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THE FUCK OFF THING

An appraisal of BANK book

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<http://www.johnrogers.co.uk/BRAINLOVE/articles3.html>

1. I first heard about BANK when Dave Burrows mentioned it during a talk about his work. I didn't know what he meant when he started talking about Bank, but I got the feeling that he expected me to. He was talking about one of his early post graduate exhibitions, a show that sounded quite interesting to me in a cool, London, flippant, pop kind of way. It was 'Cocaine Orgasm' (1991) and Dave's piece consisted of little drawings of pop stars and philosophers fighting - Jarvis Cocker having a punch up with Wittgenstein, Liam Gallagher giving Adorno a wedgie, all standing in the giant pile of 'cocaine' that formed the centrepiece of the show. White powder was dusted over everything, the paintings, sculptures and installations that made up the show, the floor, the walls... the whole thing was one giant piece of art. All the work looked vaguely cool and funny, like a student show but with an ego big enough to make it feel more important.

Trying to find out more about Bank was surprisingly hard. There was nothing at all in the library. On the Internet, I couldn't narrow the search down to anything meaningful. It was like Bank was invisible, way too cool to be 'known' by people who didn't already know. It was like it wasn't meant for us. And it wasn't.

Eventually a book came out, but only after most of the key members had left the group to pursue their personal stuff. Dave had left fairly early, after a show called 'Zombie Golf', because Bank 'wasn't interactive enough'. The other founder member (and key player) John Russell had left in 1999 because he thought the group had done everything it could do. That's how the group stands now - it's down to founder member Simon Bedwell and Milly Thompson. John Russell is now working with performance artist Fabienne Audeoud. Dave Burrows now collaborates with DJ Simpson and Bob and Roberta Smith (separately). Both Burrows and Russell were nominated for the Beck's Futures award in 2000.

But that's the end. BANK at it's most interesting was one of the most provocative and intelligent developments of post-modern art. They exhibited almost constantly, peaking in terms of productivity between 1996 and 1999. They pissed of almost everyone else in the London art scene, established a formidable reputation and (lest we forget) made some memorable and perhaps even brilliant art.

2. "The years following art school are weird. No one knows quite what to do with themselves despite the fact that every ex-art student possesses a painful consciousness of their own immense talent."

To many art graduates the art world looks horrible. It's an impregnable tower of matey nepotism and psychotic levels of competition. Everyone is after the same few shows, everyone wants to be friends with the same few curators and journalists. There's a huge, highly visible line between 'art students' and 'the art world'. It's very easy to start hating the

whole thing, but you always want to be a part of it. It's where your audience is, it's where your contemporaries are, it means you don't have to get a day job, you can continue to develop your work and your life without the colonisation of your mental space that routine inevitably brings. But it is definitely not a meritocracy, and that is a painful fact to accept.

These factors come across in BANK's tone. Their early shows consisted of a venting of frustration mixed with a strong desire to produce interesting shows. Simon Bedwell and John Russell would produce mail-outs for exhibitions that didn't exist, the idea being that "it didn't matter if you were actually having shows as long as people thought you were". This disregard for the art establishment would form the basis for many of BANK's later exhibitions - 'Fuck Off' basically consisted of an invitation with the exhibition title on it sent out to their London gallery mailing list and an unrelated display of art objects. Their intolerance for art world babble led to the show 'Press Release', in which they corrected galleries' press releases of grammatical errors, bullshit art-speak and clichés via their "Fax-Bak" service ("Helping you to help yourself!"). However, they were painfully self-conscious about appearing as clichéd art-rebels themselves, so everything they did came cloaked in a confusing mix of irony, self-parody and sincerity. This is where one of the most well founded criticisms (but some would say the most interesting aspect) of BANK is found - they took the ironic and distanced approach too far at times, leaving the viewer with no sense of anything at all.

Bank attempted to create their own space rather than showing regularly in institutional spaces. This could have been seen as a position if it wasn't for the fact that they were so cripplingly neurotic about actually taking on a position. Their initial 'Bank Space' gave way to 'Dog' (where they held the show 'God'), and then 'Gallerie Poo-Poo'. All of these galleries were at the same site - they were a re-branding of Bank's exhibition space, and each change marked a shift in Bank's tactics.

