

which statement also serves as a fundamental criticism against structuralism and cognitive poetics for upholding the status quo.

With the blurring of the borderline between production and reception, which, based on Bratich's account, might be called a poststructuralist or postmodern turn, practically nothing appears to be excluded from the scrutinizing gaze of reception studies as represented in this collection. From small talk to film adaptations, from illustrations to social networks, activities which have traditionally been classified as production are now analysed as reception of other artworks, media, or culture. And with readers and audiences activated, reception is no longer seen as passive decoding, but as an active contribution to discourse, in short, as production. But reception study has also extended itself by incorporating neighbouring realms of other disciplines. In line with the merging of literary and cultural (media) studies, a cursory glance over the background of the contributors to the present volume reveals the truly interdisciplinary nature of the field, interacting with, among others, sociology, media and communication studies. This expansion has indeed shown a way around the problem of reading readings, but this has not been without a price. With a concept of reception that now covers everything, reception study appears less and less separable from literary, media, or cultural studies in general.

**Előd Pál Csirmaz**

#### Notes

1. See, for example, Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (1975) (London: Routledge, 1997), and *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, eds. Joanna Gavins and Gerard Steen (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
2. See Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998), p. 26.
3. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," trans. S. Heath, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), 167–172, p. 170.
4. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," trans. Alan Bass, in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State UP), 83–94.

## yBa Shocks

Kieran Cashell, *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009)

*Aftershock* is a novel, unique and slightly provoking attempt to canonize yBa art through a thorough theoretical analysis of the works of six artists: Richard Billingham, Marc Quinn, Marcus Harvey, The Chapman Brothers, Tracy Emin and Damien Hirst. Kieran Cashell operates with theories emerging from post-structuralism (Foucault, Bataille, Kristeva, Mulvey), which she productively amalgamates with recent theories of transgression (Jenks, Julius)<sup>1</sup> in order

to justify her argument that *transgressive art* can be used as a framework to investigate yBa art practises. The novelty of Cashell's work is that the complex theoretical approach to yBa art which she proposes is still not widespread among scholars in the field.

There are several obvious reasons why these artists were not welcomed into the academic world. One is that yBa art is rooted precisely in the works' resistance to high-brow, academic theory. Julian Stallabrass, a well-known, Courtauld-based art historian, claims in *High art Lite* that the artistic stance of the yBa in general is a resistance to theory in two respects. On the one hand, these artists consider theory as redundant, overcome, something that is not worthy of consideration, so they do not simply resist theory as such, but ignore it, because it has ceased to play an influential role.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand – and here Stallabrass' scepticism about the whole yBa phenomenon abounds – these are not the kind of art works one can spend hours with since no intellectual demand is addressed to the viewer.

This negative view is precisely what Cashell challenges in her book: each chapter devoted to one of the six yBa artists shows that their works' resistance to theory can be seriously reconsidered. In fact each chapter exerts great effort to present a thorough analysis of the works, as well as to re-frame them and place them under the umbrella term: *transgressive art*. In doing so, she counterbalances the media generated preju-

ices and misunderstandings concerning the yBa as well as the unfavourable judgements of previous critics.<sup>3</sup>

Another problem with yBa artists is that their fame was heavily based on a media celebrity culture, including scandals and the branded bad girl or bad boy image. The phenomenon thus was interpreted as the "marriage of avant-garde shock and commodity consumption, people cannot help but know about" (Stallabrass, 4). The early accounts were also more about their personal and love relationships, the stories of their emergence into fame promoted by Saatchi (a former advertising expert who is now an uneasy mix of collector and dealer), the sky-high prices of their art, and their scandalous exhibitions like *Sensation*.<sup>4</sup> As Betterton puts it: "the paradoxical status of recent art in Britain was the consequence of a realignment between new art and the sphere of cultural consumption, a shift that made it possible for it to be represented as 'subversive' and yet rapidly assimilated to the art market."<sup>5</sup> The yBa was interpreted as a commercial success, based on such prominent galleries as Gagosian or White Cube. These galleries put emphasis on yBa's "professional" art, and on their "neo-Formalist return to a white cube situation" which "reintroduced a stylish aspect to their work for metropolitan audiences confronted by its explicitly commodified aesthetics."<sup>6</sup>

