

ELIZABETH FULLERTON

ARTRAGE!

The story of the
BRITART Revolution

'It felt like we were a rock band
on the road. And we definitely
behaved like that too'
SAM TAYLOR-WOOD

Thames & Hudson



Abigail Lane, Sarah Lucas, Marc Quinn and Rachel Whiteread.²⁸ 'They were so proud of one another and enthusiastic about each other's work, they were all very, very supportive,' she says. The exhibition would provide the blueprint for 'Brilliant!' in Minneapolis in 1995, featuring an expanded group of many of the same artists.

To give a sense of the international context in those early days, New York and Cologne were the two big art centres, each with a strong gallery infrastructure. Unlike the London scene, where no market existed for emerging artists, young American artists, according to the ex-Goldsmiths painter Glenn Brown, 'were very aware of the market. And...were making work which they thought might fit into Pace Gallery, Barbara Gladstone, Matthew Marks.' New York had witnessed an explosion of talent in the 1980s, with women artists such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, the so-called Metro Pictures group including Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince (on the Metro Pictures gallery roster), the Neo-Geometric Conceptualists such as Jeff Koons, and Neo-Expressionist painters like Julian Schnabel, who formed part of a broad international reaction

against the emotional sparseness of Minimalism and Conceptualism. 'The parallel to what happened in the '90s in London is what happened in the '80s in New York when there was a huge new influx of artists,' says Barbara Gladstone. In Germany, painters like Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter had significant international reputations, but by the early 1990s the electric Cologne scene was dominated by the provocateur Martin Kippenberger's circle and another artists' group known as the Mulheimer Freiheit. 'The real model for us was Cologne,' says Liam Gillick. The galleries there seemed 'loose and prepared to take a risk' and the British artists took their cue, he notes, from people like Kippenberger, who combined a hard-drinking persona with prolific, irreverent output, across media, styles and disciplines.

Exchanges would occur between the BritArtists and their foreign counterparts, notably in 1993 with the two-way British/American show 'Lucky Kunst' curated by Gregor Muir, now head of the ICA,²⁹ and with the 1994 British/German show 'WM Karaoke Football', curated by

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It was unheard of. It was beyond my wildest dreams.

DAMIEN HIRST

the German artist Georg Herold and styled as a friendly match between the two 'sides'.³⁰ In New York, young gallerists such as Gladstone, Matthew Marks and Jim Cohen took an interest in the BritArtists, while in Cologne they were shown at Tanja Grunert, Aurel Scheibler and Esther Schipper. From the start Angela Bulloch and Liam Gillick gravitated towards Europe, feeling more affinity with the critical rigour of the Continental scene than the British one.

The year 1992 closed with Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread pulling ahead of the group in terms of international recognition. Damien was nominated for the Turner Prize but lost to an older Goldsmiths graduate, Grenville Davey. Significantly, Charles Saatchi singled out Rachel and Damien to take part in his first Young British Artists show at Boundary Road. 'Going from a student and seeing shows there like "New York Art Now"...and actually getting a show there. It was unheard of. It was beyond my wildest dreams,' says Damien, who had been turned down by Anthony d'Offay and the Lisson Gallery. The *Daily Mail* headline ran 'Celebrities Flock to Gaze at a Cow's Head and a Dead Shark'.³¹ That the paper, weathervane of Middle England, deemed the show newsworthy enough to cover – even with likely prodding from Saatchi's PR machine – demonstrated how the once esoteric realm of contemporary art had begun to cross over to general interest within a few years. It marked the first time Damien's generation had been formally categorized as Young British Artists. Saatchi staged six of these shows, sealing the label in the public consciousness to describe a diverse group of artists, many of whom were never even collected by him. For possibly the first time ever, a collector had created a movement.³²

