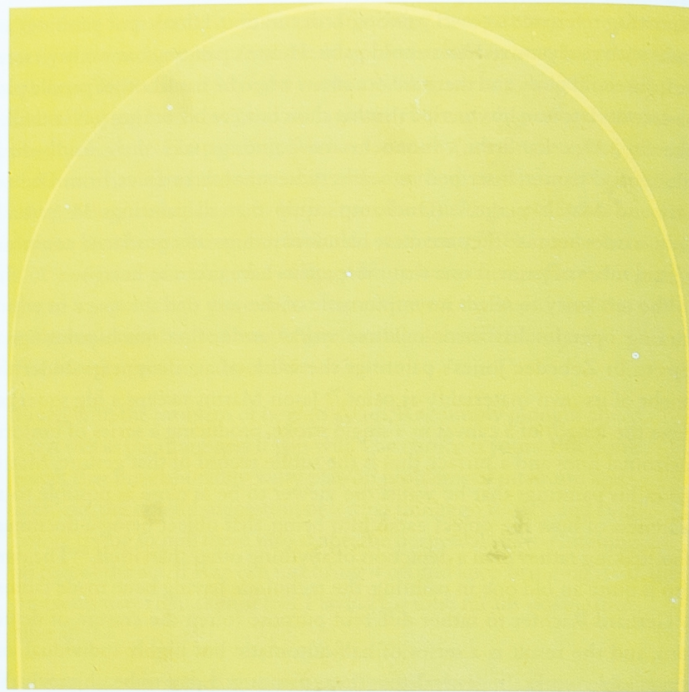




HIGH ART LITE

*Julian Stallabrass*





50 Ian Davenport, *Poured Painting: Lime Green, Pale Yellow, Lime Green*, 1998

out as a conceptual project; like Hirst's spin and spot paintings, they form part of an endlessly variable series.<sup>82</sup> As simple as an idea in advertising, they yield impressive and alluring physical objects.

Davenport is open about his technique. He describes one set of paintings in which a graceful arc of paint of inhuman perfection borders the square canvas:

The paintings ... are made by pouring household paint, straight from the can onto a board placed on the floor. I continue pouring until the pool of colour has nearly filled the entire picture area. The painting is then stood up, allowing gravity to pull the mass of material down and

off the bottom edge. This process is repeated, and a line of colour is left, as one layer obscures and nearly erases another.<sup>83</sup>

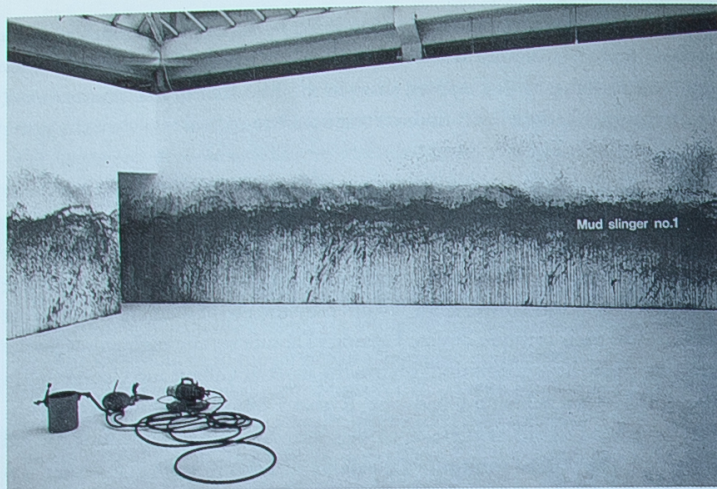
The painter's touch is mistrusted now. Artists continue to paint only by allowing some other force to participate in and to an extent determine the form of the painting. Or they paint only to undo what they have made: having painstakingly constructed a painted surface, dripping turpentine over it (Callum Innes). Or they make of their gesture so large and single a sweep that physics and physiology must intervene and undermine the – in any case, suspect – transmission of emotion into touch (Jason Martin). Or they animate dead black fields of thick paint with the minimum hand-made texture necessary to let a flickering carry across the surface, as though it were the last moment of a dying light (Zebedee Jones). Or they mechanise gesture, painting facsimiles of touch inch by inch, with the meticulous attention to detail of a Pre-Raphaelite painter, to forge and denature the expressivity of painting (Glenn Brown).

Yet the market does not permit these painters to surrender agency entirely, to let go into pure contingency. Mark Harris has argued that, reduced as the scope for action among these painters is, there is still in their practice a core of authenticity, to do, if not with touch, with aesthetic judgement, which is not present in more radical interventions, such as that of Angus Fairhurst who has hired sign painters to make his flat, conceptual works.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Angela Bulloch has made drawing machines that respond to the actions of viewers, laying down complex grids in ink that are pretty good simulacra of some of the abstract-chance work (see fig. 76). The issue on which she presses here is to automate the process and to allow viewers who come to understand that the machine responds to their own movements to try to change the work – striking at the heart of authorship.