As they continued to be largely ignored by the London art press (Art Monthly, Frieze etc.) Bank's attacks on the 'art world' grew increasingly fierce. 'Gallerie Winner' was a show that satirised the idea of the luvvie gallerist. Artist Wayne Lloyd took on the role of 'charismatic capitalist and entrepreneur' Wayne Winner. He performed the character of 'The Winner' for the duration of the show, asking visitors to hold paintings against the wall for ages or asking them to sweep up, smoking cigars, shouting down the phone or banging away at his computer. Wayne Winner was Bank's stab at the art world, their response to the culture of commercial exhibition practice that has absolutely nothing to do with art. But as always, it is impossible even now to see where the line has been drawn between detached, neurotically self-conscious irony and actual genuine sentiment. I want to think that Bank were here genuinely kicking against the horribly shallow and facile culture that surrounds art London. But it is still very difficult to recover the meaning of the work.

I would suggest that despite having a genuine desire to present this kind of opposition Bank were afraid of being pigeon holed too easily as earnest revolutionaries. Bank were painfully aware of the problems this position would give them, the narrowing of readings that this politicisation would entail. This was what the next show would deal with.

3. The press release for "Stop short changing us" reads like a manifesto. The first page talks about the history of collaborative practice, the idea of the 'genius' working with their

team of assistants - they put Michaelangelo and Andy Warhol on the same level in that there is a definite traceable hierarchy of responsibility in their seemingly collaborative practices. The press release calls this 'bourgeois individualism' - with Warhol's Factory approach seen as an attempt to oppose this idea by setting up an illusive democracy whilst still conforming in every other way to the idea of the 'bourgeois individual'. BANK, claims the press release, are different. They are a family.

The positioning of this argument comes across as a satirical take on the perceived socialist tendency of group practice. Or perhaps an earnest statement on how BANK is different from everything else ever, just drenched in irony. With radical political motifs, heroic self-portraits, anti-capitalist graffiti and ostentatious frames painted into the large paintings, the show seems like a crash of ideologies and inconsistencies. BANK are bringing to our attention the assumed position of the artist in society, the values that inform how an artist is positioned and therefore how an artist positions their work. The press release contains a direct attack on the yBa group, describing their work as "post-conceptual-style-well-made-objects", which lack in intellectual and political insight. This position, combined with their boldly announced democratic mode of practice, leads us to the fact that they see 'bourgeois individualism' as 'ego', and not conducive to producing art. In this context, the yBas and all their work is simply glossy style and no genuine content, a simulation of the basic properties of an artwork. Combined with the insidious and meaningless art speak that inevitably surrounds this work, it can be a powerful illusion, but it's an illusion none the less.

Since John Russell's departure, BANK's activities have tailed off a little. They took part in 'Protest to Survive' at the Whitechapel gallery, and have recently produced a series of posters and a downloadable screensaver for the BBC online website. They had a show of recent paintings at Jake and Dinos Chapman's gallery in the East End. BANK's appeal is definitely changing. Where once they were at the centre of a scene that was desperately new and interesting, now they are kind of veterans - the people they featured in their early shows have gone on to varying degrees of success around them. It's like BANK missed the 'career development' boat on purpose. And now they are out there, still making work, still slightly scattergun-militant in their approach. But if BANK relied on offending a sensibility or shocking someone, then over time people have come to expect this tactic from them, and therefore the effect is defused. The eternal problem of the avant-garde - the new becomes old, and the effect become affect.

Of course, it isn't over yet. BANK are still producing, still writing, still speaking in their unique voice. And as long as they are making art, I'll be happy to look at it. Even if it's telling me to fuck off.

**"It's not about the finished object. We don't see art as a unit of exchange. Art is how we live; it's our love affair with life. It's how we relate to life or the more interesting things in life and we believe in ART.
Art is a leap into the unknown."**