CHAPTER THREE

RAPID ASCENT, A STRONG FEMALE VOICE: 1993–1994

In this still small artists' community, everyone would turn up to support each other's shows and down the ubiquitous Beck's beer: Beck's sponsored many shows through the 1990s. 'We were all on such a bloody budget, if there was a degree of hedonism it was because you were just going to sign on the next day and so you were hitting as much free beer as you could the night before,' says Louise Wilson, who with her twin sister Jane was part of a second wave of Goldsmiths graduates that came on the scene at this time. In their collaborative film and photography the pair explored marginalized domestic spaces that exuded menace, such as motel rooms, bordellos and bed and breakfasts. Their shared bedsit in London's red-light district, King's Cross, gave them a perfect vantage position. On one occasion, the threat of violence implied in their work materialized literally on their doorstep when a man tried to smash the front door down. 'It was really quite aggressively done and really quite serious and then two weeks later this note arrived,' says Jane. 'They'd come back to the door and bloody left a note on the back of a gyro receipt apologizing, saying they had a psychiatric illness and if you wanted to contact them see overleaf.' Naturally the artists incorporated the note in their artwork, *Construction and Note* (1992).

The art juggernaut was by now rolling inexorably forward as the original 'Freeze' core expanded to a new batch of Goldsmiths graduates: Sam Taylor-Wood and Gillian Wearing from the BA course; Glenn Brown, Adam Chodzko and the Wilson twins from the MA. They were joined by Chris Ofili from Chelsea College of Arts, Georgina Starr and Rachel Whiteread from the Slade, Royal College graduates Jake and Dinos Chapman, Tracey Emin and Gavin Turk, and Scottish artists such as Christine Borland and Douglas Gordon from the Glasgow School of Art.

The period 1993 to 1994 saw frenetic activity and hustling as British artists sought to establish themselves. Outside the system, Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin opened their shop and the young gallerist Joshua Compston organized bohemian village fetes; within it, Jay Jopling launched his White Cube gallery, the Chapman brothers entered the fray and Rachel Whiteread became the first woman to win the Turner Prize with her remarkable sculpture *House*. As Damien cleaved animals in two, another strand of art was emerging that explored human relations. Women artists would enjoy a brief sensation

to the group with their revelling in abjection and self-absorption, Gilbert & George showed their 1974 photo montage *Human Bondage*, in which they sprawl drunk on the floor among cigarette butts and overturned glasses. '...There's a lurking suspicion that art-making is masturbation among the artists here,' the critic Adrian Searle wrote in the *Independent*, highlighting the show's 'solipsistic tone'.³

To the dismay of some, the group found themselves being exported as punkish young art entrepreneurs by the British Council, which sponsored shows of the group in America, Europe, Australia and Japan.⁴ 'There was a mismatch between how the work was packaged as a Cool Britannia embodiment of all things British and the actual integrity of the work, which seemed to be more disdainful of the idea of Britishness,' says Jake Chapman. 'Even down to when you say British, is it monarchic? Well it was anarchic, not monarchic.'

The stereotyping of the BritArtists would reach its zenith in October 1995 with the exhibition 'Brilliant! New Art from London' at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, featuring twenty-two British artists,



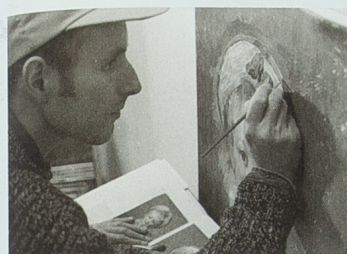
ABOVE: Glenn Brown.
Photograph by Gautier
Deblonde

OPPOSITE: Installation
view of 'Brilliant! New Art
from London', 1995–1996.
In the background:
Liam Gillick and Henry
Bond's desk installation
with *Documents*, Glenn
Brown's paintings on far
wall, Rachel Whiteread's
mattresses, and Gillian
Wearing's *Signs* on the
right wall

although those from Scotland were glaringly absent. In a misjudged attempt at wit, the catalogue cover reproduced the debris-strewn scene of the IRA's deadly 1992 bombing of London's Baltic Exchange with 'BRILLIANT!' stamped across it, drawing an implied parallel with the supposed explosiveness of the new art. 'Walker Welcomes Brash

