

OPENING UP TO CONTEMPORARY ART

Dick Goody

Why Do You Hate Contemporary Art?

Contemporary art? Why do I hate it?

Yes.

Because I don't get it. Look, my dog could have done a better picture than that.

The most unfathomable dog-painter ever was Jackson Pollock, America's most famous artist. He was a giant in the art world - an alcoholic who killed himself by wrapping his car around a tree trunk - drunk. He did huge action paintings, dripping house paint onto canvas tacked to the floor in his barn/studio on Long Island. Later they were stretched and hung in national museums across the world. But even now, fifty years later, people still don't get his work.

"Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is."

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956)

Some people say that because of his big paintings of Jackie-O and Elvis, Andy Warhol is more famous – people certainly “got” his work - more than they ever did

Pollock's. In the sixties and seventies, Andy Warhol was an American pop culture icon.

"In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes."

Andy Warhol (1927-1987)

Contemporary art, if you want a definition, is new art we find baffling. It's often so removed from the traditional idea of art (a nice oil painting in a gilt frame) as to look like something entirely useless. The more it looks like something useless, in fact, the more likely it's contemporary art.

Ask someone to define art and they will say: "it's something beautiful." A nicely painted realistic sunset, now that's art - even a slightly expressionistic sunset is permissible because the *sunset* is the *beautiful* thing. When beauty and realism are in harmony the result, in the mind's eye, is artistic perfection. If this is true, why do we like the Mona Lisa so much? After all, she looks a bit questionable - like a man in women's clothing. Mona's success and survival is partly due to this gender/anxiety situation, and partly it's the painting's secularity - because we like it for what it is, not because it's full of spirituality, and partly for the smile, which exudes the ultimate in *je ne sais quoi* cachet - and don't forget the *sfumato* - the technical Italian word for the smoky, soft-focus paint handling. The Mona Lisa is

a cultural icon, so let's forgive her masculinity: Mona Lisa is simply *the* MONA LISA.

A few people know a lot about art, but most people don't – although they know what they like because beauty is in the eye of the beholder, etc. When most people look at Old Master paintings they read them not like works of art but more as cultural relics – a trip to a museum is a cultural pilgrimage. In museums most people are visiting the bones of the past rather than the art of the past – of course they *think* they're there for the art, but really it's the connection with the past that they want because we don't really believe in rituals anymore and the only way we can connect with the past is by visiting it in a museum – it's historical therapy. There's one other aspect to this which is slightly worrying - especially if you're the one running a museum - which is when people are polled about the kind of experience they equate going to a museum with, most of them say, going to church.

What exactly is contemporary art? Well, it can't be defined simply as new art. While contemporary art is new, much new art isn't contemporary enough to be considered contemporary. For sure, contemporary art thinks it's better than new art. Actually, contemporary art's a bit snobbish. It thinks it's superior because it's

more cutting edge, more dangerous - more innovative, inventive, original – it's also into the whole idea of being youthful and rebellious – it's into new media - it's digital *BABY*. Contemporary art is bigheaded and flashy. Art done today or yesterday doesn't count if it's conservative or uniformed by a contemporary agenda, and, according to the contemporary artists, if it doesn't say ZEITGEIST! it's simply worthless.

Lest we condemn contemporary art for being elitist and arrogant, remember that if there were none, there'd be no art history and all art from all periods would be identical and boring. This would upset the art historians. The artists would be upset too. In cultures where artistic progress is not prized, creativity tends to be ritualistic, orthodox and dull. In such circumstances artists are invariably prohibited (usually on pain of death or imprisonment) from making innovations or straying from strict conventions. It's not a very enlightened situation, so we have to put up with contemporary artists whether we like it or not because they breathe new life into art. Think of Egyptian art – the old stuff from the time of the pharaohs – the “walk like an Egyptian” stuff – an Egyptologist will tell you all about the leaps and changes in style, but to most us it all looks the same. And that's the problem with despots – Rameses I, Joe Stalin, Adolph H., Kim Jong Il -

all they want to do is aggrandize their delusions – they want to stay in control – they want continuity, not spontaneity.

