

BANK [Andrew Williamson].

'Bankism!'

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It's uncanny when you think about it but the Sixties look is really in right now, when you think about it too, the Eighties new London art looked sort of like Sixties art. It's got to be why all the newspapers and magazines treat art as the new rock and roll. In London today, just as swinging as ever, this is what's really going on...

The start of the Sixties saw Britain as a new stage for new music and pop culture. This new scene spread through Britain and conquered Europe and America. England was the centre of the new exciting and different. The latest and greatest came from there and each successive hit whipped up the whole flow even faster. The rest of the world stood on aghast and shocked. How could Britain of all places produce all this hip new culture? How could the land of cricket and royalty, of fish and chips come up with the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Tom Jones and all the rest?

At home, to the old establishment it was all anathema, to the hip young it was almost

too good to be true. Abroad it went down the same way. The antics of Carnaby Street and Brighton Beach provoked dismay at the British youth and their bitter scorn of officialdom. Britain was drowning in silliness and dragging everyone down in the destruction of civilised values. The London scene of the Eighties is a story no less thrilling in its telling.

Just like the pop forbears, the young British art scene has smashed onto the stage in London and then landed on shores abroad to charm and conquer. Wave after wave of hip wised-up kids have sallied forth in ever widening circles of fame. It's true everyone likes to reel off a list of excellent names to

impress the rest of Europe and the World, but like so much recent cultural history, this list is truly familiar: everybody has heard of Damien Hirst, Rachel Whiteread, Sarah Lucas etc. It's so clear that art really is the new rock and roll; if we push it further, ride it all the way to the hilt we can see parallels piling up all the way down the line.

The new London art scene broke in a city which had previously only played a bit part as a stage for crap. English art has only ever been a bye-word for rubbish for the last two to four hundred years. Against this backdrop the old guard, the artists of official modernist museum culture, the old greys and the suits with good jobs in art schools could do nothing but deride this new breed as nothing so much as infantile pranksters and vacuous joking – sad, especially when you think these artists have about them an air of currency, an air of glamour and fashion. So what's the story? What's it all about.

Who and what is the London scene? Let's twist the knife right in and ask who are the brazen young artists walking up the street at dawn with their faces resolutely set against the wind? Let's take the toughest, the last fashion, let's look up from the long shadows into the eyes and faces of these striding figures, and all the other questions shall surely fall into answers.

BANK live and breathe the air of the times. Each trained as a painter and then they all found each other at the colleges, parties and studios of London, and decided that two plus two might equal more than four. BANK is a way and a means for these art bandoleers to make it on their own and together at the same time. That is, BANK makes art by creating, devising, building, hanging as well as inviting in and curating other artists into fully-formed exhibitions. What they make are perfectly formed little films in rooms with the other artists acting out as characters. These shows will go any

elegance of CHLORINE, creating a cold party in an empty Soho swimming pool. After this, BANK looked round for a new place to rip it up in; changing artists and forging new links with a Spanish connection, they teamed up with a disparate group from Valencia (the dream trip of that year) and launched SPACE INTERNATIONAL (1992), a transcontinental show kicking off in a disused factory behind Kings Cross Station.

By 1993 BANK had moved on, it's amorphous form had hardened to create of core nucleus of artists. Others dropped in for specific shows. It was the beginning of the BANK of today with it's hair-raising collaborations with young upstarts and glittering shows. This new extravaganza was called NATURAL HISTORY (1993). Shown at the Kings Cross site, the tram-station wreck played host to a show of 4000 cardboard boxes massed into bolted architecture. Within this vast skyline, 18 huge oil paintings suspended from the vaulted ceilings, made their presence felt. Each had been laboriously made in the traditional manner; the whole business was about production values. The subjects were big 80's media stories and advertising splashes, and with it BANK went up a gear into the big time.

By 1994 the London scene had changed again and so had BANK. The recession was petering out and the next move meant finding an affordable building in an area about to move up-market. BANK stepped into Burbage House in Curtain Road, a dis-

way, act anyhow and be made in any fashion BANK thinks is right for the moment.

There's no point pretending that its always been smooth ride: the London scene has grown and changed as the years have passed. There have always been two golden rules all along though: all the new young artists wanted to control their destinies to conduct their futures at the same time they had to respond to the ebb and flow of the money around town, and this character was stamped on their stuff.

BANK always sat on the dovetail. Borne of a savage city, proud to be red in tooth and claw, a direct external political influence was always going to sit well with BANK's kind of art-work that wanted to curl its lip at the autonomous object games of previous generations who had settled for a programme of prettiness and scientific endeavour. The brash new young things had their faces pushed in the gutter. Time and again it was this kind of pressure that would shape things, as much as the passing fashions of French theory. You could say that if rock was an unlooked-for by-product of the welfare state, then the ironic spawn of the viciously anti-intellectual, Philistine Protestant Thatcher Government was the politically sussed-on, socially hip, trash-culture of the fab new London scene.

Their first show, the eponymous BANK, found it's feet in a disused bank in Lewisham, just as England's recession begun to bite, rapidly followed by the extravagant

used telephone exchange in London's East End. BANK ran a gallery here for the next eighteen months. The first show, WISIT YOU WERE HERE (1994) turned two floors of the building into a yuppie flat. BANK first made art themselves – then set the scene for other invited artists to show theirs in. The exhibition was wall-papered throughout and the art had to sit at home, indoors.

After this BANK went into overdrive with the radical show ZOMBIE GOLF (1995). The gallery was turned into a golf course complete with working holes and peopled with the living dead – wax work zombies. Their violence both foregrounded and back-grounded the work in the show as they aimlessly stared at the art, spattered with blood and human remains. BANK's zombies have toured to different countries and cities, turning up in such diverse spots as a trendy Viennese art house and a Northern English night-club dance-floor.

BANK has followed up the success of ZOMBIE GOLF with THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE (1995); here BANK's intervention in the show wilfully disrupted and contextualised the rest of the exhibition. The 19th Century Hussars of the Light Brigade charged upside down across the ceiling of the gallery, acting out one of Britain's best known 'Glorious Mistakes', moving down in scale progressively from life size to only a centimetre in height. Each

guest artist was pulled into a willing contract with this maelstrom of disaster.

Without pausing for breath, it was a short move from this tragic scenario to cut a dash with the festive fare of COCAINE ORGASM (1995). Loud, brash, and strutting it's stuff with the best of the London scene – to date it's BANK's greatest success. Bright, taut, and striking all the right poses this show sees BANK putting on the style. This is the London scene as it happens. The assembled stars are pitched against a barricade and an iceberg. The scene is moodily lit and, softly, snow falls throughout. It's an even match, and every piece can hold its own with its neighbours. Paintings, photographs, installations, videos, slide-shows glimmering in the bright night. Here, for a brief moment, BANK and the latest wave of the London scene meet up, with plenty of jokes and plenty of hard sexy action too...

New adventures beckon and the call is to the wild. Who'll be in the van next time round? It's all in the roll of the dice, but however it lands BANK are going to sound like the Clash and walk like Diana Ross while the rest do the opposite...

**BANK, London
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