model of 'success', this is 'simply' not the case.

Gillian Wearing states that "...the show should function as a kind of snap shot-transcript of art activity, making and thinking about art in the late 1990s...a show which is saying 'this is the state of play among a sizable swathe of young practitioners in the country today'". This though is also not the case. It is a selection by a selected panel of four individuals of work by finishing and recently graduated students who decided to apply. Newcontemporaries may actually provide an opportunity to focus attention on selected activity within this designated slice of producers throughout the UK, as opposed to just the familiar focus on London psychoses. Whether in the resulting collating of work it does or not is up to the selected selectors' tastes, particular interests and relations to teaching establishments and students, and the desired participation by those who are deemed eligible (both selectors and students alike). All of which is overseen by the exhibition strategy, where the artists' work still has to be both 'transportable' and 'transposable'.

While questioning the lack of idiosyncrasy in practices within the applications to the show, what is left out of the discussion within the catalogue is the actual questioning of what effects the social, economic and political barriers erected over the past 15 years have had on art school/college intake. It is problematic for the newcontemporaries' selectors to query the range of the work represented in the applications without also querying the racial, social, sexual, geographical and gender representation within art schools. Undoubtedly, the government 'imposed' changes to the financing of Higher Education have further resulted in the privileg-



New Contemporaries
Image: CCA

intertwining relationships of how 'culture' is defined and affirmed through the processes of education, together with the consecrating power of 'commercial' publicity. To represent this with a simplistic 'survey'—where nearly all the reproduced invited responses cover one A4 sheet or less—all for 'nothing more than' reproduction in a catalogue with little intended follow up, is tokenistic. This criticism had some presence within the pages of the catalogue. In a reply to the requested response to the possibility of the reinvention of the art school, Stephan Dillemath replied "...as if it were possible to reinvent the art school just for the sake of a funny curatorial mood...it becomes issue surfing as diversion".

The selectors' actions, through concentrating the catalogue 'deliberation' not on the individual artists and their works but in a limited way on the systems and structures that led them to be exhibited, could be interpreted as a means of distancing themselves from being individually identified with the specific artists and works chosen. As suggested by Sarat Maharaj in the catalogue discussion, reasons for taking this approach may be because the means by which the participating newcontemporaries artists are selected have led in recent years to an 'outright', unquestioned endorsement of their work by our ever vigilant cultural



JEMIMA BROWN
Pumping up Dolly
Brown (video)

ing of education to those who can afford it.

Underscoring the 'entertaining' of the possibility of change in art education within the catalogue is the rash premise that the principles and purposes of education are removed from state authority and its interests—free floating in a utopian bubble. That production is socially determined, the result of a long and complex historical process, is jettisoned, for the ease and simplicity of ... 'discussion'? The prime obstacle in any shift within the educational system as a whole are the institutions' immersion in the broader ideological state apparatus.

The late '80s closing down and merging (or is that downsizing) of art schools within London were the outcomes of the Conservative government's 'vocational education' drive, presently being expanded upon by the 'new Labour' government. This includes the privatisation of Further Education funding and the advancing of competition, rather than communication, between institutions through the research point funding mechanism, amongst other things. This competition is just as strongly reflected in the internal struggles between departments within those very institutions in the annual pillar to post pursuit of funds and studio space.

Within the schools and colleges full time staff are increasingly having to take over greater administrative functions, the result of imposed structural changes, bizarre course assessment procedures, increasing financial pressures, intensifying student numbers in relation to staff student ratios and available studio space. The resulting outcome is all too often makeshift or makedo.

Part time staff have been 'drafted in' in an attempt to shore up the 'teaching' shortfall, partly as a cheaper alternative to full time staff and partly in response to the institutions' need for research qualifications—these predominantly 'young' artists through their own activity in the areas of exhibiting and publishing and their relative numbers 'produce' more convertible research points.

The employing of part time staff and visiting lecturers is not new. It is a commonplace activity within arts educational institutions, but perhaps some of the emphasis for their inclusion in a course has shifted. This is not to undermine the potential of such relationships and the benefits to those artists/critics in having 'employment', however sporadically, and access to the 'zest of youth'. Part time staff and visiting lecturers may allow for a broader representation of interests and practices within schools/colleges, being either a balance to the 'dead wood' or to supplant the student contact time of the actual educational full time staff. However, with part time staff often being on 'fragile' contracts, they have little leverage to create concrete changes within the educational environment. But they are able to make small inroads in raising the expectations of students and encouraging 'other' ways of working. The student, though, is still left to challenge the institutional monoliths alone. And let's not forget, part time staff, as with full time, can also be drafted in to support 'the Department's position', effectively foreclosing on any 'other' activity.

In the most cynical regimes, specifically employed 'research members' may not necessarily be intended to have any contact or execution over the college's

existing day to day educational activities, being there simply to concoct the research points, annexed in relative isolation.

In the UK art education system students are at an institution for between 2 and 4 years (undergraduate, postgraduate), once understanding the system within which you are enveloped and delineated by, there is only so much time in tenure for students to attempt to affect the actual educational institution itself, perhaps unintentionally through trying to cross departmental boundaries in the processes of experimentation. The continued fanciful pigeon-holing of 'legitimate' practices into separate compartments within art schools, painting, sculpture etc.—despite broader institutional acceptance of a diversification in what constitutes a practice—may well serve the interests of departmental jerry-mandering but do nothing to encourage such exploratory multiform work.

