

SUIT THE ACTION TO THE WORD

By Neil Mulholland , 10 April 2000

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Image: Photo from the performance, Artist as Whore, held at Gallery House, Stuart Brisley, 1972

The Whitechapel gallery's show of 60s and 70s British conceptualism, *Live in Your Head*, has become a sort of temporary Mecca to the UK art world. Why does revisiting this strange mix of state-funded conceptualism and a by now canonised institutional critique hold a key to understanding the yuppie excesses of the yBa's? **Neil**

Mulholland reveals all.

Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965-1975, at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, acclaims itself as an overdue retrospective of British art exhibitions in the period dominated by various forms of conceptualism, from "the whimsical to the confrontational, the politically charged to the wantonly destructive." A future retrospective of 'seminal' British art from the late 1990s is inconceivable given the numbers of artists now flooding the market. In Britain during the period 1965-75, however, debate and control of the arts were almost entirely the province of the Arts Council of Great Britain. Despite showcasing more than 100 works by over 60 artists, Live in Your Head canonises the orthodoxy of that era as then principally determined by the ACGB. In many ways this retrospective backslapping is unavoidable. As avant-gardists and cultural administrators alike have long been aware, documentation determines what will be seen in the future. The main problem for curators Clive Philpot and Andrea Tarsia has been in finding ways to exhibit work that is nominally anti-aesthetic in intent.

Mel Ramsden's description of Art & Language's 1972 Documenta Index 01 is informative: "...it requests of the consumer to be a participant, in a way. And if the consumer was not a participant, then the work did not mean 'bugger off' — it failed to signify." At the Whitechapel, Index 01 means bugger all — since it is covered in labels warning visitors not to open the filing cabinets containing A&L's writing. As such it is transmogrified from a highly complex map of their practice into an *objet d'art*, hardly an index of conceptual virtue. As a substitute for A&L's logical taxonomies, Stephen Willats used a linear communication model. His *Meta Filter* (1973) — consisting of a computer, slide projector and problem book inviting visitors to interpret everyday situations — is displayed, but only functions if the visitor books in advance. The governing model of communication at the Whitechapel, then, is between an implied artist and a model viewer, not, as Willats and many other conceptualists intended, between a real addresser and a real addressee.

Cool, narcissistic conceptual *l'art pour l'art* — seminal works such as David Dye's *Distancing Device* (1970), Keith Arnatt's *Is it possible for me to do nothing as my contribution to this exhibition?* (1970), John Hilliard's *Camera Recording its Own Condition (7 Apertures, 10 Speeds 2 Mirrors)* (1971) and Michael Craig-Martin's *An Oak Tree* (1973) — is more generously exposed. Live in Your Head also justly acknowledges that such work represents only a fraction of the experimental activity of the period. As Conrad Atkinson put it: "the conceptual art movement was profoundly academic and rooted in an attempt to corral practice and marginalise it." Perceiving analytical conceptualism as a passive form of resistance, Atkinson produced works such as *A Shade of Green, An Orange Edge* (1974), which documents life in Belfast, Armagh and Derry from a number of different viewpoints. Correspondingly, sexual discrimination at the Metal Box Company in Southwark was tackled by Margaret Harrison, Mary Kelly and Kay Fido Hunt's *Women and Work* (1970-73). However, other than significant inclusions such as Alexis Hunter's *Sexual Warfare* (1972), 'feminist' conceptualism is under-represented. Where were the initial stages of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-76)? Where is the community photography of groups like the Hackney Flashers Collective? By marginalising such work, Live in Your Head has largely written off women artists' struggle during this period to achieve the level of representation that they now enjoy in the art world.

Robin Crozier's *Portrait of Robin Crozier* (1973-) — consisting of a portfolio of letters, rubber stamps and collages — elides the altruistic critical agendas which framed politically motivated conceptualism. Crozier's inclusion, however, gives the impression that the File and Vile mail networks were also granted canonical status within the conceptual art pantheon (to which they were radically opposed). Numerous other networks existed. For example, the mail produced by Feministo was based on their experiences as women, artists, mothers and domestic workers. However, the major predicament lies in the assumption that this work is art. Mail 'art' was a pedagogic strategy and initiative that questioned the very basis of indentitary thinking in art. Since it was created by self-declaration there should be no possibilities for the fixing of rules, no public display and no judgement.

Performances are equally difficult to display posthumously. In 1973 COUM's Cosey Fanni Tutti began posing for porn mags, accordingly producing a series of actions. The Whitechapel displays a few magazines featuring Tutti, a highly inventive form of documentation. Otherwise, COUM are represented by a screenprinted poster and a rubber fetish costume worn by Tutti during the *Couming of Age* performance at the Oval House in London, 1974, neither of which give any idea of what their performances were like. We can only surmise that COUM have something in common with Stuart Brisley's film *Arbeit Macht Frei* (1972-3), in which he vomits and drowns in a pool of offal and ice. In a conceptual art context, such performances indicated a shift back towards the notion of the artist as the writerly focus and creative source of the action. Located between COUM and Brisley lies Bruce McLean, who in 1972 reversed this declaration process, officially renouncing his status as an artist to form 'Nice Style: The World's First Pose Band', which was neither theatre, nor dance, nor mime, nor rock, or art, but pose, a context of its own. Nice Style's *High Up on a Baroque Palazzo* (1974) exploited the fear that we easily mistake form for substance, an anxiety particularly alive in a period of experimentation.

As a whole, the exhibition raises an unanticipated question. Can we talk of British art being 'experimental' following 1975? 1976 saw a series of crises in the British art world. Not only did the International Monetary Fund Crisis put an

end to institutionalised art such as conceptualism; it finished off British sovereignty, leaving the nation at the mercy of the international markets. Following 1976, the British art world and the public sector generally could no longer rely on state subsidy. The Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts was launched in February 1976, only three days prior to the appearance of an infamous article in *The Sunday Times* condemning the Tate's use of public money to buy a "pile of bricks". Critics who had supported The New Art, such as Richard Cork, turned against it, seeking to re-brand 'Art for Social Purpose': The centrality of public arts bodies weakened as private 'partnerships' were established, ushering in the mercenary relativism that now dominates the art world and British society in as a whole. *Live in Your Head*, therefore, harks back to an allegedly golden era, when artists and administrators could 'experiment' securely, in a publicly sanctioned, institutional environment. In this sense, it simply does not compare with the current British art world.

This has not prevented many enthusiastic critics from commenting superficially on the influences of 70s artists on the 90s. Is this show then just a lazy historicist attempt to legitimise the past in the terms of the present, and/or vice versa? For Michael Archer, the "freshness, often disarmingly straightforward, that is visible in the work in this exhibition remains, from this perspective, one of its essential qualities." Indeed, freshness and the concomitant lack of professionalism are precisely what mark this work as the product of a significantly different culture. Michael Craig-Martin's observation is most telling: "No one knew what the rules were, or whether or not what they did was art. Nor did they know how to present it. Every student now knows the rules of presentation."

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