

YOUNG LONDON

In the middle of the nineteenth century a group of London artists banded together to form The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, joined later by Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, Frederick Sandys and William Morris, were the young art stars of their era. No other group of British artists had the same powerful identity or status for one hundred and fifty years until a loosely knit group emerged from London art schools in the late nineteenth century to change the perception of British art for a generation. Periodically, but rarely, certain exhibitions mark significant instances in the development of art. One such was *Freeze* that took place in three stages in a warehouse in London's Docklands, the brainchild of Damien Hirst, a student at Goldsmiths' College who had come to London from the North of England to study and with *Freeze* launched a generation that came to be known as the YBAs – Young British Artists. What a mixed blessing that was. All in all there were probably no more than thirty artists who could be included under the soubriquet YBA, thirty out of many, many, more of the same generation whose careers were overshadowed by overriding interest in one small part of a much larger scene. The advantage was to place contemporary British art centre stage on the global art map, it had the disadvantage of appearing to epitomise the latest developments in British art. One generation summed up in the output of a few.

The YBAs were grouped together under the umbrella of 'British' - and that in itself has always attracted criticism. As part of Tate's investigation into British Art – *The Great British Art Debate* - the London based artist John Russell, a founder of the artists' group BANK – a radical force on the London scene for some years – was asked in an accompanying publication, the GBDA Fanzine, "Is the idea of British art a British fantasy?". He replied "I don't think British art is a British fantasy. I just think it's shit."¹ He expanded his view discussing the way in which culture in Britain has been determined by class. Until the emphasis started to shift in the fifties with a series of exhibitions in which British artists began to use popular culture as a source. At the same time the higher education opportunities opened up to a far wider cross section of British people. From that point an engagement with popular culture has been a constant within British art and in spite of a close association with US culture. British Pop had its own stars in Peter Blake and David Hockney.

Notwithstanding the global nature of contemporary art, its incidence in the UK has always asserted local characteristics, an evolution in Britain that can be regarded in part as a lineage of idiosyncrasies that impinge upon and have sometimes influenced the broader world of art. Its separateness while being also centre stage internationally makes the notion of 'glocalism' fit the UK better than most. This is not to say that British artists deliberately strive to affirm a parochial isolationism or espouse what was once described as a 'Little Englander' mentality but rather that their practice can contain distinct characteristics that mark it out from its counterparts in continental Europe and America. Quite how these characteristics may be summarised or from where their impetus stems is harder to determine but, historically, a popular antipathy to mainland Europe, a recent but now nearly defunct colonial past, and a highly structured class system, all play a part. In addition curatorial notions of what was or was not art contributed to a consensus that excluded some types of creative endeavour and confined what remained to an art world governed by concerns that had become increasingly irrelevant. In major cities of the world like London where contemporary art thrives, artists work to push the boundaries of art wider and wider. The latest art is therefore usually working out at the edges of what is commonly acceptable. The partiality of curatorial selection produces powerful paradigms that also leads wider art practice in particular directions.

¹ John Russell in conversation with Cedar Lewisohn, *The Great British Art Debate Fanzine*, Tate Britain, P 4, 2012

So what has all this to do with *Young London*? For all its Britishness and with the exception of some outpourings in Scotland, Young British Art was a London phenomenon. If the era of the YBAs was the era of 'me', current socially engaged art practice asserts the moment of 'us'. The artists in *Young London* fall into neither category but demonstrate the effect of both. Less concerned with the self-analysis or the self-promotion of some of their precursors, they are the inheritors of the new conceptualism that was used as a catchall term for the YBAs. They unpick social norms and cultural inflections through popular culture and the global language of contemporary art. The *Young London* exhibitions don't describe a movement. In a sense there are no new movements in art. Society moves on for better or worse, media develop as technology advances but the concerns of artists are essentially the same now as they have been for the past hundred years. Periodically, because like everything else, art does not exist in a vacuum but in the social circumstances in which it is produced, different aspects of art are asserted over others and, for a while at least, the specific concerns of some artists hold sway. The artists exhibiting in *Young London* have all graduated since 2000. Even in an age of rapid achievement and quickly attained prominence in the art world these artists are nevertheless at the start of their careers.

Young London sits within a scene comprised of fragmented contexts. London remains the most important centre for contemporary art in the UK and one of the principal focal points for art in the world. Its art schools, studio complexes, artist run galleries and projects provide the city with the most dynamic aesthetically and intellectually stimulating context for experimentation. Today many artists operate, to use the curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud's term, as 'navigators of knowledge' often in association with institutions that are in place to support the teaching, production and display of contemporary art and which define to some extent what art is. But the viability of art's institutions has been stretched by the nature of contemporary art practice as artists increasingly produce work that is incompatible with established conventions in art. Artists often make artworks that are the result of a long process of research and collaboration that is as much a part of the work as the final product. They make and place their work in a wide range of contexts and their processes cross over into other disciplines that are similarly involved with forming contemporary ideologies. Institutional initiatives to support alternatives to the orthodoxies of the contemporary art world happen gradually and are slow to develop effective progressive models. In addition the main players in the world of contemporary art have drawn so close that their roles overlap or are conflated to the extent that once distinct activities have begun to fuse with one another. In the light of this, combining artists together on the basis of their locality seems somewhat obsolete if we acknowledge that local identity is no more a marker of value or indeed interest than a hundred and one other characteristics. Although contemporary art is not necessarily Western-centric the work of contemporary artists is on show throughout the world as part of a homogenised global totality that comprises the art of today. However, as a medium for thematically linking artists without constraining them within the bounds of a curatorial conceit, using London and youthfulness as the conjoining factors is as good as any.

