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Like a dog biting its own tail

Anti-theory? I don't believe in it. A smart marketing realignment of the tendencies behind new British art to sustain its commodification; the lazy conforming to a commercial relibidinizing of male and female stereotypes, aka *Loaded* man and woman; a footnote in the struggle by critics to retain their position in the hierarchy of institutional validation; another manifestation of what Adorno calls the division of labour in producing knowledge – who better qualified to declare the irrelevance of theory than theoreticians themselves; the weary protest of art students faced by another stack of dense texts, and so on.

An artist is too drunk to participate in a TV discussion to which she's been invited and instead sustains a background commentary on what the other participants are saying. Eventually she gets up and leaves, accusing them of being out of touch with her and their audience. Other than providing opportunity for a voyeuristic laugh is she irresponsibly wasting a chance for women to take on the male visual arts establishment? Is her action a critique, intentional or inadvertent, of what passes for intellectual discussion on TV? Is it anti-theory live? A newspaper the following day called this an authentic performance unmasking the event's pretentiousness. The other participants were blamed as insensitive, as too theoretical, as out of touch. Is this true or is that journalist star-blind, falling into step with opinion that links merit in British art to personality and populism?

Anti-theory as popular entertainment. That it takes place on live TV fits new British artists' ease with the medium and their intuition of what makes good coverage. A Sarah Lucas feature lingers over a drunken escapade and exaggerates the desultoriness of her working methods. Elsewhere, Jake and Dinos Chapman and Sam Taylor-Wood make work for celebrities' homes. The celebrities offer more insights into the work than the artists who cultivate an air of

insouciance rather than deliberation. On TV art just gets made without it being a big deal. Like the programme producers, these artists make a show of the spontaneity of thought and fabrication as if it's disingenuous to be seen to struggle with words or material to express ideas. Never mind that the work by all these artists, Tracey Emin included, is sophisticated, articulate, and hard to account for

without some knowledge of the theoretical arguments underlying contemporary art.

And if some theory is becoming redundant for some young artists is the 90's boom in the theoretical component of fine art courses about to go into reverse? Does Marxism have a future in a post-communist world, or feminism and gender studies in a country where women are supposed to be fast achieving economic parity with men and where the rights of sexual minorities improve? With an increasingly negative appraisal of Lacan and a shift of interest in Freud away from the psychoanalytical texts towards his writing on culture, psychoanalysis continues to be discredited. Furthermore, the absorption of the left by central conservative parties means these theoretical areas remain without a political base. They are made to seem anachronistic academic leftovers of a transformed political and social Britain. In an Audio Arts interview, Lucas explains that earlier issue-based work by women frees her to make her personality a subject of her art. What gets celebrated as an anti-theoretical initiative may equally be seen as the continuation of theory.

Anti-theory is oxymoronic. You need a leap of faith to believe that the anti part survives the struggle without any taint of theory. The dialectical argument is almost too pat. Nothing *anti* can escape being characterised by what it opposes since it's own orientation is from the start defined by what it pushes away. The work by these artists is interesting in relation to the art that it isn't. They sometimes tell us so themselves. It's related to its opposite in a cyclical pattern of self-affirmation through rejection.

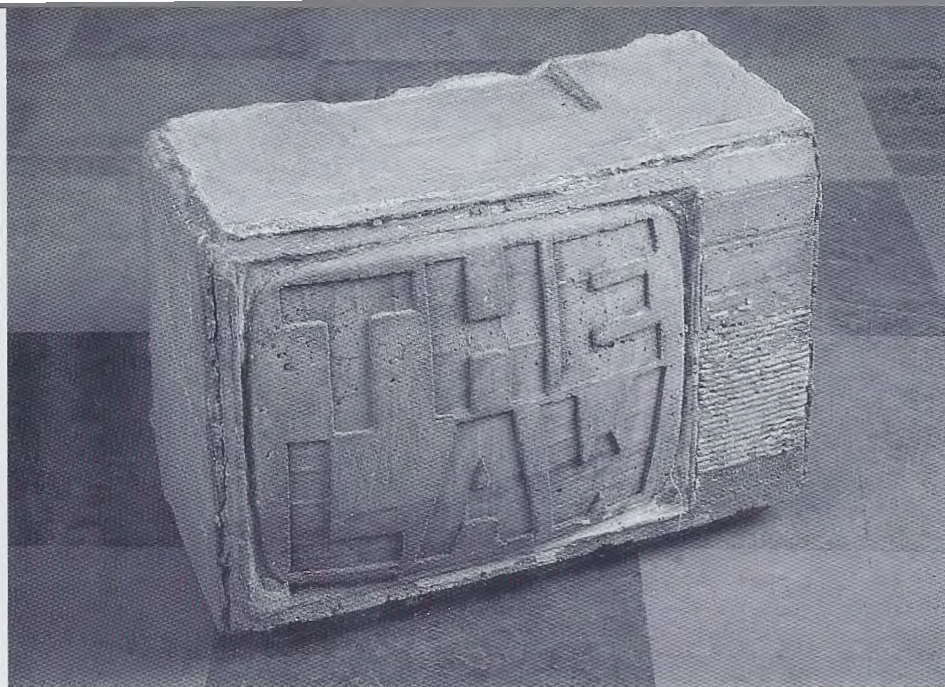
The hedonism of New York's East Village in the early 80s, with its 'bad' painting, could be seen as a cacophonous rejection of preceding conceptual or post-minimal work. In a similar way some young British artists appear to be developing a language