In most cultures, epochs of extraordinary prosperity are usually accompanied by great flowerings of creativity. The Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque were all complemented by brilliant bursts of artistic innovation. Our images of people from these different periods are fashioned by the artists of the time. The “look” of the Renaissance is different from the “look” of the Baroque. The difference is not just dissimilar styles of dress or architecture, it’s in the fact that artists of the time saw things differently and invented new ways of seeing which affected the way they depicted people. Romanesque art looks somber and clunky compared to Rococo. Rococo, with its pink flowery nymphs lazily posed against powder blue boudoirs, even sounds sexier in an onomatopoeic sort of way. In Gothic art, images appear flat because linear perspective hadn’t been invented yet – of course, the most impressive art form of the day was architecture – the Gothic Cathedral – Chartres for instance – or the Rose Window of Notre Dame. Painting was still in its neophyte stage. Painting couldn’t compete with the innovative strides being made by the Gothic masons, whereas, two hundred years later, with improved methods of creating illusionistic space, painting became the leader of the pack.

Some people like making definitive declarations by saying things like: “The Sistine Chapel Ceiling by Michelangelo, it’s the greatest painting of all time – you can’t beat it!” or “Beethoven’s Ninth is the best piece of music ever – period!” This is slightly depressing because in the case of Michelangelo, if it’s true, it means that in five hundred years no one has done anything better and this is another reason why contemporary art exists; in the warrens of studios around the world artists are saying: “I’ve got to beat Michelangelo, I’ve got to knock him off his perch. I know I can do it!”

The artists of any given period tell us a great deal about their time – they’re a cultural mirror and that’s another good reason to have contemporary artists because often they “tell it like it is.” But don’t forget, art has nothing to do with the success of a particular epoch; it is merely a manifestation of that success. The Renaissance was fueled by an increase in trade and by greater social stability. People had the money and confidence to build larger cities and furnish them with objects of great beauty – high art has always been a luxury item, a trophy for the privileged.

What do contemporary artists reveal about our life and times now? It’s a hard question. We probably won’t know until much later – in which case we’ll be dead,

but our grandchildren will look back and say “Ah, I see it now – all those empty white boxes, it must have been fear of the void.” In the meantime we have art critics. They’re not all parasites; some of them are quite useful.

The first problem with contemporary art for most people lies in the fact that it isn’t historical. In other words it hasn’t been taken out for a good long test-drive. With historical art – art that’s at least a hundred years old – you know what you’ve got: something that’s survived because people, over the years, have hung onto it - it’s been re-evaluated over a long period and survived changes in taste and fashion. This reinforces its merit because we tend to think old things have value. This isn’t the case with contemporary art – it’s so hot off the production line, it hasn’t even had a chance to cool down yet. It’s prototypical, often infuriating, not to mention unfathomable. Take the example of cubism, the contemporary art of 1907; no one could say at the time whether cubism would become part of the canon (the “A” list works in art history textbooks). The bourgeoisie hated cubism, as did most art critics because it rubbed against the grain of taste and decency. It was horrid and ugly – it was monstrous, which brings up the second problem of contemporary art, that of its tendency to be naughty and rebellious. It wants to bite the hand that feeds it. It wants to be notorious and not user friendly. It wants to slap you in the face and say: LIKE ME!

This doesn't make contemporary art very endearing to the masses unless they happen to be British. There's something about the British. Think of Benny Hill. The working-class Brits like their entertainment spicy and naughty. Because of the whole class thing – the working-classes spitting at the middle-classes, the aristocracy letting everyone eat cake (while the middle-classes are off by themselves, gloriously indifferent; they could care less – they're too busy carving out careers in advertising and marketing) – because of all these insults flying about, and everyone living on top of one another – fifty million people in a place smaller than Michigan* - there isn't much tolerance for political correctness. People are blunt with one another. Working-class men flaunt their topless girls on “page three” of their tabloids – if you're unaware, everyday there's a naked woman in the *Sun* and the *Daily Sport* - these papers have circulations in the millions. Middle-class men wouldn't be seen dead looking at the page three girls, except askance on the tube with superior tolerance, slightly envious of the easy working-class bonhomie of their less privileged countrymen.