The first *Young London*, was held in Summer 2011 - the oldest works in the exhibition were made in 2008 - and was intended to address a significant gap in the city's exhibition circuit. It was planned that *Young London* should become an annual exhibition. Described by the instigators and organisers of the exhibition: V22 as follows -

An annual survey that will provide the opportunity for everyone to observe trends closely as they develop and change. In this way, the Young London series will make a vital contribution not only to the promotion and promulgation of London's fine art zeitgeist, but also to its assessment and critique. In our vision for Young London youth and innovation are inextricable.

We seek to promote work that challenges expectations, and to support bold young artists who are pushing contemporary art in new directions, especially at the beginning of their careers.²

Degree shows are an important part of London's art scene but, still, few opportunities exist for young artists once they emerge from what can be several years in art school. This is frequently a testing time for artists, a crucial moment in the development of a new art practice without the studio or technical support offered in art school and separated from a structured critical discourse. For artists who have settled in London after art school, there are few opportunities for their work to be seen by those who are able to help them develop their careers. V22 sought to address this and conceived *Young London* as a survey of emerging contemporary practice. The first show included 92 works by 35 artists with many works commissioned expressly for the exhibition and made for the space. *Young London* has gone on to include a further 44. This field of artists exhibited over three years, however, still represents only a few of the numbers graduating from London art schools each year.

V22 believed (and still do) that it was vital to promote the work of emerging artists by providing them with a platform big enough to allow the selected artists free reign in mounting works that could be seen on a larger scale than most galleries would be able to offer. This they could do in their two enormous ground floor spaces, the site of the first three iterations of *Young London*. The vast spaces in the V22 building in Bermondsey approached the volume and scale of the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, allowing artists, if they chose, to work at a great height or extend over a large area. This could be a daunting prospect for any artist and one that is full of pitfalls. Artists might be overwhelmed by the space or fired with misplaced ambition to operate on a scale beyond their creative means. However throughout the process of selection and commissioning the specific characteristics of the space have been thoughtfully considered by all concerned, the artists, selectors and the V22 team who more than anyone else understood the constraints as much as the possibilities of these two massive raw environments. With a budget minute in relative terms with that of the major galleries, V22 has installed three of the most ambitious exhibitions of contemporary art to be seen in London in each of the three years they have taken place.

Much of the art that V22 as a contemporary art organisation promotes is experimental and innovative by its very nature. It has built on the tradition of providing artists with studios begun in the seventies in London by Air and Space and Acme all three of which mounted influential exhibition programmes that revealed the breadth of experimentation occurring among artists, almost entirely based in London, alongside their provision of studios. All three organisations continue to exist and to thrive. The contribution they have made to the support and promulgation of contemporary art in London runs deep. V22 is within the same mould, adapted to suit the times, more pragmatic but still as idealistic as the art world becomes increasingly polarised, creating a growing divide between the supply of art as luxury goods for those who can afford enormously expensive art objects acquired through the dealer system, and small-scale artist run projects. For many artists the mainstream art world has divorced itself from any philosophical 'truth' or base that once provided their inspiration. This has led to a disenchantment among many artists with the system and a rejection of the conservative values that dominate the commercial art world and which run counter to the iconoclastic aims of experimental contemporary art.

² V22 Statement for Young London, 2011

With *Young London*, the organisers deliberately chose artists who engage with new concepts and practices. These were selected from nominations received through V22's existing network, including artists from the V22 collection, art world professionals, academics, young curators, and the *Young London* alumni who were asked to nominate those artists from their peer group whose work they respected. Many of the artists subsequently selected had attended one of the main London art schools, the Royal College of Art, Royal Academy, Goldsmiths or the Slade. Most, but not all, had completed studies at post-graduate level and had shown in small emerging galleries in the UK and continental Europe. What might be regarded as a closed circle actually provides an insight into the specialised world of emerging artists, where friendships, networks and collaborations are enormously productive creatively and intellectually but which have still to be recognised beyond a comparatively small scene. The backgrounds of the artists vary enormously reflecting the diversity that makes up London. And, although there are powerful arguments to be made and pursued about the prohibitively high cost of student fees and the exclusion this produces, this diversity is a move away from the class ridden mono-cultural demographic that once predominated in the UK art scene.

While, as the V22 publicity states - *Young London offers an eclectic and detailed exploration of the imperatives and artistic practices that resonate today [and] provides a unique platform for emerging artists to show their work alongside a wide group of their contemporaries in a large-scale exhibition*³ - this cross section of work resists categorisation. It would be convenient to be able to sum up the work shown during those three years as containing some interconnected characteristics other than the fact it had been produced by recently graduated artists or those new to a contemporary art practice, all based in London. But, as the fragmented nature of art practice demonstrates everywhere, this is not the case. These were multi-disciplinary shows, which included everything from performance, video, film, vlogs, sculpture, to installation and painting. They demonstrated imagination, engagement with issues, a sophisticated understanding of the place of fine art in contemporary visual culture and an ambition inspired not only by the V22 spaces but by the artists' own sense of possibility. If there is one unifying characteristic that runs through the art and the *Young London* exhibitions it is that the artists currently working in London can justifiably claim to make it the most important centre for contemporary art in the UK and one of the principal focal points for art in the world. Its art schools, studio complexes, artist run galleries and projects provide the city with the most dynamic aesthetically and intellectually stimulating context for experimentation across the generations.

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³ V22 publicity 2013.