The works of these endgame painters are largely about the condition of painting. They are a critique and a continuation, half-apology, half-bravado, of subjective painting and of painting as object. What good fortune that the critique allows the continuation of what the market requires: many coloured objects placed in rows, first in galleries and then in the houses of collectors.

They have also acquired another resonance. Given the context of the art





17 Angela Bulloch, *Mud Slinger*, 1993

of sneaking monumental figure sculpture back into contemporary art where it was quickly welcomed by the establishment.<sup>14</sup>

Between angst-ridden expressionist painting, and calm, latter-day-hippie melding with nature, and strivings for metaphysical significance, the contemporary world was largely passed by. What is more, these artists, almost all men, took themselves very seriously, and worked in the grand style. Despite the irruptions and rebellions of the 1960s, there seemed to be a direct line between much of this work and the older compromise between modernist, primitivist and representational elements, brought to most efficient combination in the work of Henry Moore. There was the same engagement with the rural landscape, and the same soft humanism, so convenient for consensual politics. It was that last aspect that made British art seem so worn out, for consensus had long since passed away (at least from the election of Thatcher in 1979, though there were signs of its demise beforehand) and by the late 1980s it was perfectly clear that no resurrection was in prospect. The innovation of high art lite, as we shall see particularly in the next two chapters, was to bring in a harder, cruder and more nihilistic element to art, one more suited to the times.

So the new generation of British artists had a strongly sceptical attitude towards the dominant art of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and of the specious justifications that surrounded it, from press releases to weighty catalogue essays. Sometimes this took the form of specific critique: Richard Long, for instance, was taken on by Angela Bulloch with her *Mud Slinger* (1993), a device that decorated the gallery walls with mud, as Long had done laboriously by hand, but now in a rapid and purely mechanical manner.<sup>15</sup> This not only took art-making out of the hands of the artist, with all the draining out of specious aesthetic experience that handing over to a machine entails, but also had the effect of making mud a matter not of the earth but of the media. Likewise, Matthew Arnatt made a Richard Long-style stone line, using large lumps of coal, displayed them in an 'alternative' show held in Building One, and called the piece *Slag* (1994). What was rural became post-industrial and, with the double meaning of 'slag', the once simple, spiritual line becomes sullied. Tim Noble and Sue Webster travelled to Death Valley to make the dour-sounding *Untitled Stone Formation* (1998) in the Richard Long manner: actually a love-heart containing the artists' initials.<sup>16</sup>

Another assault on what was most dear to the British art establishment was Glenn Brown's remaking of other artists' paintings, including those of Frank Auerbach. This was not merely an appropriation of an image and a comment on originality in the manner of Sherrie Levine (a US artist who notoriously made photographic copies of well-known works by modernist photographers), but also a specific attack on painterly touch as a vehicle of personal expression. In remaking paintings by Auerbach, renowned for the thick impasto of his surfaces, Brown creates the illusion of the paint's troughs and ridges on an entirely flat, slick surface. Not only is the process highly laborious and mechanical but what were records of a painter's action become part of an apparently effortless illusory representation, as in a magazine reproduction. In no way are these works a homage to the work of the older master, who Brown describes as a third rate Van Gogh. Indeed, Stuart Morgan has written that for Brown 'daft, culturally sanctioned gesturalism is an Augean stable, and he the Hercules whose duty it is to disinfect it.'<sup>17</sup> The mockery is carried further in the titles that Brown gives to his copies. They are generally drawn from low cultural sources – horror films, for instance: *The Day the World Turned Auerbach*





18 Glenn Brown, *The Day the World Turned Auerbach*, 1992

(1992) makes it clear that Auerbach's distortions of the human visage, being to no good or higher purpose, are merely horrible. Of course, whether any disinfection takes place is debatable; rather the effect of such works, once the first shock of seeing the old bore being satirised has worn off, seems to be to add another marketing option to the world of art.

Further examples of this less than respectful attitude to previous British art can be found in the work of Keith Coventry. He celebrated the act of mutilation in which one head of a cast of Henry Moore's famous sculpture *King and Queen* (1952–53), sited in a remote Scottish location, was cut off and taken away by a persistent (sawing through bronze takes a long time) and perhaps Jacobin or nationalist thief. Checkily, Coventry cast his own copy of the

removed head. Further, in his works that highlight the use of the names of Homeric heroes on the signs of kebab shops, it is perhaps not coincidental that another much-revered father of British sculpture, Anthony Caro, had recently sculpted a vast and pompous assembly of Greek and Trojan heroes.<sup>18</sup> In a similar degrading of the high points of British sculptural modernism Hadrian Piggott, as part of a larger project, has made sculptures in soap that look similar to pieces by Barbara Hepworth, highlighting the fetishistic character of those streamlined stones and blocks of wood.

