

PAUL NOBLE

*Nobsend*

1997–1998, graphite on paper, 150 x 200 cm

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## ADVENTURES CLOSE TO HOME: AN INTRODUCTION TO BRITISH ART SINCE THE 1990S, OR THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY FROM 'THEN' TO 'NOW' JOHN SLYCE

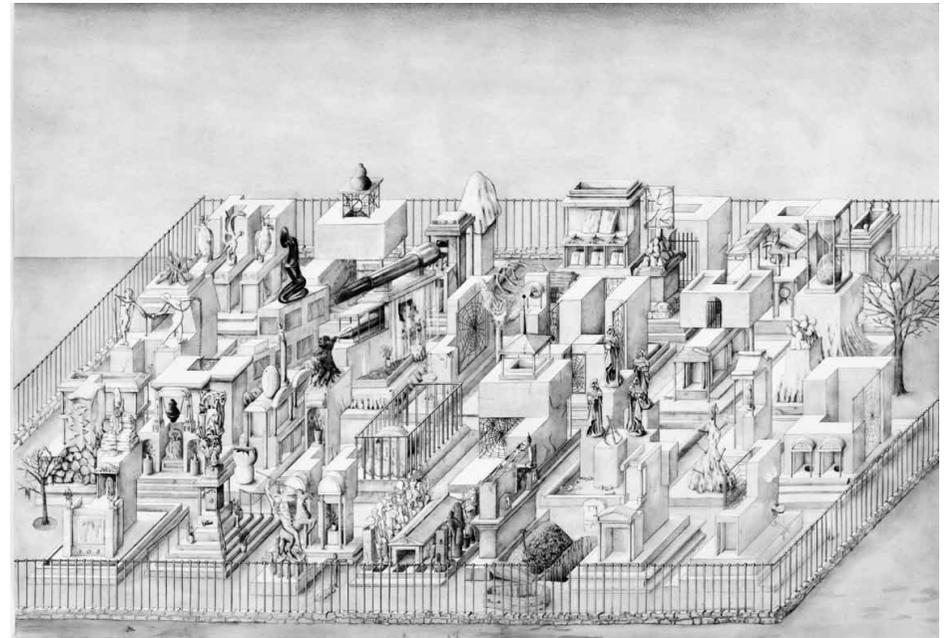
As I sit down to write this introduction, I face another in a long line of distractions personal, professional and disastrous to a deadline: the 2012 Turner Prize shortlist is announced in Elizabeth Price, Luke Fowler, Spartacus Chetwynd, and Paul Noble. An intriguing set of nominees and practices—ranging from dispersed performance strategies (Chetwynd), to archival approaches to filmmaking, which evoke a distant moment and changing social relations (Fowler), or, in the case of Price, films centred on robust encounters with loud music and vulgar noise tracing the pleasures to be found in broader urban life and visual culture, and then Noble's brand of world making in monumental drawings of Nobsend, his own new town—and yet the shape of the shortlist largely conforms to that of recent years. More should follow on the ups and downs of the £25,000 Turner Prize as it not so much lumbers but twitches towards its thirtieth anniversary. Although, I am not convinced it is really necessary other than to say it is often better to be nominated than to win the prize.

I intended to begin this brief introduction by reaching back to a recently forgotten moment when there was no museum of Modern art in London, or no Tate Modern, the WWW was yet to be revealed, and only a handful of commercial galleries—say, some three to five and that might even be an exaggeration—were interested in looking at, let alone showing contemporary art in London. That situation was structured by complacency as much as indifference. The lack of venues or platforms for contemporary art, or even much of an audience for it, cannot be overstated. And this was true as shockingly late as 1990. Yes, there were a couple of shops in Bell Street, but little more from the 1970s had survived or was closely followed from abroad. I arrived in London from New

York on 1 January 1996 and by then the breakthrough had already largely taken place. Something had happened and much had changed. Cork Street was then still desperately hanging onto its claim as the geographic focal point of the London gallery scene, but momentum was gathering further east. And no one needed a weatherman to know which way the wind was blowing.