Brits for Flashy Bash', a press release announced and, 'Witness work by a new generation of artists from the land that brought you Sid and Nancy, Chuck and Di, fish and chips, Hugh Grant and Cats.'⁵ 'What was being marketed with "Brilliant!" was this punk sensibility and these cheeky chappie Brits', recalls the artist Adam Chodzko. Dinos Chapman remembers people in befeater outfits saying 'Mind the Gap' in pseudo cockney accents. Middle America seemed like another planet, and many artists felt alienated by the culture clash.

The embarrassing cultural clichés and hipster tone of the catalogue unfortunately upstaged the diversity of offerings. The line-up included big players like Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread and less high-profile artists such as Adam Chodzko, Anya Gallaccio, Georgina Starr and Gillian Wearing. Glenn Brown, a second-wave Goldsmiths graduate, showed his flattened versions of thick impasto paintings by Frank Auerbach and Karel Appel, which were intended both as homage and an act of aggression towards the originals. While doing his MA at Goldsmiths, Glenn had developed his distinctive style of copying renowned portraits from bad reproductions; by emptying out their expressive content, he caught the loss in the transition from easel to print and debased the painter's heroic status. In the wake of the German Neo-Expressionists like Georg Baselitz, 'gesture seemed hackneyed...and impossible to use anymore,' Glenn explains. 'So I was trying to figure out whether the brushstroke could be reinvigorated in any way. And I thought the best way of reinvigorating...the expressive gesture was to first make sure it was thoroughly dead. And then rebuild it.' At Goldsmiths figurative painters such as Auerbach and Francis Bacon were deeply unfashionable, hence the attraction of Glenn to the former and Damien to the latter. It was 'part of the game. That you have to make an original statement for anyone to pay attention,' Glenn says. Later, a tough tutorial with





ABOVE: Glenn Brown,
*The Day The World
Turned Auerbach*, 1991.
Oil on canvas, 56 × 51 cm
(22 × 20 in.)

OPPOSITE: Glenn Brown,
Dali-Christ (after 'Soft
Construction with Boiled
Beans: Premonition of
Civil War' 1936 by Salvador
Dali), 1992. By kind
permission of the Gala-
Salvador Dalí Foundation,
Spain. Oil on canvas,
274 × 183 cm
(108 1/4 × 72 in.)



Michael Craig-Martin encouraged him to be more extreme and Glenn tackled the hallucinatory work of Salvador Dalí and science fiction illustrators. 'They're both trying to make almost photographically hyper-detailed paintings, but in a place that doesn't actually exist.... And I thought, "Well that's more interesting. I'm redescribing somebody else's imagination."'

Of Nigerian heritage, British-born Chris Ofili, a graduate of Chelsea and the Royal College of Art, was a new addition to the group, presenting vibrant canvases that referenced black culture and racial stereotypes. Following a British Council-sponsored residency in Zimbabwe in 1992, Chris had incorporated lacquered elephant dung in his paintings, disrupting their decorative beauty – taboo in the Postmodern 1990s – with earthiness and reality.



ABOVE: Michael Landy working on *Scrapheap Services*, Clapham Common studio, c. 1994. Photograph by Abigail Lane

OPPOSITE: Michael Landy, *Scrapheap Services*, 1995. Installation view from 'Brilliant!' at the Soap Factory, Minneapolis. Mixed media

Among other highlights was Michael Landy's powerful installation *Scrapheap Services* (1995), a room-size representation of a fictitious Orwellian company that disposed of superfluous people in society. Comprising dustbins, a corporate video, posters, a disposal machine and mannequins sweeping up thousands of miniature cut-outs of people, the work took two and a half years to make. 'I used to go and raid McDonald's late at night and tin banks at Sainsbury's,' says the artist, who, according to his then girlfriend Abigail Lane, would stink from the rubbish he constantly stuffed in his pockets to be transformed into tiny figures. The piece reflects Michael's trauma over his father's consignment to the refuse heap following an industrial accident and his anger at the dehumanizing capitalist culture embraced by Margaret Thatcher, with its erosion of the Welfare State. 'I've always been interested in the value our society gives to things, whether that's a weed or a person or a bread tray,' says Michael.

