

■ The Nature of the Beast

Jaime Stapleton

Richard Hylton, *The Nature of the Beast, Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector: A study of policies, initiatives and attitudes 1976-2006*. ICIA/University of Bath, 2007, 168pp, pb, £14.95 or £9.95 direct from ICIA, 0 86197 136 1.

In his afterword to *The Nature of the Beast*, Eddie Chambers suggests that Richard Hylton has, 'inadvertently perhaps, produced the most authoritative modern history of Black artists' activity in Britain'. That history is, in fact, a by-product of Hylton's principle aim: to provide a critical account of the problematic, dysfunctional and failed policies aimed at 'Black' visual arts activity in the UK over the last 30 years.

The recent restructuring of the national office of Arts Council England makes this a very timely book. *The Nature of the Beast* should be high on the reading list of all those involved in mapping out a new direction for the organisation. In tracing policy documents relating to the 'ethnic arts' (from the 70s), to 'Black arts' (the 80s), 'New Internationalism' (the 90s), to more recent 'cultural diversity' initiatives, Hylton recounts a succession of policy initiatives targeted at artists of African, Caribbean, Chinese and South Asian origin ('Black' artists in Hylton's terminology) that persistently forgot, and then proceeded to reinvent, the wheel.

Hylton's analysis points up an essential contradiction – one that has existed at the heart of policy for the last 30 years. On one hand policies have followed a line of thinking that seeks to make the activity of 'Black' artists integral to existing mainstream arts organisations. Such an approach throws out direct challenges to the structure of those institutions. It demands that changes be made to practices that 'routinely favour white, middle class artists and curators'. On the other hand what has been described as a separatist model has also been significant. Such an approach is founded on assumptions about ethnic and cultural specificity.

In practice, the separatist approach has often meant the 'dead end' represented by survey shows: inclusion initiatives and funding streams targeted at remedying imagined deficiencies in the skills of 'Black' artists. While some 'careerists' may have benefited from the separatist approach, Hylton argues that the ultimate effect has been to further marginalise and disempower those it claims to help, trapping them in byways well away from the centres of power. Regrettably, such separatism is 'increasingly the norm'.

Hylton traces the origin of the separatist

approach to Naseem Khan's 1976 Arts Council-commissioned report *The Art Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*. Despite more positive moves towards a more reform-minded agenda in the late 80s and early 90s, the separatist tendency is again in the ascendancy in public policy. Exhibitions such as *africa remix* (Hayward Gallery, 2005) and *Back to Black* (Whitechapel Gallery, 2005) are, in Hylton's analysis, indicative of a tokenistic approach that 'accommodates, stifles and marginalises' 'Black' artists.

Hylton is unsparing in his criticism of recent attempts at tackling exclusion. Arts Council England's decibel project is taken to task for its organisational failings and its general lack of coherence and for its prevailing assumptions that a deficit of skills explains the exclusion of 'Black' artists from the mainstream. Hylton convincingly argues that such initiatives send out an erroneous image of inadequacy and, in addition, serve to direct attention away from the attitudes and processes of those in mainstream institutions who do the excluding.

Hylton sets projects such as decibel in relation to the increasing instrumentalisation of cultural policy under the Blair governments. Such projects respond directly to central government edicts on social inclusion, harnessing the work of 'Black' artists to the agendas of the political establishment. Instrumentalisation also frequently charges cultural institutions with instituting social developments that other areas of government policy have failed to achieve. On this point Hylton is direct and pithy. The claim by culture minister David Lammy that the cultural sector is 'taking a lead in a society-wide issue' is denounced as 'risible'.

The Nature of the Beast raises interesting critical issues – the discussion of which lie, sadly, beyond its remit. The cultural policy initiatives Hylton analyses make an interesting intersection with the general policy culture of New Labour. In the Blair era, the announcement of policy has itself become a policy. Challenging public perception of an issue is as important as challenging the issue itself. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the recurrence of initiatives (and, by extension, their repeated failure) are in part a response to the pressure of visibility.

Hylton's analysis of the problematic genesis of the new inIVA building is acute. However, it is beyond the remit of this book to examine the extent to which such visible capital projects and dedicated funding streams are the hallmark of Labour in every area of policy. Labour's assessment culture is about illustrating the (positive) impacts of spending. Such projects lend themselves to the political expedience of visibility. Public spending must be

tracked. Its operation, outcomes and benefits must be definable and measurable. This building is visible. It does this. It costs this and delivers this. It works. We did this.

Hylton's analysis also raises, but stops short of analysing, the perennial schism between competing notions of what are described as high, or elitist, art forms and community arts. Early separatist, or 'ethnic', approaches to the work of 'Black' artists were clearly allied to contemporaneous notions of community arts. Despite the 30 years that have passed since Khan's report, policymakers are still hung up on this question. Arts Council England's current public consultation, entitled *The Arts Debate*, is yet again seeking to reopen questions about the purpose and justification of arts funding. Though it should be added that the shape of the recent restructuring indicates that it already knows the answer to its own questions – the 'celebration of diversity', 'internationalism' and 'vibrant communities' are high on the ACE agenda.

It is unfair to criticise a book for what it does not set out to do. However, the reader may end up wishing that Hylton would turn his sharp analytical skills towards the process of institutional exclusion itself. Is the 'unfettered favouritism' directed towards 'middle class white people' simply a matter of racial prejudice or are more complex systems of exclusionary practice also at work? If so, how do they operate? What are their protocols? The answers to such questions are likely to be complex. They may also prove painful to those who currently work within the mainstream institutions of the art world. But sadly, those answers must wait for another book. Until then readers must satisfy themselves with this thoughtful, provocative and very readable account of 'Black' arts activity and cultural policy. ■

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■ Cultural Ecology

Dean Kenning

Land, Art. A Cultural Ecology Handbook, ed Max Andrews, Royal Society of Arts, London, 2006, 280pp, hb, £20.00, 978 090146957 1.

