

Adrian Searle,
**'Nice, but can you keep your
trousers on next time?'**
The Guardian, 4 August, 1998.

They've got attitude. They've even got their own tabloid newspaper. But do those crazy cats at Galerie Poo-Poo have anything to say? **Adrian Searle** tries hard to find out. Plus: Lari Pittman and his Queer Aesthetic at the ICA

**Nice, but can
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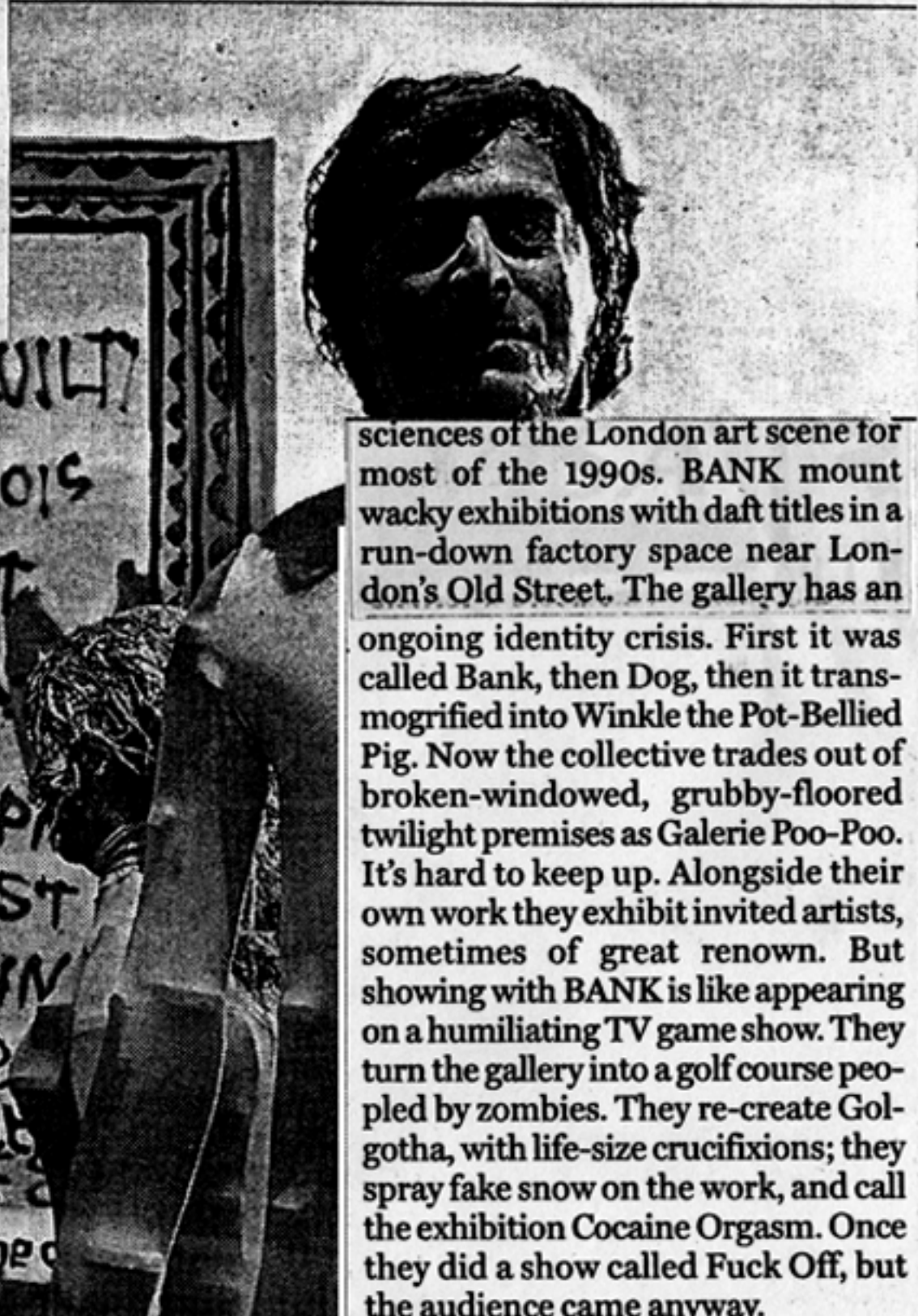
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“Stop short-changing us, Popular culture is for idiots. We believe in ART,” the press release shouts. Never trust anyone who claims to believe in art, I remind myself. “We are sick of popular culture, after all we grew up with it! We all watched children’s television and pop music and it was all shit!” the text continues, making expert use of the expletive and the exclamation mark. This isn’t a press release, it’s a manifesto, and manifestos are thin on the ground hereabouts. The collective group BANK, who wrote this invective, want to kick non-art out of the galleries and get back to real values. They’re sick of popular culture masquerading as art in the name of democracy, and of the derision of art (or ART) as elitist.