Tracey Emin found 'Brilliant!' 'just vile in every way'. 'Minnifuckinghellholeshittingapolis,' she grimaces. The group had no daily allowance, and a transport strike meant they either had to walk miles from the hotel to the museum in freezing temperatures or take a sightseeing bus around the city to install their show. Moreover, the minibars in their hotel had been cleared out, their reputations



preceding them. And they lived up to those reputations. Liam Gillick remembers one occasion with a free bar when the bar staff walked off in disgust, prompting the artists to climb over the bar and help themselves to drinks.

'Everyone was badly behaved,' Michael recalls. 'I think Richard [Flood, the curator] found trying to hang everybody in this space together was a bit like herding cats... "Her video's too loud. You can't see this," says Glenn Brown. 'I had a wall which was painted bright green to hang my paintings on, which made all the other work nearby it look pretty awful and led to animosity.' Tracey was furious to discover she had been allocated a noisy spot for her tent and decided to withdraw it from the show. 'So I started taking it down the escalators and got told that I wasn't allowed to take it off the premises, and I said, "Oh yes I can because it's mine and I brought it here by plane,"' she says. Eventually the tent was rehoused in another part of the museum. 'I was told by the curator that with my attitude I would never show in an American museum again,' Tracey remarks. 'I think...the idea that the work itself was inherently shocking, or that this was the exciting stuff coming out of Britain, overshadowed the possibility of really being able to figure out what might have been at its core, what really did connect the artists, which actually is quite a difficult, nebulous thing to figure out,' says Adam Chodzko.

WHO ARE THE YBAS?

The vexed issue of what connected the BritArtists has never been resolved for want of a simple answer. While common threads exist in their art, such as black humour, focus on the self or emphasis on death and decay, there was no overriding style. The artists certainly didn't consider themselves as a movement and had no manifesto or shared philosophy; yet they were undeniably a phenomenon. They emerged around the same time, many from the same college, socialized, lived and worked together, and absorbed the same cultural influences.

Inevitably, given their sheer number and the media and curatorial attention they received, it was only a matter of time before they earned a label. The American critic Michael Corris first discussed the 'young British artists' in a 1992 article in *Artforum*, whose glib,

vernacular style rooted the group within the sociopolitical context of British culture and set the tone for much subsequent literature on them.⁶ The writer Simon Ford is credited with coining the abbreviation YBA from the title of Saatchi's Young British Artist shows in his 1996 article 'Myth making' in *Art Monthly*, dissecting the mythology that had grown up around the group.⁷ Ford rightly pointed out that the emphasis on the anti-authority nature of the group was at odds with the fact the YBAs were funded by state grants and rapidly embraced by the establishment with exhibitions and prizes. However, what is not a myth is that these artists did effect a sea change in British culture and put emerging British artists on the international map.

The moniker YBA quickly caught on and became a convenient journalistic tag for the group. 'The first time I heard the term YBA, I thought, "This is a disaster,"' says Carl Freedman. 'People went along with it because it was just naming it. Now it's defining.' Ask any of the group if they view themselves as YBAs or like the label, most will answer in the negative. It 'grates' on Sarah Lucas, although she now finds it comical given their age; Damien Hirst hates it; for Jane and

[The label YBA] is so threadbare in terms of description...It's like hands up everyone who's got a British passport.