The brick and the balloon is a ruling late twentieth century metaphor for the dialectical thrust of urban regeneration/gentrification driven as much by culture as capital. In New York there was precedent for what was to take place in London in the 1990s. It had happened there earlier in Soho and then the East Village and later still in bits of Brooklyn. In New York, the move to Chelsea's former meatpacking district had more to do with artworld real estate cartels than anything else. Art galleries make money out of real estate, just as land values benefit from the presence of artists and their art. How the London artworld came to be centred, if only for a moment, in the east of London begins and ends with the availability of space, lower gallery overheads and the density of artists and makers who live, or lived there. The east London Borough of Hackney can still boast a higher concentration of artists living and working there to any other comparable area of Europe. This is at least true up and to the dislocations wrought by first, the concomitant regeneration/gentrification the artists and galleries brought, and then the 2012 London Olympics located just further east and in a spot where many artists fled once forced from more central areas in east London.

One of the very first to pioneer this zone commercially was an American expatriate who had come to London in the



1970s drawn as much to Punk and its Do-It-Yourself ethos as to art school and studies at the Royal College of Art. To my mind and eye, when I arrived in London in the mid-1990s, Maureen Paley was doing something interesting from her home-cum-gallery in east London, behind a grey door at number 21 Beck Road, E8. Having tested the west London gallery waters during what was to become the economic downturn in the early 1990s on Dering Street, Paley returned, slightly bruised, and regathered on Beck Road—a street of tightly terraced Victorian workers' houses, many of which were gathered together under the ownership of a publicly funded 1970s artists' collective support organisation called ACME—and fashioned a programme centred on a mix of international (largely American) artists and younger British artists. The Sunday soirées there would increasingly gather together some of the best of what would become the New British Art, or yBa. On my shelves is a book that documents the particular lineaments of that moment in the early 1990s better than any other: *Technique Anglaise: Current Trends in British Art*. I got Liam Gillick to sign my copy one evening on a bus ride to Bristol. This curious publication (the title was offered as a joke by Gillick, but received earnestly by the other editor) aimed to buttress and increase an "aura of activity" in younger British art. Maureen Paley joined a coequal

pioneering gallerist in Karsten Schubert, the art historian Lynne Cooke, artist William Furlong and the book's editors in Liam Gillick (then as much an artist as a working critic) and curator Andrew Renton in a roundtable discussion of the then scene, a search for its tendencies and a grittily realistic account of the conditions in which contemporary British art was to operate. What is palpable in a reading of that roundtable conversation from 1991 here in 2012 is the obdurate determination not only to make something happen but then also to see it stick. Images are spoken into being and, in this case, so too were the necessary conditions out of which a scene, work and practices, and then platforms and possibilities would emerge.

Everything just said should be qualified by at least two facts. The middle years of the 1990s saw a massive increase in the audience for art and an expansion of the realms of culture and economy to the point where one began to signify, or be coterminous with the other. This state of affairs, it should be obvious, is not a local one. The book before you is every bit a material example of our moment and this attendant merger. There are some truisms in art, but these thankfully are always given to change. It was once said that young artists should never approach a gallery brandishing slides from their degree show seeking representation. Alan

**LIAM GILLICK**

*Complex Centre*

2010, powder coated aluminium, transparent Plexiglass,  
120 x 120 x 30 cm

Courtesy Maureen Paley, London

Charlton, otherwise not represented in this book, but who is an important figure in British art as it emerges from the late 1960s and the interstices of minimal and conceptual practices of the early 1970s, did just that. After looking over some art magazines covering international shows, he sent Konrad Fischer some slides of work he had made thinking that he felt a common project there and Fischer offered him a show in his Düsseldorf gallery. Charlton painted the last of his paintings at the Royal Academy as the Beatles played from a rooftop and never looked back. He has gone on to

show with about every important blue chip gallery there is, the world over.