Land Art has come to be associated with the environmental movement through both its contemporaneity – the late 60s witnessed a raised public awareness of ecological matters – and the iconographic power that works such as Robert

Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* have had in indexing Earth's physical processes. If the *Land Artists* were on the whole never interested in 'saving the planet', their understanding that nature was a cultural construct underpinning the Kantian aesthetics of formalist art led them out of the galleries and cities, and to an ecological standpoint – if ecological is understood in a more dialectical sense of the intrinsic interconnection of seemingly separate things.

At a time when it is barely possible to open a newspaper or turn on the TV without being reminded of the global catastrophe heading our way, *Land, Art* serves an essential function in making clear that while climate change has become a palpably real political matter, it cannot be isolated from issues of economic organisation and social justice. In punctuating the 'Land' from the 'Art', the title of this book forces the question of private property upon us.

No work of Land Art could hope to compete with The World – an artificial development of islands off Dubai in the shape of the countries and continents of the globe – a real estate paradise whose ecological purity and diversity are emphasised as much as its exclusivity. As Jiang Jun suggests here, where economic power has traditionally been materialised in buildings we have to look up at, the age of Google Earth inaugurates a logic where such power may increasingly be manifested in structures designed to be viewed from above.

The focus on land as a concept around which a discussion of ecology can take place is all to the good, and there are inspiring lessons from people such as Nobel Prize-winner Wangari Maathai and Cameron Sinclair, founder of Architecture for Humanity. However, there is a problem with the art side of the equation – a fundamental one. There is something terribly insipid, worthy and self-satisfied about much of the art that appears in this book, exacerbated by the discourse (or lack thereof) that surrounds it. There are two reasons for this. First, the tendency to treat a complex system of relations as a 'thing', which is attacked explicitly or implicitly throughout when it comes to 'the environment', does not seem to apply when it comes to 'art'. The ink drawings by Fernando Bryce

which introduce the volume (*Work in Progress*) – literal transcriptions of pages from the G8 Africa Action Plan, and the scribbled notes and doodles of trees from Katie Holten's sketchbook near its end – have no power to do anything other than communicate the presence of good, concerned citizens. Low artistic expectations do not reveal an inclusive, democratic realm, but the performative power of institutions to bestow the title 'artist' like a fetish.

The lack of inquiry into the economic and cultural conditions of what, for shorthand, can be called relational art, is an even more serious omission, given both its current status and its quintessentially global form – reflective of the so-called network society. It is also the main reference point in this book, with projects by Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla, and Christoph Büchel & Gianni Motti being seen by Jeffrey Kastner, in a keynote essay, as the inheritors of Smithson's critical land-based work. For example, in Büchel & Motti's *Guantanamo Initiative*, 2004, which relies on the power of art institutions to initiate legal proceedings, or Amy Balkin's *This is the Public Domain*, which uses art platforms such as this book to present her legal path towards making a small piece of Californian land available for common ownership, there is at least a potential contradiction which needs to be addressed between the work as a political act, and the work as a supposedly radical gesture legitimising the biennales, art fairs and galleries it will stop off at on its world tour.

The tendency to treat art as a thing reaches the height of parody when museum curator Stephanie Smith discusses sustainability in terms of reusable crates for transporting artworks and cutting back on exhibition brochures. She enthuses about a work by Kevin Kaemph who 'tackled the issue of the waste produced by endless repaintings' by covering the gallery walls with a mixture of paint left over from previous shows. Not putting on an exhibition at all would of course have been more environmentally friendly. Then again it might be considered that the social wealth (benefit beyond monetary value) created by good artworks would more than offset any concomitant

carbon footprint. Here we find applied to the realm of art what Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, in their excellent closing discussion, refer to as environmentalism's 'soft misanthropy ... Its gloomy, anti-aspirational focus on "limits" and "restrictions" ... [Its failure] to speak to higher needs ...'

This brings me to the second reason this book, despite its apparent diversity, seems so flat. To put it in a sound bite, art reaches (or should) the parts that ecology can't reach. The symbolic needs of what Roland Barthes once called *homo significus* are constitutionally excessive to the biosphere. Max Andrews, in his introduction, talks of art's ability to 'make connections' and 'communicate ideas', and it is sometimes as if the limit of art's value is an instrumental one – 'to translate the message [in this case of experiments into sustainable energy] into accessible media', as Jonathan Meuser puts it. Too many of the works that make up the glossy middle section of *Land, Art*, from Alfredo Jaar's *Emergency* to Brian Jungen's *Shapeshifter*, can all too easily be wrapped up by critics in terms of what they 'explore', 'suggest' or 'reflect'. The effect is one of suffocation and boredom. What of mystery and strangeness; where is the humour, embarrassment and idiocy? Why is it that the kind of works that don't appear in this book, such as Fischli & Weiss's *The Right Way*, or Marcus Coates's *Dawn Chorus*, would add such a disruptive element if they were to be?

Like an ugly virus infiltrating a homeostatic body, a claim by Thomas Hirschhorn infects the book at one point: 'economy is boundless ... active, assertive' where ecology is 'self-centred and dull'. His work is made from rubbish materials, but recycling collection centres are an expression of social conformity, where human energy is 'drawn off, burned up'. This gets to the heart of the productive capacities of art, and would make an interesting starting point for a wider political discussion. ■

DEAN KENNING is curating 'Second Life', an exhibition of art made from throwaway or second-hand materials, opening in June at the Portman Gallery.

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