JAKE CHAPMAN



Angus Fairhurst and Angela Bulloch celebrating Mat Collishaw's birthday without him, 1997. Photograph by Sarah Lucas

it's about the Second World War. They have to ignore the dinosaurs, the mutants, the spacemen, the cavemen, the skeletons, Adam and Eve, Stephen Hawking. The kind of blinkers you have to be able to put on to see that is incredible.'

ART WITH A CONSCIENCE GAINS FAVOUR

However, within the art world, the taste for extravaganza was declining while art with a social conscience was in the ascendant. Shows such as the Whitechapel Gallery's 'Protest and Survive' and 'Intelligence' at Tate Britain in 2000 countered the recent emphasis on spectacle. Matthew Higgs, who co-curated 'Protest and Survive', declared that

years of British Council-sponsored exhibitions abroad had produced a 'collective weariness with British art that has accelerated its marginalized presence internationally' and made foreign curators suspicious.¹³ Artists and curators emerging in the wake of the Hirst generation are wary of making shiny, visually striking things to go in galleries. They see themselves as infinitely more serious,' noted Jonathan Jones in the *Guardian*, reviewing 'Protest and Survive'.¹⁴ Liam Gillick, who while at Goldsmiths never identified with the 'sex and death thing' of Damien's circle, was a rare exception from that generation to find favour with his cerebral art. He participated in several institutional shows, including 'Protest and Survive' and 'Intelligence', and earned a Turner Prize nomination in 2002.

Behind 'Intelligence' was the idea that the viewer was an investigator, who activated the art on display and gave it meaning.¹⁵ Liam contributed a bright-coloured suspended ceiling titled *Discussion Platform* to designate a potential area in which visitors could communicate, and a partially panelled barrier, *Applied Distribution Rig*, as somewhere for applied problem-solving and redistribution of ideas.¹⁶ Since his early work exploring the process of newsgathering, Liam's practice had been concerned with engineering social dialogue and interaction through

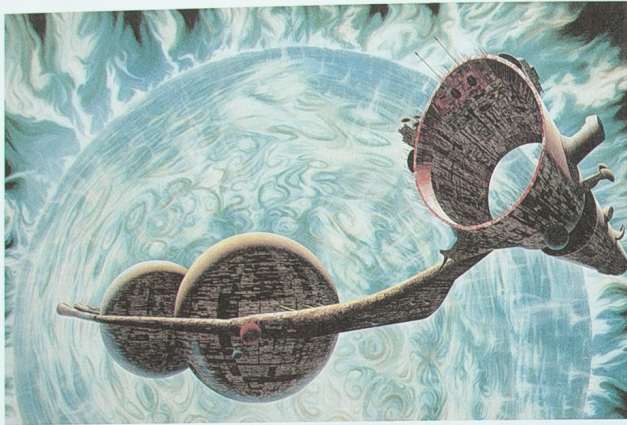


Liam Gillick in Fiona Rae's flat in the Barbican, London, 1996. Photograph by Fiona Rae

his installations, making him a leading light of the Relational Aesthetic movement. His socially engaged art is intended to be participatory, provocative and subversive, challenging the notion of art being located in one specific object or even discipline, spanning architecture, design and sculpture and often accompanied by text diagrams and literature. Using technological materials of the modern age such as Plexiglas and aluminium, he makes attractive installations with colourful Minimalist ceilings, partitions or benches as social spaces whose actual purpose or function is open to interpretation. His sleek corporate-looking installations with management jargon titles evoke big business and bureaucratic environments, and demonstrate ways in which architecture and language can be used to exert subtle social and economic control over people. 'I think certain things...that I was involved in got mis-characterized as being part of that system rather than conscious and critical of it....I don't think you have to make abject looking things to show that you're being critical,' he says.

Besides Liam Gillick, shows like 'Intelligence' and 'Protest and Survive' brought to wider attention non-Goldsmiths artists such as Martin Creed, Jeremy Deller, Grayson Perry and Wolfgang Tillmans, whose concerns were perceived by curators to be more serious, quieter and less self-indulgent than those of Damien Hirst's group. These four artists would go on to win the Turner Prize in this period, which reflected the changing mood.