When I lived in New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s, British art was still reducible to a handful of names linked in the main to the historical moment of conceptualism: certainly Gilbert & George, and Art & Language, Victor Burgin, Richard Long and or Hamish Fulton, and perhaps Stephen Willats (though his handwriting wasn't quite good enough to be a proper conceptual artist, at least that was



**DOUGLAS GORDON**

*Blind Star series: White Blind Janet*

2002, photograph and archival museum board,  
framed: 66 x 61 cm

Copyright 2012 Studio lost but found/Douglas Gordon/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, courtesy Gagosian Gallery

the joke amongst some). Most art scenes and the attentions they evince are highly parochial. That is one of those truisms given to change. What characterised the recognisable names above is that each had ventured beyond the narrow confines of a British artworld in order to sustain their practices and follow careers. Not that any of the artists immediately above ever necessarily expected the careers that have come their way. For an earlier generation, choosing to become an artist was a lifestyle choice—one that consigned the maker to a marginal and limited social status—if not indeed a vow of poverty. Often, and this is particularly true in the British variant of early conceptual art of the late 1960s, their work was to start remarkably lo-fi and came forward as an intended amateurish affront to the corporate professionalism of a late modernist art nearly, if not indeed already, exhausted and spent.

Since the later 1990s, becoming an artist is still a lifestyle choice, but now one bound to an inflated set of expectations and outcomes where the stakes are perceived to be very high. The introduction and then increase in tuition fees renders this more than mere perception. It is no great surprise when young artists read in the Sunday papers that Damien Hirst's net worth is estimated to be \$215 million USD, making him one of a handful of artists to make a rich list alongside his patrons. In reality, should they even make it, and 'make it' here can be construed as still making art and having something of an art practice a decade on after graduating from art school, then they will roughly already be in an elite group that constitutes some three to five per cent of the cohort they went through school with. This, however, they may not appreciate, or even want to know. Just as the number of artists—from the UK, Europe, and increasingly overseas—entering British art schools swells from the late 1990s on, the professionalisation of those same art students and their art schools gains pace. The forces of professionalisation only increase expectations and what appears to be 'at stake' in a vicious cycle that is too much brick and very little balloon.

Perhaps the most tangible outcome of a period in a British art school is still the erection of a support network that might extend the conversation around art works and practices beyond the institution and provide mutual



platforms on which to present work. Rather than waiting to be asked, now the dominant strategy is to start early to create a buzz and 'aura of activity', to make something happen whether actual or imagined. The embers of a sibling culture are still noticeable and in place. And no matter how professional and practised the younger British artists of today have become, art is still a social practice and they will, by necessity, have to rely, if for some only at the start, on mutual forms of support.

For me, one of the really valuable attempts to assess yBa and its wider cultural context arrived in the form of a one-day conference organised by the artist David Burrows titled *Who's Afraid of Red, White & Blue?* in the spring of 1998. The presentations and papers offered there are gathered up in a publication with the same name. I remember relating to part of what Burrows was aiming for in the conference through the prism of a line from Fredric

#### MARTIN CREED

*Work No. 340: A sheet of paper folded up and unfolded* (below)

2004, paper, 30 x 21 cm

Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, photo: Barbara Gerny

#### WOLFGANG TILLMANS

*Cova Crater I* (opposite)