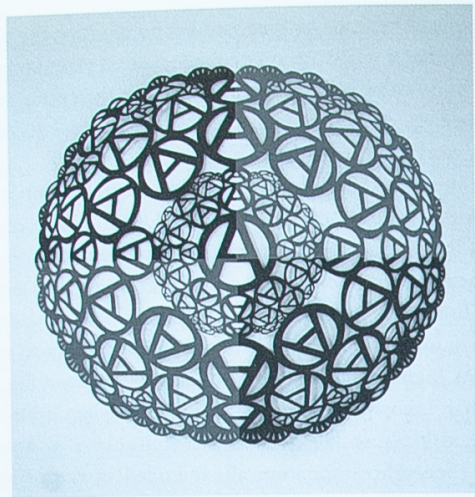
Even where previous British art was not directly referred to, there was still an implicit criticism offered by high art lite in its cool, youthful, resolutely urban stance, in the costume of hard modernity that it had slung over its shoulders in defiance of the hesitations of the past. This went further than saying even that the old art was provincial and reactionary: rather in its nihilistic outlook on art and the world, in its taking of degradation and violence as a form of spectacle, it took on the worthy, if generally unspoken, foundations of established British art. Among the statements implied by the older art and the manner in which it was displayed and supported by art institutions, and sent up by the new work are the following:

- art is good for you
- art has an ethical content
- art illuminates the human condition
- art reveals deep inner truths that cannot be expressed in words

The implied critique of these old foundational clichés was made partly on the basis that they no longer seemed plausible: no one much believed in ethics, the human condition or truth any longer, at least among the cultural elite, who were by now well educated in relativism. It was also clear that the spectacle of the art world of the 1980s hardly matched these humanist principles, being instead an unseemly scramble for money, a prime example of Thatcherite speculation.

The popularity of high art lite was accentuated, then, because of the elitism of what had gone before: both the money-grubbing, speculative, overblown neo-expressionist painting that had appeared so suited to the 1980s bubble economy, and had been sold to and made for a tiny and very well-heeled





32 Simon Perriton, *Radiant Anarchy Doily*, 1997

decoration and decorum with youthful disorder and vandalism, and a suggestion that one may be as conformist as the other.

Or to take another simple example from the work of an artist with a more extensive project, Jordan Baseman's *Shoes (Size 8)* (1995), massively elongated footwear, switch the conventional fetishistic association from female to male.

Much of the work of Ceal Floyer is also in the form of visually impressive one-liners, playing with illusion: a light switch that seems real but is actually a projected image (turning on a real light switch will make it invisible), or a light bulb appears to be burning but again the light comes from a number of projections of a lit bulb, and the bulb you see is off; or the projected image of a nail in a wall, a variant on an old Cubist pun.<sup>32</sup>

In the synthesis of idea and image that is the visual work of art, these works greatly favour the idea, and do so to the extent that the two may become uncoupled. The image less embodies than illustrates the idea.

What is missing from such work can be seen clearly by comparing it with one-liner art that successfully convinced art-world professionals that it is of the deepest significance. Rachel Whiteread's distinct contribution, and in part

this is the reason for her success, is to combine the one-liner – few have been more consistent in the pursuit of a single idea, casting the spaces framed by objects – and a traditional engagement with material, with sculpture in a conventional sense, the result being a hybrid, part concept, part aesthetic presence. As Lucas says of Whiteread: 'All her work has the appearance of being proper sculpture and mine hasn't.'<sup>33</sup> The difference is not just in the use of materials, for Whiteread uses some (including plaster and rubber) that are as low and domestic as those of Lucas, but in the level on which the one-liner operates: with Lucas it is at the level of language, typically with visual punning; with Whiteread it is at the level of technique, and while interpretations circle around that base-line, being caught up with absence, death, the tomb, the uncanny, they are not bound by specific symbols.<sup>34</sup>

The usual rule of recursion is in force here: one-liners comment on themselves and their ostensible subject. An example is Glenn Brown's work – including, as we have seen, meticulous but flat copies of highly impastoed British painting (fig. 18). That practice can be read not only as a one-line comment on artistic expression and the 'death of the author' but also as a performance that comments upon repetition itself:

Auerbach's portraits are like cartoons. He has a set way of doing the eyes, nose and mouth with brushmarks he has perfected over the years. He copies himself, everyone does. The notion of self-parody and plagiarism is in everyone's work; Picasso did second-rate Picassos.<sup>35</sup>

So Brown does only what every painter does, with the difference that he does it as part of a conceptual project that talks about doing it.

### In extremis

There do seem to be occasions when theory has been needed, however, and one of the most striking examples is the catalogue to the exhibition of Jake and Dinos Chapman at the ICA. Plainly, the worry was that the Chapmans' kiddie dummies sprouting sexual organs in unusual places, or showing the victims of torture, would be condemned as simply attention-seeking and sensationalist, a crude gallop over the tender parts of the public and the media.