Whether contemporary art in Britain is lewd because of a cultural penchant for saucy pictures or whether artists thought sex would sell better than seriousness is difficult to unravel. The fact is, twenty years ago there were no lewd British

artists. Back then, artists were all uptight formalists and if they did nudes at all they made them so asexual and steeped in dreary paint as to make them unrecognizable and completely inert. Most of the artists were a bit upper-class, a bit standoffish. They still sold their work by the yard in guineas (one pound, one shilling instead of plain one pound – very upper-class). There was no ambiguity back then. Art was for rich people and it was so serious and turgid that the masses didn't even give it a second look. There *was* one working-class artist from Yorkshire called David Hockney. He was openly gay and did fabulous paintings of boys taking showers together and swimming naked in azure swimming pools, but he moved to California.

Now British artists are doing spectacular art that's sexy and exciting. Britain has changed – I mean really changed. You wouldn't recognize it. Take your notion of the British stiff upper lip and throw it out the window. In the old days no one talked to each other. You weren't allowed to show your feelings. Never complain, never explain was the maxim. Now people talk constantly – they can't get it out fast enough. They keep telling you how they *FEEL*. Some people say it happened because of the public outpouring of grief over the loss of Princess Diana. This may be so, but things had already begun to change when an artist named Damien Hirst organized an exhibition called *Freeze* in London in 1988.

Damien Hirst was an art student at the time and he and his friends commandeered a disused warehouse in London's Docklands and put on an exhibition of their new raw work. More importantly they threw a huge opening party to which all the important critics and media types were invited. It was massive success. All the artists were rowdy and outspoken, and totally obsessed with self-promotion which was something new because artists were supposed to be reticent, eccentric and confined to their slightly upper-class ivory towers, but Damien Hirst was different. He'd worked as a laborer on building sites, but he'd also worked at a famous gallery in the West End of London – the fashionable bit – and was very savvy about promotion. His tutors at Goldsmiths College, University of London, also pushed the idea of students getting their work out there and receiving as much exposure as possible.

In Britain you can get away with murder on TV and the “Young British Artists” - the YBAs as they came to be known - took full advantage. It became very hip to have an artist on your chat show and the artists were meant to act up and be lewd and generally embarrass the audience. The audience loved it (because of Benny Hill - national treasure). It was exciting and groundbreaking and most people were ready for a change after the dour matronly shadow that the Thatcher regime had

cast throughout the 80s. The artists would do their self-promoting antics, then the tabloids would report it and soon they became household names.

Now you can go up to anyone in the poorest parts of London and ask them to name two living artists and they'll say: Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin – or a dozen other celebrity artists. Try that in America. Contemporary art is now part of the culture in Britain. There's always been soccer and the pub, but now there's contemporary art too. The museums are packed, the art is outrageous and the people excited to have something to do on a Sunday afternoon. You walk into the National Portrait Gallery with your kids and the first thing you see is a big Gilbert and George photograph, eight feet high – a double self-portrait. They're naked, their backs facing us. They've got their hands on their buttocks. Oh dear, they're bending over slightly, pulling on their cheeks. Oh my goodness! But no one's batting an eyelid. The kids don't care, neither do the parents. It's like Britain has suddenly become Denmark or Sweden.

One reason the people like the art so much is that most of it is about sex and death. The Brits only discovered sex about thirty-five years ago, but it still took them a long time to get used to it and genuinely concede that sex actually existed (Benny Hill helped). Now the Brits are all sexed-up and as for death, well, they've always

had an irrepressible, ingrained, gallows sense of humor. Sex and death make the art direct, outrageous and dynamic - now everything's all out in the open.