Where YBAs had dominated the Turner Prize shortlists through the 1990s, by 2000 the Tate was casting its net wider. That year the German artist Wolfgang Tillmans won the award with his visual bombardment of photographs reflecting contemporary culture. But even so, the media managed to whip up controversies around the nominees. The sole BritArtist Glenn Brown found himself at the centre of a scandal when *The Times* newspaper reported that his painting, *The Loves of Shepherds* (2000), was 'copied' from the cover of a science fiction book without acknowledgment of the original. The wall label acknowledged the original, but the Tate's Turner Prize literature did not. At the Turner Prize ceremony the newspaper arranged for an awkward confrontation between Glenn and the outraged illustrator of the original, Tony Roberts. It led to a costly legal battle that was eventually settled out of court. 'It felt as if every year the journalists were trying to find "What's the freaky bit of publicity we can find in



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to appropriate other artists
and found images.

GLENN BROWN

OPPOSITE, ABOVE:
Glenn Brown, *The Loves
of Shepherds* (after
'Doublestar' by Tony
Roberts), 2000. Oil on
canvas, 219.5 × 336 cm
(86 ⁷/₁₆ × 132 ⁷/₁₆ in.)

OPPOSITE, BELOW:
Glenn Brown, *The Tragic
Conversion of Salvador
Dali* (after John Martin),
1998. Oil on canvas,
222 × 323 cm
(87 ⁷/₁₆ × 127 ⁷/₁₆ in.)

this year's Turner prize?" And unfortunately, I was it in my year,' says Glenn. While to the media and public it may have appeared a clear case of plagiarism, to Glenn, who had been immersed at Goldsmiths in Post-structuralist theory about the death of the author and appropriation, the furore seemed absurd. 'It seemed a natural part of the vocabulary of being a contemporary artist to me to appropriate other artists and found images. And to do anything else other than that seemed slightly irrelevant to me as an activity,' he says. 'I always believed my own voice is only made up of the voices of other people.' Glenn's artistic practice relied on unravelling the language of other painters and reinterpreting them for a modern audience.

Since Goldsmiths, Glenn's art had grown in sophistication. His paintings had moved beyond simple appropriation to become elaborate personalized compositions, freed, sometimes beyond recognition, from their original moorings through changes to colour, style or form and the addition of comically discordant titles.

The Turner Prize had come under increasing attack as tired and dominated by Conceptual art, so its award to Slade-trained Martin Creed in 2001 for his installation of an empty room with lights going on and off drew cries of outrage. In 2002, the culture minister Kim Howells ranted, 'If this is the best British artists can produce, then British art is lost. It is cold, mechanical, conceptual bullshit.'¹⁷

Michael Landy, one of the few YBAs overlooked for the Turner Prize, created an artwork in February 2001 around the destruction of his entire worldly belongings, catching the more sombre mood of the time. He traces the genesis of his spectacularly anti-commercial work *Break Down* to the Tate's purchase of his installation *Scrapheap Services*. 'Suddenly I have a car and suit and my little apartment and I think, "Well how can I fuck this up for myself?"' Staged in a former department store on Oxford Street, London, over two weeks with the help of the non-profit art funding organization Artangel, *Break Down* took more than three years to prepare and, like *Scrapheap Services*, demonstrates the extreme ascetic side of Michael's personality. He explains the work as 'a way to get to understand consumerism which is the number one ideology of our time, to literally take it apart. That's wrapped up with commodity but also oneself

regularly fetch several million pounds apiece at auction. Sam Taylor-Wood has become a Hollywood film director with her 2015 box-office hit *Fifty Shades of Grey*. She, Tracey Emin and Gillian Wearing have been recognized with Queen's honours. 'I think getting my CBE made a lot of difference to a lot of people because they suddenly had to think, "Oh Christ, she really is part of the establishment,"' says Tracey, who also has 'a property portfolio that stretches on and on', according to her friend, photographer Johnnie Shand Kydd. Jane and Louise Wilson continue to earn critical acclaim for their films and photographs investigating the emotional resonance of architectural spaces, from Second World War bunkers to nuclear test laboratories. But every artist knows that the toast of today may be forgotten tomorrow. Equally, undiscovered artists from the 1990s may be hailed as geniuses in years to come as fashions and sensibilities change.

