Beautiful Inside Our Heads Forever:

How the YBAs Made British Art What It Is

If Damien Hirst did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him. In the late 1980s, the London artworld consisted of just a few galleries around Mayfair's Cork Street that mainly showed American or German art. This arrangement possessed no mechanism by which young artists could flourish and the general public could engage with contemporary art. A revolution was needed to reinvigorate an artworld that had been stagnating since the golden days of Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon, and to revitalise a country languishing on the edge of depression.

A new world order requires a leader, and while it is possible to imagine a world without Damien Hirst, it is not possible to imagine the artworld that we now have without some such character at the helm. Jonathan Gibbs has written a novel which imagines that Hirst was hit by a train and killed when drunk, so another young artist named Randall happened to lead the crowd, but what really happened is infinitely more interesting. Today's artworld is the result of a few people poised at just the right historical moment with just the right amount of luck and talent, all converging on a plane of potent contingencies.

In the late 80s and early 90s, a group of artists who would change the face of art emerged from Britain's art schools. Goldsmiths was the epicentre of the revolution: it produced Damien Hirst, Marcus Harvey, Sam Taylor-Johnson, Michael Landy, Fiona Rae, Mat Collishaw, Gary Hume, Angus Fairhurst, Gillian Wearing and Sarah Lucas. The Royal College of Art produced Tracey Emin, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Gavin Turk and Chris Ofili. And the Slade School of Art gave us Rachel Whiteread and Douglas Gordon, while Marc

Quinn studied art history at Cambridge. Collectively, they become known as the YBAs – the Young British Artists.

The group is not bound by school or style in the manner of Abstract Expressionism or Pop Art. The YBAs comprised conceptually inclined painters, sculptors, photographers and installation artists with a penchant for shock and the grotesque. The primary characteristic, however, is a mere contingency, for it was their cultural milieu that gave them their distinct character. They arrived in a desolate Britain on the cusp of great change: the 90s thrust Britain into the 21st century on a wave of new art (the YBAs), music (Britpop) and politics (New Labour), all of which filled the dark hole left by recession and 18 years of Tory rule. The YBAs both capitalised upon and helped to create a new sense of hope.

Julian Stallabrass characterises the movement in terms of 'temperament and tactics' instead of 'style and medium'. This bridges the considerable gap between Chris Ofili's paintings and Gillian Wearing's photographs or between Tracey Emin's installations and Damien Hirst's animals in formaldehyde. The temperament and tactics that neatly unites this diverse group of artists are found in a desire to shock in order to engage the mass media and in a distinctly 'Cool Britania' edge that appealed to an international art market.

However, Stallabrass denies they are bound by an ideology, since the artists worked independently without a mutually agreed programme or manifesto like Surrealists or Futurists. But they were united in their promotion of the pervasive ideology of the 90s: at first it was an anti-establishment fight against the system that had wrecked the country and then later, with the arrival of Tony Blair, it became the neo-liberal ideology of freedom to pursue wealth and fame. The YBAs subscribed to both of these phases whereby the aesthetic was a

constant reflection of changing socio-economic conditions. In the early days, Hirst made his cabinets from MDF and filled them with cigarette butts, whereas later he made them from highly polished stainless steel and filled them with cubic zirconia. This gradual move from the old Conservative to the New Labour ideology can be read in every facet of the YBAs.

The big historical claim here is that the YBAs laid the foundations for the artworld we now have, consisting of many galleries, even more artists, a vast market and an engaged general public. They did this in two ways: one, they made art popular; and two, they tied art to money. It was spectacle, consumerism, celebrity and popular culture on an industrial scale. Now that the hubris has dissipated into an accepted normality, we are left with an artworld that is equally the wreckage of unregulated exuberance and the legacy of an inspired generation.

The YBAs entered the scene in 1988 with ‘Freeze’, an exhibition of Goldsmiths students curated and masterminded by Damien Hirst, which introduced, among other modern icons, Hirst’s Spot Paintings. Over the course of three exhibitions in a disused warehouse in London’s Docklands, the YBAs emerged as the most shocking, vital young artists around. There followed a string of group shows in the same vain, including ‘Gambler’ and ‘Modern Medicine’ (Building One, 1990), ‘Young British Artists’ (Saatchi Gallery, 1992-1996), ‘Some Went Mad, Some Ran Away’ (Serpentine Gallery, 1994) and ‘Sensation’ (Royal Academy, 1997). The YBAs had arrived and everyone in London was talking about it.

The calculated sensationalism drew a wide audience, while clever art historical references satisfied the establishment that it was real art. It was entrenched in the inescapable past, but stubbornly directed towards a bright future. Hirst’s Medicine Cabinets fused the stark

semantics of minimalism with a pop art interest in consumer culture. Gavin Turk tied history in knots, using the craft of waxworks to make a self-portrait as Sid Vicious dressed as Elvis. While Jake and Dinos Chapman took an anti-art, anti-aesthetic stance by mutilating an entire set of Goya's *Disasters of War* etchings with childlike scribbles.