A couple of years ago, the first thing you saw coming out of customs at Heathrow Airport was a huge black and white billboard of Tracey Emin's head (looking naughty), her eyes colored an intoxicating sapphire blue; superimposed next to her was a bottle of Sapphire gin and the words *Taste and See*. Her claim to fame is her notorious, "Everyone I have Ever Slept With (1963-1995)" (1995), a work of art, a tent, actually, with appliquéd names of all the above including her mother and her aborted fetuses. Tracey Emin's act – her appearances – her party-girl persona - give new meaning to the concept of the "personality of the artist." Self-promotion is suddenly "in," modesty, "out," and the artists are famous for being famous. And if you still have doubts about the excitement over all this new contemporary art about sex and death, what could be more scary and provocative than Damien Hirst's tiger shark - a real seventeen-foot long shark, floating flamboyantly in a factory-made glass and steel tank of formaldehyde. Hirst, just to make us *think about it* entitled the piece "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living," (1991). Hirst's work is mostly about death – he's also done things with brightly colored dots – you may have seen them – you can buy his dot wallpaper and dot T-shirts now - but mostly it's death. He's done

things with dead cows and other livestock that might make you want to become a vegetarian.

In the late eighties Charles Saatchi, a multi-millionaire (whose ad-agency, incidentally, ran Margaret Thatcher's ad-campaign), started buying Hirst's and Emin's work. Now they're blue chip artists with work in museums across the globe. Saatchi became the foremost collector of contemporary art in the world and made and defined the careers of about forty artists. In the wake of Saatchi's buying spree, a lot of bright new people started buying contemporary art too. It became the "in thing" and new galleries sprung up all over London, especially in the East End, the most working-class quarter. All these beautiful, rich people traveled to parts of London they'd never have dreamed of going to before.

Another sensational artist in the Saatchi's stable is Marc Quinn. His most notorious work "Self" (1991) is actually a self-portrait made from taking a cast of his head. He filled the mold made from the cast with nine pints of his own blood and then had it frozen and exhibited in a specially made refrigerated display unit. Charles Saatchi, by the way, is married to famous TV chef Nigella Lawson. There was a story in the papers about "Self" being accidentally unplugged - Quinn's blood was said to be oozing all over Charles and Nigella's kitchen floor, but don't

worry, “Self” is now installed at Saatchi’s brand new museum next to the “London Eye,” (the big new tourist-trap/gondola wheel on the South Bank of the Thames). If you think about it, “Self” is totally about personal identity - it’s a blood bank – it’s Quinn’s DNA. *Your* DNA is so *you* – one day, when we get tired of Quinn’s old “Self” we’ll be able to flush him away and clone a completely new one.

The other interesting thing about Quinn and his fellow YBAs - who are actually a little bit older now - is that a lot of their work is ephemeral. Can a frozen lump of blood last as long as the Mona Lisa? Only if the electricity stays on. The Old Masters didn’t need electricity; the new ones are digital and can’t live without it. Ephemeral or not, contemporary art has a short shelf-life and the artists have to keep upping the ante to make their newest work as *au courant* as possible – it’s got to outshine their old stuff or their careers will be toast because there are too many young Turks lurking in the wings ready to usurp them, but this is another thing that makes contemporary art so exciting.

Brit corporations now hire “resident artists.” It’s all the rage. They don’t want corporate flunkies, they want the real thing – they want attitude, the riskier the better. Having an artist on your payroll is thought to be very sexy. SEX and SEXY are big new words in Britain. In 1975, entrepreneur Malcolm McLaren

opened a clothes shop specializing in “anti-fashion” called “SEX” on the King’s Road in London - the same King’s Road where the Chelsea Drug Store used to be, as featured in the Rolling Stones song “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” (Let it Bleed, 1969). Malcolm McLaren’s greatest claim to fame was that he created a rock-and-roll band called the Sex Pistols. The *Pistols* and “SEX” only lasted three years. Britain wasn’t quite ready for sex in 1975, but by 2003, even the House of Common had sex on the brain. Opponents of the invasion of Iraq openly accused Tony Blair of “sexing-up” the data on the weapons of mass destruction.