Since the 1990s, when Charles Saatchi was virtually the sole contemporary art collector in Britain, the global art market – one of the last unregulated arenas of trade – has exploded into a rapacious beast that needs constant feeding. Opulent new buyers from the non-Western world have joined the picture. Middle Eastern nations such as Qatar aspire to build world-class art collections from scratch. Prices keep pushing higher, as seen by the private sale of Paul Gauguin's 1892 oil painting *When Will You Marry? (Nafea faa ipoipo)* in February 2015 for a reported \$300 million.⁵ Art fairs have proliferated and now dominate the dealer's calendar. Artists in turn come under pressure to churn out baubles for these gigantic supermarkets rather than spend time developing their work. In the rarefied world of art investment, collectors and investors focus on a privileged group of top-selling, mainly male, contemporary artists including Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons.⁶ Michael Craig-Martin recounts with dismay how recently a successful art dealer declared that 'except for about a hundred important artists in the world, the rest was just a complete waste of time. And they could just pack up.' But such a view misses the crucial point that the 'star' artists owe their position to the thousands further down the ladder. 'Underneath all that, there's all the other work that always goes on that is often unseen,' says Simon Patterson, who has continued to explore taxonomies since his reworking of London's tube map.

One of the most important achievements of the group was to democratize art by creating work that caught the public imagination.

It wasn't a dry academic bunch of people. [It was] people who were more motivated by drinking and dancing and talking than by writing manifestos.

MAT COLLISHAW

'An engagement with contemporary art in Britain was its massive legacy,' says Frieze fair co-founder Matthew Slotover. Some critics contend that the British public's interest is superficial, limited to the recognition of a few key names such as Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst, but the huge popularity of the dynamic new regional art venues and Tate Modern suggest otherwise. 'It's...an educated audience, an audience which is enquiring and challenging and questioning and not willing to be fobbed off all the time....And I don't think it existed before,' says the artist Glenn Brown, who has lately switched paint for ink, stripping away colour to focus on line, shading and form in elaborate drawings. Where

before contemporary art was considered marginal, now it is part of the mainstream culture along with cinema and music. 'An ambition for art to become more central to people's lives I think was a big change,' says Adam Chodzko, who continues to create intriguing ephemeral communities like his *God Look-Alike Contest*.

BritArt attracted the public because it was sexy, witty and readable, drawing on the language of advertising, television and the media in which the British are proficient. Whether overtly sexual or made of bizarre matter like blood, flies and elephant dung, or breathtakingly intimate, such as Richard Billingham's family photographs, the art often had a gut appeal. (Incidentally, Richard's recent photography has focused on beautifully composed landscapes, zoo animals and his own young family, a world away from the dysfunctional scenes of *Ray's a Laugh*.) The artists 'were taking the world as they found it and commenting on it very directly or using their own lives as the subject for their art, and speaking frequently in a language which was highly accessible,' says Tate director Nicholas Serota, pointing to Sarah Lucas's ribald tabloid images and Damien Hirst's animal works about life and death. 'It's emotional stuff and it immediately provokes a response.' 'It wasn't a dry academic bunch of people,' says Mat Collishaw. '[It was] people who were more motivated by drinking and dancing and talking than by writing manifestos.' After the abstruse Conceptual art of the 1970s, the media jumped on BritArt as something it could finally grasp, that made good copy, although in those days of fledgling art commentary women artists still faced

blatant sexism. 'I've got all these reviews where...they...take the mickey out of my accent or talk about my breast size,' says Tracey Emin, noting that her male counterparts escaped this. 'What are they going to do, talk about Anish Kapoor's dick? I don't think so.'