The emergence of different art practices from the 1990s might also have some role in the uneasiness about the

yBa phenomenon. Artists belonging to the so called “relational,” “participatory,” “site-specific” or “interventionalist” art emerging around the yBa generation could better circulate and were also better received on the international scene (e.g. Mark Dion, Pierre Huyge, Thai Rirkit Tiravanija, Jeremy Deller or the somewhat younger Phil Collins).<sup>7</sup> These artists and their projects were more in tune with the learned approaches of high-brow theoretical (e.g. post-structuralist, feminist and post-colonialist, etc.) thought and partly countered the tendency of the commodification of the international art market and art fair culture. Claire Bishop, for instance, who writes excessively about contemporary art, hardly mentions yBa artists and if she does, then mainly as a point of contrast between yBa and “participatory” or “relational” art.<sup>8</sup>

The problematic point of Cashell’s argument is that (similarly to Bishop’s or Stallabrass’), it narrows down its scope of yBa art mainly to the debated, media-sensation-based and Saatchi-promoted group of Goldsmith artists. However, it is also important to note that the term yBa is problematic in itself: firstly, these artists and artworks have no common set of characteristics. Secondly, several artists who are categorised as yBa were not in the original group of the (in)famous Goldsmith student-based *Freeze*-exhibition (Rachel Whiteread or Yinka Shonibare) or included in *Sensation*, which boosted yBa into world fame (Douglas Gordon), nor

they are part of the media buzz around yBa. Some yBa artists’ art practices are much more in tune with “relational” art; these include such highly valued artists as Mona Hatoum, Liam Gillick, Tacita Dean. Liam Gillick is especially interesting in this respect, since he is the paradigmatic example (with Rirkit Tiravanija) of Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetic*.<sup>9</sup>

The controversies around yBa art are manifested also in the fact that some artists were positioned into the – debated but – somewhat elitist framework of the Venice biennials, and even into the high-brow Documenta representations. Tracy Emin, Rachel Whiteread and Chris Ofili represented the English pavilion in Venice, Mona Hatoum’s *Homebound* was exhibited at Documenta 11. The success of yBa, grounded by Saatchi promotion, was also furthered by Nicholas Serota – the director of the Tate(s) and one of the most influential art world characters in the UK.<sup>10</sup> The Tate(s) have a considerable collection of yBa artists; the works are well represented among the (also debated) Tate Turner Prize winners and are constantly on display in various thematic shows not only at the Tate(s), but at other major art institutions in London, as well. It seems that their place is becoming established despite the frequent furies.<sup>11</sup>

Cashell’s reinterpretation is thus to be placed within an affirmative canonizing framework of an institutional background. She aims to reevaluate yBa art in particular by overcoming preliminary biases against transgressive art in gen-

eral. In her opinion the problem with receiving this type of art was that transgressive art's uncompromising mission to interrogate conservative views and to subvert conventional moral beliefs might have become excessive, so much so that it was conceived as an art which "violates the remit of enlightened culture to the extent that it is impossible to engage with transgressive practices as art" (1). In her argument however this is the case only because transgressive art genuinely expanded the horizon of artistic practises by seeking to "invalidate the principles of institutional aesthetics" (4).

To justify her argument Cashell connects *aftershock* to *transgressiveness* and seeks to find the basis for resistance in "post-Kantian institutional aesthetics" and Greenbergian formalist theories (6). In order to ground the opposition of transgressive aesthetics and institutional principles, she contrasts the Kantian disinterestedness of the aesthetic judgement of the beautiful (7) on the one hand, with the unavoidable involvement of the viewer in (the often repulsive and disquieting) transgressive art on the other, which by its form and theme thwarts the possibility of detached contemplation and provokes an irresistible moral answer in the viewer judging the work.<sup>12</sup> In her view this counters Kantian disinterestedness and post-Kantian formal aesthetics. Although Cashell's approach simplifies Kantian aesthetics through Greenbergian formalism, the thesis seems to be a

very demanding and productive one for reconsidering yBa art.

Here what is at stake is the impossibility of disengaging from the emotional and moral response the works provoke. Therefore, in her opinion, the effect is not aesthetic, but moral "which cannot be spirited away by creative ratiocination"; also because the works' formal aesthetic quality does not allow it – as was the case with Mappelthrope's or Serrano's photographs.<sup>13</sup> Although she claims that transgressive art entails a "reflective moral response," which she identifies as "the ethical aftershock of the work" (12), in her view the emphasis falls on the moral-emotional engagement with the work, that is, on the impossibility to keep the (neutralizing) aesthetic distance. This is why yBa works pull towards a new type of experience which is primarily not aesthetic or which radically re-interprets once more what the so-often criticised Greenbergian aesthetics put forward.

