‘Where any View of Money Exists …’. Illusion and collusion in the contemporary field of British Art

Roger Cook

**Supercollector: a critique of Charles Saatchi** by Rita Hatton and John A. Walker, London: Ellipsis 2000, 288 pp., 40 b. & w. illus., £12.00

**High Art Lite** by Julian Stallabrass, London and New York: Verso, 1999, 224 pp., 18 col. plates, 58 b. & w. illus., £22.00

According to the French sociologist of culture, Pierre Bourdieu, ‘nothing better conceals the objective collusion which is the matrix of specifically artistic value than the conflicts through which it operates.’ In other words, we are all caught up in the *illusio* and *collusio* which constitute the field of contemporary British art. Both these books engage with the conflicts through which art operates by means of an avowedly left-wing critique of Charles Saatchi and the new British art he has patronized. They make their critique against the background of what Bourdieu sees as the ‘economic fatalism’ of neo-liberal enterprise capitalist culture first ushered in by Reagan and Thatcher.

A central question would seem to be whether advertising, mass media and money is controlling the cultural production of Saatchi’s artists? Of course these artists will feel the necessity to reference popular culture and the mass media, the common culture, which is so much part of their world. Is their autonomy and freedom thus automatically endangered? In view of the warnings Bourdieu made in his Ernst Bloch Prize speech, published in the *New Left Review* (227), the journal for which Julian Stallabrass writes, concerning the neo-liberal ‘economic fatalism’ which threatens to engulf the field of cultural production, there is no doubt that these are *urgent* questions. The answers will continually have to be weighed up and argued out, specifically in the case of each individual artist, by those who form the constituencies for contemporary art. As Stallabrass indicates, these artists have learnt to engage performatively, both in relation to their work and the public persona of the artist. The best of them, like Chris Ofili, have
engaged successfully with both art and publicity, employing a subtly transgressive aesthetics of irony, beauty and pleasure to grapple with the social and political issues which practically engage them; in his case with ethnicity, masculinity and exoticism. This engagement through the performativity of pleasure is where perhaps some artists of the more theoretically and politically correct previous generation fall short; Stallabrass cites Carl Freedman’s criticism of Mona Hatoum in this respect. As to Saatchi’s role as a power broker in all this, there is no doubt that it is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, there is the fact that he has made money and space available to younger artists; on the other, one knows that as an advertising man and entrepreneur he is skilled in the negotiated exchange of economic for symbolic capital. It is his qualifications as a true connoisseur of contemporary art that can and will be legitimately questioned and perhaps found wanting in the future.

Rita Hatton and John A. Walker’s book is a thorough-going account of his rise to the status of supercollector and an indictment of the role of advertising in the advancement of capitalism and how this implicitly endangers the field of cultural production. Saatchi, along with his brother Maurice, was responsible for advertising the Tory election campaigns; has gone on record as saying that the creative drive of his favourite British artist, Damien Hirst, is a direct result of the enterprise culture created by Margaret Thatcher. Would he recognize the ironic fact that this was the direct result of economic recession? This generation of artists are often referred to as ‘Thatcher’s children’. Whilst it is true that they grew up and went to art school during the Thatcher years, few of them would consciously avow a right-wing political agenda. Though they might, as Damien Hirst does, evince a cynicism regarding politics, as in the interview Hatton and Walker cite, when in answer to the question as to whether he was ‘a socialist at heart’, Hirst replied: ‘That kind of integrity is bullshit. Nobody has that kind of integrity … I’m not anything at heart. I’m too greedy’, they go on to point out sensibly that he donated one of his ‘spin’ paintings to the *Big Issue* magazine and therefore may not ‘be as selfish and hard hearted as these remarks suggest’ (p. 56).

Stallabrass sees many of these artists as being tainted by the political climate in which they grew up. He has created the irritating moniker ‘high art lite’ to replace the equally irritating ‘yBa’ (young British artist), to generalize what he sees as the characteristics of this art, ‘an art that looks like but is not quite art, that acts as a substitute for art’. It is difficult, I think, to determine quite what he means by this beyond the fact, as he says, that they went to the same art schools, showed in the same exhibitions, were represented by the same dealers, came to the public’s attention at about the same time, lived in the same part of London, socialized together, addressed popular culture and mass media, and make work that is less provincial and more international than previous British art. What, it seems to me, most of these artists do have in common is that they are the product of a particular kind of art education. This education has placed a strong emphasis on self-generation and differentiation in relation to the acquisition of modes of production that relate to the history of contemporary art since the 1960s (sometimes referred to as the post-Duchampian or post-Warholian era), when contemporary art in Britain threw off its provinciality and came of age democratically in relation to the international art world. This education acknowledged the reality of the art world as a competitive market place. Apprentice artists were encouraged to keep an eye on what was going on in the international art world, especially through the increasing availability of English-language international art journals, exhibitions and their catalogues. Intellectual capital came to be valued as an asset through the incursion of critical theory into art education, to which, as Stallabrass points out, young artists have reacted in different ways. In the late 1980s the Saatchi Gallery played an important role in this induction with the two-part *New York Art Now*, which showed the artists known as simulationists or commodity fetishists:
Ashley Bickerton, Peter Halley, Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach. This show was something of a wake-up call to many young British artists whose art education had, increasingly since the 1960s, put much greater emphasis on both practical and theoretical professionalism.