As sweeping as the change was for Britain's art scene and the media, few would argue that the BritArtists radically altered the direction of art. As artists do, they borrowed from the existing repertoire – whether to pay homage, mock or outdo their forbears – and advanced the dialogue in their disciplines in exciting, sometimes spectacular ways. 'Was the change as fundamental as some of the changes wrought by Picasso with Cubism or Duchamp?' asks Nicholas Serota. 'No. But was it a significant step forward? Yes.' 'This is not about a revolution in art....But something does change. A lot of it is not visible. What changes is the

terms of engagement,' says Liam Gillick, who has maintained a strong international profile, as seen by his selection to represent Germany at the 2009 Venice Biennale. The YBAs had a sense of their talent and felt entitled to show their work without waiting to be discovered.

The real revolution of this period was in attitude. 'It was all about change. Change of approach. Change of ambition. Change of possibilities. What they did was they showed what could be possible,' says Julia Peyton-Jones, former director of the Serpentine Gallery. 'They provided a really important role, in a way, of destroying the establishment.' Not only did they make art that didn't fit, literally or metaphorically, into most of the existing galleries, but they also circumvented the rigid gallery system. Sadie Coles and Jay Jopling launched galleries in response to the new art that was ambitious in scope and aims. 'The artists did not rely on any of the old boys' networks to get ahead. They made their own history. They made their own platform. And it was bloody impressive,' says Coles.

Moreover, this new egalitarian climate put to bed the perception of the artist as white, male and independently wealthy, as personified by the likes of Anthony Caro or Lucian Freud. 'I think essentially what was great about YBA,' says Jane Wilson, 'was just the sheer demographic of people who were making art....And artists not necessarily from the safe privileged middle classes. There was

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SADIE COLES

a lot of working class.' 'That's what they really proved, that you could come from very modest backgrounds and you could really win the prizes,' agrees Michael Craig-Martin, who has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity with his bright paintings of everyday objects and large outline sculptural versions of these. Women artists also gained visibility and presence. Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin and Rachel Whiteread are now big names; others such as Christine Borland and Abigail Lane have left the male-dominated gallery system. Christine, a professor at Northumberland University, has extended her artistic investigation of bioethics and medicine. Her latest collaborative project revolves around a sculptural proposal to two organ donors for using their bodies for artistic research. For several years Abigail has curated and participated in the contemporary art exhibition 'SNAP', part of the Aldeburgh Music Festival in Suffolk, bringing in peers such as Glenn Brown, Anya Gallaccio and Sarah Lucas. In the wake of the YBAs, art students in Britain increasingly picked up video cameras and made DIY films, foreshadowing the explosion of video-sharing websites such as Vimeo and YouTube. 'I do think there was a very big impact on how younger artists began to work in the late '90s and also even now,' says Georgina Starr, who has continued to create her lo-fi productions of magical worlds involving performance, song and sculpture. 'The fact that many of us were using our own bodies and voices directly and using performance, video and sound...opened up the possibilities of what art could be.'

In terms of their profile abroad, the BritArtists as a group never carried the same force as in Britain, although individual artists have considerable foreign followings. 'I think that they have had an impact in America and in Continental Europe definitely. They're not just a parochial British phenomenon,' insists Tate's Nicholas Serota. But America and Germany, despite hosting big group shows, were always somewhat lukewarm. 'I always felt that the Americans were actually quite reluctant to give what's due here, which has to do with...a certain chauvinism at work,' says Karsten Schubert. 'I think some of the galleries abroad were a bit turned off by what they saw as brashness,' says one informed art world insider. 'Jay [Jopling's White Cube] is maybe not the most collegiate of galleries....I think Jay was always quite happy to keep all the sales to himself, which hasn't necessarily been great for the artists, or for the city.'