I get letters every week from readers expressing similar bellicose sentiments. Whatever happened to art, the letters ask. The modern world is what happened, I want to reply, and we get what we deserve, along with all the hype, the brouhaha, the trivia. So do BANK have an answer? “We believe in art and the idea of the avant garde,” they bluster, heroically. But then it gets tricky: “BANK believe the real revolution is in the head — not through the imposition of structural solutions, but through the provision of a new world consciousness.” Now they’ve really lost me. Somewhere in this stew of New Age nonsense and collectivist togetherness there’s something worth saying, but not in the name of new world consciousness, puh-lease.

BANK is a knockabout quartet of artists whose exploits have provided light relief and pricked the bad con-

have



sciences of the London art scene for most of the 1990s. BANK mount wacky exhibitions with daft titles in a run-down factory space near London's Old Street. The gallery has an ongoing identity crisis. First it was called Bank, then Dog, then it transmogrified into Winkle the Pot-Bellied Pig. Now the collective trades out of broken-windowed, grubby-floored twilight premises as Galerie Poo-Poo. It's hard to keep up. Alongside their own work they exhibit invited artists, sometimes of great renown. But showing with BANK is like appearing on a humiliating TV game show. They turn the gallery into a golf course peopled by zombies. They re-create Golgotha, with life-size crucifixions; they spray fake snow on the work, and call the exhibition Cocaine Orgasm. Once they did a show called Fuck Off, but the audience came anyway.

BANK also sporadically produce a hilarious, scurrilous tabloid newspaper. ICA Complete Load Of Bollocks Shocker, the front page screams. And Galleries All Owned By Rich People Shock... Chisenhale — Why?... Sarah Kent Stupid. Official!... “Anish Kapoor is boring, it was allegedly revealed today,” and “Contemporary art ‘too theory-led’ claims top TV Cop”. Magazine editors, grant-giving authorities, curators, museum directors and artists are all fair game. There’s a cruel but true “Where are they now?” column, a “Name that Deutschland dealer” photo-spot, cartoons and advice columns. Now, predictably, everyone wants to be lampooned in *The Bank*.

The current exhibition is an arrangement of unpleasant expressionist paintings and sculpted figures, all of which feature the group. Mannequin versions of the artists — Simon Bedwell, John Russell, Milly Thompson and a bloke from Hove named Bill (real name Andrew Williamson) stand in a circle, naked and holding hands. And then again in boiler suits, their faces blitzed with tacky expressionist paintwork. A repellent fibreglass sculpture shows them once more, arms around each other’s shoulders. Milly’s face has been so badly modelled she looks like Winston Churchill, and the ensemble has been given a nasty bronze-effect coating. **BANK** work collectively in an orgy of togetherness, except that all the lovey-doveyness

keeps slewing into bitterness, bile and bad painting. “Art is how we live, it’s our love affair with life,” they say. In one of their terrible paintings they stand around looking grumpy in a magnificent hall at Versailles. There is a sticker on the painting which says Q: Must all this go? A: Yes — all this must go. It sounds Maoist, but apparently the text is inspired by Beethoven’s last quartet. They paint themselves in war-torn Vietnam and in front of an exploding volcano. One painting — very metaphysical, this — has them standing in blackness, sculpted arms and hands emerging from the painting, each clutching a paintbrush with which they paint their own images.

In the autumn, **BANK** are giving their space over to three rather unexpected and prestigious solo exhibitions, by Bethan Huws, Lolly Batty and the world-famous conceptual team Art & Language. In a way **BANK** and Art & Language have much in common: both groups are equally infuriating, thought provoking and frequently funny. But the shows will be mounted in an overlit, pristine white cube dumped in the middle of Galerie Poo-Poo. There is, of course, already a celebrated commercial gallery called White Cube, so **Bank** are calling the project *White*³.