My initial reaction to the exhibition of Saatchi’s purchases of British contemporary art shown in the Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1997 was that thirty or more years of British art education had finally come to roost. Whatever triumphalism this exhibition represented it was over the previous provinciality and insularity of British art measured against Europe and America. It was during the 1960s that the influence of American art first hit British art students through the shows organized by Bryan Robertson at the Whitechapel Gallery. The ‘triumph’ of American painting and sculpture was quickly challenged by conceptual art and Italian Arte Povera, not to mention, since 1968, the increasingly powerful presence of the two Marcels: Duchamp and Broodthaers. It was in these formative years that art students gradually became aware that it was the international field of artists, critics, dealers and collectors that was the context in which British art was made. It was the stakes and struggles that made up that field that those art students became increasingly acquainted with. Artists were taught to understand that they must take their chance in what the American art critic Dave Hickey has called (in his essay of this title) ‘The Birth of the Big Beautiful Art Market’, which he wickedly describes, as ‘that embodied discourse of democratic values that [partake] in equal parts, of the Eucharist and the stock exchange.’ It was this we saw arrayed before us in Saatchi’s selection at the RA.

My primary criticism of these books, which are, after all, written by those who teach art history, is that there is little sense of the long and complex historical evolution of all this. Stallabrass cites innumerable opinions from the copious literature, mostly journalistic, on recent British art, but qualitative analysis of the actual art in relation to what has gone before is very thin on the ground. One feels that he should have spent more time really looking at this art and pondering it for himself, rather than reading everything ever written about it. Given his view of art criticism’s decline it is surprising how many references there are to the promotional writing of opportunistic art journalists. He appears to be complaining of the patent lack of intention behind the work of many of these artists but fails to address the historical legacy of an art that refuses authorial intention and purposefully puts the spectator in a position of active responsibility before the work. He quotes Hirst as saying: ‘I want the viewer to do a lot of work and feel uncomfortable. They should be made to feel responsible for their own view of the world rather than look at the artist’s view and be critical of it.’ There are many artists who would go along with this, and Stallabrass rightly says: ‘This refusal to make consistent comment could be seen as a strength, being a welcome relief from the endless moralizing and neatly tied-up narratives of the mass media.’ Unfortunately, he fails to apply this to himself.

My secondary criticism is that both books, to differing degrees, lack an adequately academically grounded theoretical framework to make the kind of analysis that is needed. And it is not as if the means are not available: they cite the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose writings on taste and the field of cultural production would have provided a structure for their stated objectives. In order to answer these difficult questions one would have to forego easy polemics and assess the larger parameters of contemporary British art, which would position the various agents – artists, critics, dealers – relative to one another in the field of artistic production and consumption. This would mean less time spent agonizing over local polemical issues and more time making hard comparative analysis. Both books contain a lot of useful information about the rise and fall of the Saatchi advertising empire and the Saatchi collection, but they seem to me to fail practically as a
political analysis of lasting value, by lacking a sufficiently grounded basis for their critical judgements to make a difference. It is just too easy for these kinds of analyses to be dismissed as left-wing rhetoric. If the quality and integrity of the art experience is to be defended against its vulgarization and trivialization by the advertising and entertainment industry, there surely has to be a firmer foundation for critique. Bourdieu is the European thinker most likely to provide it. He has worked tirelessly to defend culture against what he so clearly sees as the market-oriented forces arrayed against it. Hatton and Walker cite the highly respected work of his associate Raymonde Moulin, whose *The French Art Market: A Sociological View* was first published in French in 1967 and translated in 1988. However they could have made a great deal more use of Bourdieu himself; for example, with regard to the relation between the avant garde and advertising, they could have invoked Bourdieu’s model of the two ends of the field of cultural production: the ‘restricted field of cultural production’ where artists create for their own circle against commercial interest, and the ‘large-scale field’, where cultural production is geared to economic profit. The question of the interpenetration of these fields is one that is highly significant for the present time. Bourdieu has written of the traditional disavowal of economic exchange in the field of cultural production. This has now, to some extent, changed. Duchamp and then Warhol (as well as Beuys and Broodthaers) were artists who questioned the hypocrisy of that disavowal and opened up a more honest awareness of the questions concerning the interpenetration of commercial and symbolic values that is the art world that today’s artists inhabit. Politically aware younger artists, like the late Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who was recently shown at the Serpentine Gallery, never disavowed the fact that they have to operate within the capitalist market in order to be effective artists.4 This is not, of course, to say that they capitulate to the demands of the market. In my view, both these books present too crude a view of the problems of present-day artists’ relation to the market. It is only too easy to underestimate the complexity of the situation and the sophistication of young artists’ strategies to maintain integrity as relatively autonomous artists, whilst working within, without being compromised by, the capitalist market. Present-day artists have to be much more self-conscious than previous generations about these issues. No doubt there may be some who will try to make what they think ‘Saatchi will go for’, as Hatton and Walker suggest. But there are also those who recognize the complexity of the situation and negotiate their positions as a balance between legitimate economic interest and aesthetic disinterest to protect the autonomy, always provisional and relative, of the strategies of their artistic production, who might fundamentally understand what William Blake meant by: ‘Where any view of Money exists, Art cannot be carried on, but War only.’

Roger Cook

*University of Reading*

Notes

4 ‘Money and capitalism are powers that are here to stay, at least for the moment. It’s within those structures that change can and will take place.’ ‘Joseph Kosuth and Felix Gonzalez-Torres: A conversation’, in *Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility*, London, 1994, p. 76.