Artists, sex and death are what contemporary art in Britain is all about. When you go to a museum in London – like the Saatchi museum – it’s a fun day out, but you’re not supposed to linger. Don’t contemplate the work. You’re supposed to “get it” immediately - like it’s a one line joke - then move on to the next piece. Art museums are for the quick fix. Get in, get out, don’t linger, but it’s okay to spend an hour in the restaurant (all museums in Britain have restaurants and they’re the hottest places in town to eat and meet) and then you can spend forty-five minutes in the museum bookshop – but whatever you do, don’t linger around the paintings.

Actually, hardly anyone is doing any painting anymore – painting is passé and things like photography, video and installation are the new gods. In Britain, contemporary art is now part of mass popular culture and this is a good thing for the artists. It's good for the people too because they get out more and it gives them something to talk about. It's now as much a part of life as soccer and the pub. It's invigorating. But remember this: the artists still have to go to art college and work very hard to become artists, because in order to become a contemporary artist your work has to shock and yet still be related somehow to something in art history (otherwise it wouldn't be art) and it has to be somehow beautiful too – it's actually harder than you think - and there *is* something sublimely beautiful about Damian Hirst's shark when you're standing there looking-in through the glass at that fabulous *dead* creature.

“Dead Dad” (1997) by Ron Mueck is another blockbuster. It's a half-life size completely realistic sculpture of a, well a *dead dad* – a dead dad everyman in his 60s, lying there on the floor naked, exposed, human, dead - reduced. It's so realistic it takes your breath away. They say you don't really grow-up until your parents are gone... While clichés are exploited in much of the YBAs' work, what it's really saying is: let's look at this banality afresh, let's reappraise it, let give it a good wallop. Most of the work coming out of Britain over the last decade

doesn't sweep things under the rug. Quite the opposite, it gives you a short/sharp nominalistic, existential jolt.

Contemporary art in Britain has its serious side, but it's more interested in being sensational than grave and some of it is bluntly ironic, in an "if you don't laugh, you cry" sort of a way. Mockery is a national sport in Britain. Take Sara Lucas's "Au Naturel" (1994), which is actually a nasty old mattress lying on the floor, tilted slightly against the wall of the museum – it doesn't look right – it looks like it should be somewhere else - like in an alleyway or rubbish dump. On one side of the mattress is a red fire bucket lying on its side, above which are two large melons; on the other side is an erect cucumber and two oranges. A satire on the banality of the conjugal bed, it says: here's married life with all its familiarity and contempt, its secrets and lies, its spikes and compromises. It's saying: it's *BEDTIME!* – for the next forty years. OUCH!

In America this flippancy doesn't play so well. Over here contemporary art is still mostly serious. Ask any Frenchman and he'll tell you it's a well-known fact that Americans are a tad prudish. Much contemporary art on both sides of the Atlantic deals with nudity and body fluids – okay, no big deal - it's stuff we deal with everyday in the bathroom, but we don't want to have to see it downtown, thank

you very much! American contemporary art peddling sex and death tends to over-compensate by being rather earnest – it’s the only way it can find the credentials to pull it off. Andres Serrano’s huge red cibachrome “Piss Christ” (1987) is a good example. This photograph outraged many people, but the work was still about serious issues. Serrano is an Hispanic-American whose culture is steeped in the mysteries of blood and the sacred rituals of the Catholic church – it’s serious stuff. Paradoxically, Serrano’s serious work egged on a lot of YBAs to be more outrageous and rebellious. Another New York artist, Jeff Koons, did some exquisitely executed life-size sculptures of him and his then then-wife, former Italian porn model Ilona Cicciolina *in flagrante delicto* (“Made in Heaven” series, 1991), but devoid of irony, it was all done so industriously that it was positively puritanical in its preachy ardor. Artists shouldn’t preach.

Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection opened in New York at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Oct. 2, 1999. It included the *tent*, the *mattress*, the *dead dad* etc. Rudolph Guliani went ballistic. The old debate of decency vs. free speech raged. He took particular dislike to Chris Ofili’s “The Holy Virgin Mary” (1996) – a mixed media painting depicting the Madonna which incorporated elephant dung. The Brooklyn Museum’s funding came into question.