Once in the school/college door, there are also specific funding difficulties for students in challenging the institution, in whatever way, especially today. As individual schools/colleges have the financial responsibilities of students previously undertaken by government and local government dumped on them, and as the student 'grant' rapidly vanishes, internal school/college grants and bursaries become an ever more essential aspect of

day to day survival for students. The expectation that students are going to demand a better 'service' for the education they 'purchase' doesn't reflect the continuing disproportionate power structures within academic institutions. The National Union of Students (NUS), the supposed watchdog for students, was ineffectual in defending its members' interests against the last government and has shown little backbone in doing so in the face of the present one. Hardly surprising when the NUS seldom looks more than a grooming parlor for the 'official' left. Any student within, and wanting to continue in, Further Education is ultimately reliant on the institution for endorsed qualifications as those qualifications are the bureaucratic bench marks within the present and proposed Further Education funding systems, not to mention private bursaries and grants. These qualifications may actually take on even more of an importance within this circuit, from foundation level and its equivalents onwards, as the financing of the Further Education system is progressively privatised and private funders look for some form of guarantee of return on their investment, sanctioned qualifications acting as just that.

Not to conflate the 'relatively' independent existence of newcontemporaries and the state subject educational system, but problems that arise for transitory staff in effecting change within the educational system in some ways parallel any one newcontemporaries panel attempting to effect change within its exhibition structure, as perhaps this years did. Newcontemporaries' selectors are only there for a short period (one show), and they also effectively reflect the broad tastes of the overseeing panel who selected them. In this instance the onus for change within the newcontemporaries lies with having a progressive directorship/management. (Newcontemporaries' 'personnel' are faintly listed within the opening pages of the catalogue as: chair—Sacha Craddock; Vice Chair—Jill Ritblat; directors—John Huntingford, Rebecca King-Lassman, Dez Lawrence, Andrea Schlieker, Mark Wallinger; company secretary—Tony Paterson; administrators—Bev Bytheway, Andrew Critchley.) And as Gillian Wearing suggested in the catalogue regarding art schools/col-

leges at the present time, one way of removing some of the barriers to allow for more experimentation by those already in college is in having good flexible relations between defined departments, or in removing the regulatory departmental fences altogether. This, though, does nothing to breach the widening financial moat surrounding access to education in the first instance.

While the newcontemporaries catalogue serves to raise questions of both art education's and newcontemporaries' broader involvement in the placement of young artists in the market, the underlying managerial structure of newcontemporaries is left intact and the selectors' own authority within this system of consecration remains largely unquestioned, if not tactically sidestepped. This year's newcontemporaries exhibition suffers from the very same annual ills supposedly under question. The difference being this year that the exhibition reveals the symptoms, the catalogue readily diagnoses, suggested cures are sought, the body lurches on regardless.

The changing panel of selectors for the newcontemporaries, as chosen by the management committee, this year allows for a range of individual artist's, critic's, curator's diversities of tastes. But the newcontemporaries' annual shifting public face, within a general field of practice, has gone without any real questioning of its present day purposes, and still has a limited ability to 'represent' due to its exhibition structure and continuing constraints on practice. It currently appears to be unable to challenge the assumptions of what an 'artistic' practice could be. At least the dialogue and responses within the catalogue may begin this process, something more than is tolerated, never mind generated, within the present 'backs to the wall' educational environment. One question arising is how willing and able are educational establishments to critique these 'competitions' when they are so heavily involved and reliant on them as markers of 'their own' success and endorsement within the vocational framework—how many students from their courses get chosen for newcontemporaries, or how many newcontemporaries artists apply, and get on, to postgraduate courses. The education system at present is, after all, based on a system of competition (there are winners and losers in games of college and departmental 'profiling' and 'suitability') which the newcontemporaries is itself an active participant in. Any questioning of one is implicitly a questioning of the other.

The panel made its choice of artists and work and effected the few events and discussions that surrounded the exhibitions. But perhaps it is acceptable to vaguely discuss the reinvention of the art school precisely because it is insubstantial and because next year it will be a different issue surrounding the newcontemporaries, given the change in the selectors, a new tail to pin on the donkey, more grist for the mill.

Within the catalogue it is suggested that possibilities for an expanded framework of participation (by both practitioners and public) may lie in the inclusion of 'new technologies', CD ROM and Web work. The newcontemporaries' application form for this year (1998) includes such media. Hopefully this is not the stuff of technological utopianism as the technology itself does not necessarily escape the dynamics of the systems supposedly under question. 'New Media' is now able to be brought into the fold in this way precisely because it is able to "...overturn the hierarchy of the field without disturbing the principles on which the field is based. Thus [the] revolutions are only ever partial ones, which displace the censorships and transgress the conventions but do so in the name of the same underlying principles".³

notes

- ¹ *The field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bordieu; Editors Introduction, Randal Johnson; Polity Press 1993
- ² *The field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bordieu; Polity Press 1993
- ³ *Ibid.*