It felt as if contemporary art summed up the modern condition: Hirst's shark, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, gave concrete form to the abstract fear of obliteration engendered by economic woe and the perennial threat of the IRA; Sarah Lucas' *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* and *Au Natural* captured the violence of gender stereotypes; and Mark Wallinger's *Capital*, paintings of tramps in grand municipal settings, exposed the Thatcherite doting on the wealthy at the expense of the poor. The YBAs were not intentionally political, but they were products of their time and made art about the material conditions of life in an aesthetic language that was both simple and seductive.

These messages might have fallen on deaf ears if it were not for the YBAs' instinct for self-promotion and their flirtation with the mass media. They met Jay Jopling, owner of White Cube gallery, whose natural charm and gift for sales generated publicity, leading to a memorable image in the *Daily Star* of a reporter posing with a bag of chips beside one of Hirst's fish pieces. That was the scale of it – tabloid newspapers, normally concerned with cheating footballers and corrupt politicians, were splashing on art and artists. When Charles Saatchi first commissioned the shark from Hirst, it was reported in Britain's biggest tabloid, *The Sun*, with the headline '£50,000 for fish without chips'. Even in 1997, when people were more desensitised to the shock tactics, there was a scandal over the 'Sensation' exhibition, due to the inclusion of Marcus Harvey's *Myra* – a huge portrait of the reviled child-killer Myra Hidley made from a child's handprints. The press and the public alike were apoplectic

with rage, leading to resignations within the Royal Academy and invaluable press for the artists. The press watched their every move with breathless anticipation, as the YBAs were willingly embroiled in the cult of celebrity in a way that artists never had been.

The net result of this is that art became very popular indeed: people flocked to galleries and museums, and talked about this exciting new art and its celebrity protagonists as if it mattered – even people who had never before professed or pursued any interest in art. While this is partly due to the work itself, it is also the seduction of celebrity. If a famous person appears glamorous and exciting, then interest in whatever it is they do when they're not falling out of the Groucho Club will follow; as it happened, these people made decent, exciting art. By throwing themselves into the spotlight the YBAs made art a popular pastime, and the effect, 25 years later, is that the Tate is able to have blockbuster shows that appeal to a general audience and contemporary art is sufficiently enmeshed in public consciousness that it has an abiding media presence.

Aside from the shocking new art and A-list hijinks, the YBAs became famous for the money. Owing to a few wealthy collectors at first and then a rejuvenated economy, ever-increasing sums of money changed hands, and staggering numbers always make good headlines. When, in 1991, Saatchi paid £50,000 for Hirst's shark, it was an indecent sum of money for a work by a largely unknown artist (and remains so now). So something had gone very right indeed when Saatchi sold it to American hedge-fund manager Steven A Cohen for $12million – at the time the highest price for a work by a living artist other than Jasper Johns. For Hirst, the first work to sell for £1million was *Hymn*, bought by Saatchi in 2000. Prior to that, prices had been steadily creeping up; after that they rocketed year on year. Hirst made £11million in 2003 from a sell-out show at White Cube; £50million in 2007 for the infamous diamond skill,

For the Love of God; and bypassing his dealers to sell 233 lots at Sotheby's in 2008 for £111million. It worked in much the same way for the others, particularly Emin: Saatchi bought Emin's *My Bed* for £150,000 in 2000 and sold it in 2014 for £2.5million.

The chance meeting of three individuals, Damien Hirst, Jay Jopling and Charles Saatchi, formed a holy trinity of the manufacturer, the seller and the consumer. Hirst's seemingly unstoppable genius, Jopling's exemplary salesmanship and Saatchi's insatiable desire signalled to the world art market that London was ready, willing and able to join in. And thus was spawned a market that eventually grew so strong that it would defy even global financial meltdown. The art market is self-perpetuating: once you have someone like Saatchi buying so much everyone else starts to think they are missing out or off-trend if they too are not buying the same stuff. And once the demand rises, things either became scarce, and therefore expensive, or, as with Hirst, production is stepped up accordingly.

All this created the kind of market confidence that brought big blue-chip galleries like Gagosian and Hauser & Wirth to London. The more the YBAs sold, the more collectors wanted, and the more the international artworld wanted a slice of the action. Eventually – with the help of an improving economy – it led to today's multiplication of commercial galleries, which can only survive because the YBAs helped create a climate in which art is a necessary luxury for the wealthy. Since art was so popular, market confidence created the conditions for smaller, more modestly priced, galleries to open so now there is something for everyone who wants it.

The YBAs filled the welter left behind by a poverty of both art and politics, creating a miraculous situation that today we almost take for granted. We now have a climate in which

art is popular, accessible and even necessary to the core of British society. The paradox is that the YBAs fought the Establishment, only to become the Establishment themselves and thus created a bigger, more money-soaked Establishment than existed before. But that, as with all stories of progress, is par for the course and does not dent the world of possibilities that the new world order allows. The dark truth of all this is that if, like the YBAs, you have fame and wealth at your disposal, then you can change the world, as if all the myths of celebrity and capitalism turned out to be true after all. And now that we have more galleries, more art and more artists than ever before, we wouldn't change it for the world.

If Damien Hirst did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him. It's almost as if that working class boy from Leeds was sent to shake things up with a shark so that we could enjoy so much art, and he was rewarded with a very big house in the country.