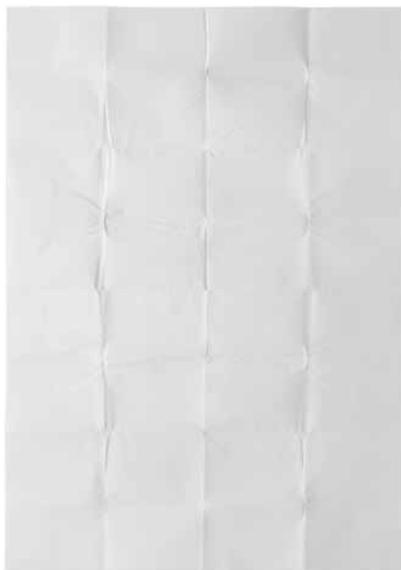
2002, C-print

Courtesy Maureen Paley, London

Jameson on architecture where he writes, “An individual building will always stand in contradiction with its urban context and also its social function”. There are some brave attempts to critique the moment (Julian Stallabrass and his *High Art Lite*) or even vacuously insert oneself in the mythology (Gregor Muir’s *Lucky Kunst*). There is now even a quising book with a title something like *Growing Up: The Young British Artists at Fifty*. I set out for the book launch on my bike to find out about that one, by the time I arrived at the Bethnal Green Working Man’s Club at 9pm, everyone had moved on, or perhaps even gone to bed. The moment still awaits its ultimate treatment, but as I have suggested, it is all there already in the primary source material. I remember the day the catalogue to Freeze arrived in the post at a friend’s New York Gallery unbidden and thumbing its pages with some amusement. The ‘scene’ was never the art, but a by-product of the sociability and speed from whence it arrived in a particular context. All this was magnified by the media and art-journalists eager to benefit from an aura of activity.

yBa came forward as a mythic structure; this was part of its design from the first. Its greatest adventures were actually not so close to home and were often realised through the hard graft of establishing one’s practice and persona abroad. Witness the activities of Liam Gillick and Douglas Gordon, to mention only two ready examples. It was not often as young or even as British as it appeared. Its image may have been centred on a revamped and newly swinging London, but Glasgow and Scottish artists played no small part in its success. Sensation opened at the Royal Academy towards the end of September 1997. Princess Diana had died some three weeks earlier. The shine was already off Tony Blair and New Labour, or at least the honeymoon period had certainly come to an end. By the opening of Sensation you could hardly find a young British artist who had actually been part of the ‘scene’ who wanted to be associated with yBa. yBa, which then seemed obsolete, only lives on because it missed the moment of its realisation. The indulgence associated with Sensation belonged to and was designed to serve somebody else. Those at the helm had already jumped ship at their desired destination long before the vessel dropped anchor in the courtyard of the Royal Academy. This is the ultimate *technique Anglaise*.

What differentiates the British artworld from any other is predominately a matter of scale. The British commercial gallery scene is not unique in being lead by some remarkable women gallerists, but this was not always the case and certainly not before the expansion of the 1990s. Maureen Paley and Victoria Miro (and before them Annelly Juda and then Angela Flowers) lead the way and brought photography into the gallery on an equal standing to anything else. Sadie Coles, Cornelia Grassi and then a growing following of younger women running important galleries in Pilar Corrias, Kate MacGarry, Laura Bartlett and Rebecca Marston belong in a list, which could easily be now much longer. Another positive development in the expansion of the British scene is the tangible recognition for some artists who should have enjoyed it earlier, but are receiving attention beyond that



they enjoyed from other artists and writers or perhaps their students. Gustav Metzger, Phyllida Barlow, John Stezaker, Peter Kennard, Amikam Toren benefit from this expansion and still deserve to benefit more.

In the 1990s, the speed of art increased: both that given to its making and that required in its reception. This is a generalisation that does violence to some more subtle and complex practices from the period, but even these often used speed as an aesthetic decoy or camouflage in order to fit it. This perhaps fits the work of Adam Chodzko or Roddy Buchanan, even Martin Creed. If the early 1990s were characterised generally by speed with a good amount of post-studio kitchen table making happening, then the late 1990s and 2000s were given over to a different type of expansion associated with the scale and capital intensity of production, or post-production, or indeed out-sourcing of production. The art does not necessarily slow down at all; it only gets bigger and more expensive to make and to have. In this, certain types of British art slotted seamlessly into patterns of the making and marketing of art characteristic of an overheated bubble economy. There was thankfully very little British subprime art as we passed beyond the threshold of 2008. Others were not so prudent, or maybe just unlucky.

This book attempts to survey some of the best examples of contemporary British art assembled in one place. In putting the book together, there was an attempt to not focus too greatly either on a more distant past (gathering important practices from British Pop Art or even Conceptualism) or to have the book concentrated too heavily on an yBa grouping. In an age of globalisation, national identity distorts if not indeed subverts the ultimate brand and artists located in London are now drawn here from far and wide: for instance Wolfgang Tillmans. Individual examples will always stand in contradiction to the context in which they are set and operate. This is, after all, part of their social function. They don’t take it personal. It is all part of their adventures close to home.