

# Open War

12.30, MAY 2, ON A VISIT TO *Material Culture* at the Hayward Gallery I was greeted by a considerable police presence at the door of the exhibition. Insults and expletives were being exchanged on this sweltering day. A bomb scare? No, just some disgruntled Marxist students from Middx. University who on expecting to find in *Material Culture*, at last, an exhibition with a dialectical twist, discovered instead a show about sculpture. Their noisy impromptu protest was short lived. I paid my £5 and went in.

*Material Culture* promised a survey of British object-based work spanning 1980-97, a period that seemed to have a special significance given the fall from office of the Conservative party the night before. The security guards appeared menacing: nervous and unsmiling, bulges under their left armpits, they watched through the narrow slits of half closed eyes. The most alarming feature of *Material Culture* was not the impression of increased security but an intense feeling of *deja vu*; an effect created firstly by the familiarity of the art works on display and secondly by the customary pluralism of exhibitions payrolled by the big cheeses of the London art world. Special agents Greg Hilty and Michael Archer, the curators of *Material Culture*, attempted to iron out the contradictions and approaches.

The resources of the South Bank were put at the service of the two masters of mis-information. Their numerous acts of propaganda included an affordable catalogue which contained a user's guide explaining the themes of the exhibition. Small, square in shape and containing 45 black and white photographs of artworks from each participating artist, this catalogue was widely sought and read. Not everything went according to plan though. Hilty's and Archer's hidden agenda contained within (the reading of recent artworks through an 80s agenda in support of flagging quasi-formalist sculptural tradition of 'questioning what an object is') was beginning to implode. *Material Culture* received criticism from all manner of publications.

The curators suggested that the exhibition was staged as a conversation between works. An example of one such imagined conversation was described as follows:

"Wilding's *Echo* and Turk's *Pimp*, while not necessarily shown side by side, demand to be compared here. Both are sculptures of highly polished metal, occupying similar floorspace and volume; both cold and highly sensual, they combine transparency and containment, in an emotional and not merely formal sense; both have been made with the help of industrial manufacturers, and both are among the respective artists' defining works."

Hilty's and Archer's conspiracy was beginning to come apart at the seams. The comparison between Wilding and Turk was a desperate choice as Turk is part of a recent initiative among artists to address questions of identity and, in Turk's own specific project, to address the legacy of the readymade and past critiques of the culture industry; while Wilding makes sculptures exploring interior and exterior space. *Echo*, constructed from slotted metal strips, is a sculpture concerned with volume, mass and infinity. By comparison, Turk named a large, black roadside skip *Pimp*, a reference perhaps to the expensive cars with smoke black windows that cruise the streets of London? While Turk's use of this stereotype is alarming, it does place him firmly in a discourse that is a million miles away from Wilding and her fellow travellers (Marcus Taylor; perspex fridges, Rachel Whiteread; negative sculptures of domesticity, Richard Deacon; formalist

garden sculpture, Kapoor; mystical phenomenology). This negative-formalist faction has close ties to the Revolutionary Army of Structuralist Formalism (RASf) whose commander in chief, Richard Wentworth, had a high profile in *Material Culture*. The RASf were strongly represented by Abigail Lane, Damian Hirst, Ceal Floyer, Julian Opie and Simon Patterson. Sitting uneasily along side these artist's work were contributions from Susan Hiller, Lucia Nogueira, Sarah Lucas and Rebecca Warren, but any conversation between the artworks in the exhibition was governed by post-modernist protocol. By placing the various artworks in seemingly random relationships, any shared or contradictory contexts, attitudes and influences were carefully erased: the discourses that have evolved around artists' works over the last two decades were effectively silenced.

Despite the smell of panic in the air the Hayward did feature significant and engaging works. Bill Woodrow's early disfigured consumer objects and Tony Cragg's rainbow plastic floor piece *Spectrum* stood out as did Roderick Buchanan's *Chasing 1000* and *Sinn Féin*. In this latter piece from 1990 Buchanan upset the geometry of a white plinth by inscribing the Gaelic phrase in pencil upon the face of the plinth. The accent above the 'e' creates a ridge on the top of the plinth unsettling a white tea cup which balances precariously.

Sarah Lucas and Rebecca Warren both showed pieces that suggested narratives of domestic life. *Is suicide genetic?* by Lucas presented a motorcycle crash helmet made from cigarettes placed on a smoke blackened arm chair, a burnt offering to her interest in clichés about life, pleasure and life harming habits. Rebecca Warren's *Every Aspect of Bitch Magic* was a spell made out of household debris arranged on a plinth that included a shard of green glass, a bee in a jar and pants stretched around a stiff white envelope. Warren had made an artwork that appeared to be the kind of construction made when bored or when wasting time. A spell that has significance only for its maker? These last two works refreshingly showed little interest in craft, skill or Radio 4 poetics that dogged some of the other works in the show.

*Material Culture*, however, was not staged to open up these issues but to maintain an uneasy peace. That the exhibition has so little to say and no position on the differences between the works revealed a lack of nerve. The market success and media status enjoyed by some young artists, who have little in common with the likes of Deacon, Gormley, Opie or Davey, has been troublesome for many commentators and curators. For this reason *Material Culture* is a timely, if dismal, failure at attempting to deal with art produced in the last 5 years. Diverse practices have emerged in circumstances shaped by a growing interest in vernacular culture and identity amongst artists (which has unfortunately seen the adoption of stereotypes by some), and an unprecedented media interest in young artists, often seen as unproblematic by many of today's practitioners. This change in circumstances does represent a generational shift of positions and concerns which *Material Culture* was not keen to explore. Others have been more forthright.

Peter Suchin, when writing on *Live/Life*, astonishingly chastised much of the art on show for being amateur and badly made, and praised work whose production values matched the rigours of critical thought. A misguided nostalgia for the 80s and the professionalism of Neo-Conceptualism perhaps? Adrian Searle, writing about the same show worried about beauty and brevity and many thought that too much attention was being given to a scene rather than concentrating on the quality of the work, *Live/Life* being a telling

example of this.

Quality is the issue here. It unites those who might under other circumstances find themselves in opposing camps, and behind this call for quality is a belief that the production of art and culture is an ethical activity. In comparison to *Material Culture*, *Live/Life*, despite its faults, placed an emphasis on the contingencies of recent art production by involving independent art spaces, exhibiting magazines and connecting different generations of artists through collaboration. *Material Culture* had little interest in such a dialogical space despite the claims that it was structured through conversations.

20 seconds of my visit to *Material Culture* will stay with me for a long time. One of the Middx. University students managed to regain access to the exhibition; dressed in denim and wearing Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses he passed easily for a German tourist. The student joined a group being conducted around the gallery by an artist. He listened intently and then raised his hand to ask a question.

His dry lips parted: "A large percentage of the works on show are either owned by the Saatchi Gallery or the property of the Lisson Gallery, I've heard of a one party state but..."

He never finished his sentence. Ten bullets were pumped into his chest raising red craters on his denim shirt. In slow motion he fell against the white wall, smearing a path of red blood as his dead body fell to the floor. Gasps from the group were quickly silenced. All exits were sealed. Two security guards stood motionless, arms outstretched holding objects of highly polished metal, occupying similar volume: both cold and sensual. They had delayed shooting only for a second and then carried out their duty, just as they had been instructed. One guard, his mouth covered by a bushy ginger moustache, raised his radio to his lips and croaked: "Dead terrorist in gallery one." Within the hour the only trace of the event were the small blood speckles that now decorate Richard Deacon's *Art for Other People*. It never made the papers.

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