Nonetheless, *Sensation* made millions in ticket sales. The *Sensation* exhibition

traveled from London, where it had debuted in 1997, paradoxically at the Royal Academy of Art – that’s the R-O-Y-A-L Academy – *God Save the Queen* – which also happens to be the title of the Sex Pistols’ first hit record.

Can America “get” contemporary art? The audience for contemporary art stateside is still very privileged. New York and San Francisco “get” contemporary art, but what about the rest of us? Compared to Britain, America is massive - no place in Britain is more than 75 miles from the sea. Despite America’s immoderate size, you can connect to the net instantly – at a click you can log on to artists working in London, Berlin and Moscow, but getting the actual art here - getting the genuine object into the center of America isn’t always easy. Catching the contemporary art bug is all about seeing the *real* thing.

Another aspect that people in the American heartland tend to forget is that if you’re living in New York or London you’re right in the center of the mess. There’s a lot to be said for *street life* – it’s visceral and exciting. In the heartland of the burbs, tethered to our cars, we live more vicariously in a kind of virtual version of real life – we’re not rubbing shoulders as much. We’ve probably forgotten what *street* authenticity and uniqueness mean - we’re more into mass-production and watching TV than uniqueness.

You can bring all the art in the world here, but then you've still got to get people to go out and see it. It's quite heartening when you drive downtown past the museum and see people huddled around Yoko Ono's "Freight Train" (2000), but it's only a huddle, it's not yet a movement.

The Brits shy away from big cars because gas is five dollars a gallon. Americans worship the automobile and have an ingrained love of auto styling. Auto styling is brilliant and it's about the sexiest art form in America, but a car isn't unique – it isn't the unique, authentic art object. Why would you want to go to a museum, which, *survey says*, is just like going to church, when you can drive around in your big sexy car? If Museums are going to entice people they're going to have to do something different - like be turned into super/fabulous retail outlets with a bookshop the size of an aircraft hanger and a restaurant with fabulous views that stays open at night. The art has to be spectacular too. In Britain, going to the museum is like going to the mall only more cultured because you're looking at art not schlock.

Contemporary art isn't about bones and history; it's about the whole retail package of mass culture, sex and death. America's got death down – death by intravenous

injection – okay, we’re all going to die – but the problem’s the other thing.

America is going to have to work on its open-mindedness and open-up it’s BODY and soul to contemporary art, and American artists are going to have to develop a more spectacular sense of art and stop being so humble – they’ve need to think *SHOWBIZ!* But, ultimately, it’s WE THE PEOPLE who are going to have to figure out that there might be something lacking in our lives that a big car and widescreen TV can’t quite placate. Ooh, that sounds preachy!

In Britain art is entertaining. Can art in America be entertaining? Will we allow it? Here’s another interesting paradox. Michael Craig-Martin, Damien Hirst’s guru/professor at Goldsmiths grew up in America and studied at Yale University.

We’ve got to make contemporary art more accessible, not just the art, although it helps when the art is spectacular. The museums have to be more spectacular too. Unless we can make art become part of our lifestyle it’s not going to work. If we make viewing art feel like taking a class, people won’t bother. We’ve got to make it as natural as going to the mall.

WANTED: ARTISTS WITH CHUTZPAH! Julien Stallabrass wrote a book, a scathing attack, on new Brit art called “High Art Lite.” He said the YBAs were

dumbing-down art - he felt that the art wasn't serious enough, that it lacked theoretical clout. Don't worry Julien, they'll come up with the theory later, but right now the only *liteness* is that people get it. And think about it, the more they get it, the more they'll eventually be receptive to the great *dog-painters* like Picasso and Jackson Pollock.

So, if we can just park our cars, instantly *GET IT*, move on to the next piece, then, possibly, we might stick around, buy a magazine - something for the coffee table perhaps - take the escalator up to the restaurant with the fabulous views, talk it over, and while swirling a glass of chilled Chardonnay, finally see that art and lifestyle can go together.

*The population of England (as opposed to the United Kingdom) is 49,500,000. England is 50,327 square miles; Michigan is 56,243 square miles.