that owes nothing to the theory-driven precepts of the last ten years. The grip of theoretical studies on American artists had steadily grown during the 80s in spite of the enormous success of American and European neo-expressionist painters during the same period. Like other anthologies, *Art after Modernism*, published in 1984, was typical in underpinning writing on current conceptual art with articles by popular theoreticians such as Foucault and Barthes. Many of the artists appearing in that book, like Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger represented a marginalized sector of New York art which became increasingly influential as it attracted critical commentary. That this work involved photomechanical processes made it well-suited to theory that referred to Benjamin's and Baudrillard's writing on reproduction. What subsequently became marginalized in New York was artwork that could not overtly engage with theory, a condition that by and large still exists. Market forces aside, insofar as such a condition is repressive, the continuing American interest in new British art recognizes qualities that challenge this hegemony of theory.

Any prolonged look at some of this art reveals ambiguous strategies. The TV performances may be an old-fashioned display of bohemian inarticulateness but the artwork is often an intelligent accumulation of complex signifiers, only one of which is the disregard for theory.

In Lucas's 1997 installation *The Law*, the sculptures and photographs dissimulated a rough-and-ready casualness to mediate the allusions to mortality, abjection, sex and abortion that formed only part of the work's content. Sue Webster's and Tim Noble's DIY approach to junk culture appears increasingly like an archaeology of public distractions, whether of tattoos, violence, sideshow *trompe l'oeil*, or illuminations. The friction between this legacy of theory and the new iconoclasm is most astutely exposed by BANK's programme. The parodies of critical theory and polemical manifestos announcing their shows, the feint of radical and offensive gestures in their installations, the use of humour to reconcile disparate images and concepts, free the artwork to be something that is both practice and theory.

The term *anti-theory* is also flawed in implying that theoreticians aren't writing against theory themselves. One reason for Heidegger's continuing popularity amongst artists, in spite of



his distaste for contemporary art, has to be his attempt to let the art object open itself up to thought. His critique of traditional ontology is to allow objects and artworks to be seen for what they really are, independent from the deforming suppositions of human demands and speculations. An extreme opponent of Heidegger, Adorno also insists that all aesthetic speculation must start from the conundrum of the artwork, though in his case its autonomy unfailingly bears the stamp of the society it has freed itself from. Furthermore, Adorno is adamant that in their manifestos and explanatory writing it is artists, not aestheticians, who have provided the most valuable aesthetic theory this century.

If the *anti-theory* concept is to gain much hold it should make clear what theory it is against. Like a dog biting its own tail, the bland term never leaves its circle of self-delusion. It's certainly a motif of some new British art but the real interest is in identifying how the work turns theory against itself, not the fairytale of leaving theory completely behind.

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Flat Football

Never really one for eye-catching pictorial formulae or decorative predilections, Clement Greenberg occasionally wrote about the way he thought certain artists might rescue Art from the jading frustrations of artiness. Flatness though, despite the Open University's historical heave on the theme, is something receding from the consciousness of the art-going. It is something that has been made the bone of Clement's contention. The organised articulation of the integrity of the picture plane as the founding concern in a visual philosophical pursuit will tell something of concentricity or verticality and any other of a number of purely painterly things. He hoped. If not exactly popular, he certainly thought that this theory of painterly modernity had politically radical implications. What he had, well at least it seems so, is a determined and earnest disdain for Kitsch. This probably isn't true at all or if it is, it's all a lot more complicated than that. Nevertheless, and in spite of the straw, Clement's critics prevail.

Perhaps he could have taken an interest in football. Like little else, a working insight into a popular sport can do wonders for the reputational gravity of higher-minded inquiries.

As is everyone though, I get sick of hearing about the cool of Albert Camus and his goal-keeping exploits. The well defined jawline and the cut of a properly proletarian leather jacket must have helped in this. Ever seen a photo of Clement? No oil painting. And as for the attire, well Jackson and Barnett weren't bad, but even these, the better deported of the 10th Street artists, couldn't properly carry a suit. Perhaps it was an urban code and Clement felt compelled.



Anyway, there had been a huge fuss over the poetry of football; novels, poems and much artwork. Roderick Buchanan for example, Lucy Gunning and Mark Wallinger for others. There are all the contributors to the *Offside* show and of course the reprobable Nick Hornby. I'm always willing to be talked into an appreciation, but I just don't get football. Of course I've had to play it. Even in the rugbified heyday of the early 1970s, you still had to play football in a Welsh comprehensive. I was always keener on the water; swimming, canoeing and that. A different kind of sublime; individual, less teamy. I never felt invited to the inner-life of football and what went on around it – the tragedies of the game and the name-knowing, the physical precociousnesses and the technical fluencies, the dynamics of the off-the-ball incident. Perhaps I didn't have the legs. Perhaps I was just crap