Her claims are manifested clearly in each chapter devoted to an artist and furthered by diverse theories. The chapter on Tracy Emin Cashell operates with Foucault's interpretation of parrhesia (fearless speech).<sup>14</sup> In Cashell's view Emin does risk herself through the fearless exposure of her traumas, as in the case with her *Everyone I have ever slept with 1963–1994* – at best mistakenly interpreted as a confrontation with female promiscuity (born in 1963, Emin constantly protests against this interpretation). Cashell claims that the work is a

complex network of metaphors and personal traumas: the empty interior of the protecting womblike, yet nomadic, temporary dwelling place and the 102 names sewn into it, which evoke often traumatic experiences from childhood on – ranging from the lost comfort of the womb shared with her twin brother through the comforting of a homeless to sexual abuse or to the traumatic loss of her own foetus – point towards the anxiety of abandonment and the feeling of emptiness. Moreover, in Cashell's view "Emin's entire aesthetic project developed out of an existentially significant confrontation with suicide," whereby Emin's art engages not only at shocking audiences but, in a very intricate and complex way, the very basic existentialist questions art can raise (134).

In the chapter on Richard Billingham, Cashell focuses primarily on the Britishness of yBa: she places Billingham's works into the socio-political and socio-cultural givens of the 1990s, marked by the emerging (international) influence of Britpop culture (with such brands as Oasis, Blur or Pulp equally coming from Goldsmith) as well as by John Major's absurd vision of a "classless society" or the later Blairian idea of the "opportunity society," as well as by the clash between the idea of "creative Britain" and the working-class experience. In Cashell's view Richard Billingham's *Ray a' Laugh* photograph series of his working-class family confronts the viewer with the hidden ideology of the controversial middle-class class-tourism approach to

working-class life (e. g. also that of Brit soap idealization). She claims that Billingham's work – due to the photographs' low quality – does not allow for a disinterested aesthetic stance; to the contrary: although his photos invite the viewer to adopt the attitude of the cultural tourist or the disengaged attitude of "orthodox aesthetics," they generate a "sense of shame." In her words, Billingham's work "intensifies moral and sensory queasiness by shocking and embarrassing us . . . for approaching his family and home with the repulsive attitude of the cultural tourist" (27). These photographs make the viewers "uncomfortably conscious of the fact, that . . . everybody hates a tourist" (26–27).<sup>15</sup>

The fact that social class or Britishness is also a critical point of Chris Townsend's approach to novel generation Brit art, *New Art from London*, or of the 2010 Saatchi exhibition of a newer generation Brit art entitled *Newspeak: The Complete Grammatology of Panic*, shows that Cashell's approach is not a unique one.<sup>16</sup> The curator of *Newspeak*, Patricia Ellis, claims that it is an art which expresses the anxiety of the younger generations and reflects the "new social order of class homogenisation, consumerist gentrification and the phenomenon of instant success culture."<sup>17</sup> The Orwellian newspeak in this interpretation becomes the recycling and mixing of phenomena: "[the artists] hand-make the virtual, cite history in fugue fervour and find the poetic and enduring in the cacophony of pop cul-

tural din” (Ellis, 4). On the other hand, in Townsend’s account, new British art is much more about the questioning of Britishness from an outsider’s point of view in a multicultural society, and the turning towards social questions of art instead of media buzz culture. Townsend’s book takes a wider scope of the “creative Britain”-criticism approach and analyses several artworks which comment upon social questions as well as on the economic controversies of our everyday life. In both cases the turn towards newer generations and novel experiences become signposts of the shift in British art.<sup>18</sup>

The problematic or controversial chapters of Cashell’s book are the ones on Harvey and The Chapman Brothers. The ethical implications of Harvey’s *Myra*, or those of *Zygiotic Acceleration* or *Tragic Anatomies* by The Chapman Brothers, remain dubious even within the explanatory framework of the aftershock experience. She claims that in *Myra*’s case the victims’ protests and the public outrage it raised are structural to the work’s aftershock aesthetics, and highlights the “particular effectiveness of the painting” (84–85). Though the question remains whether the ethical problem which the portrait of serial killer Myra Hindly raises - because it is made of children’s handprints and thereby evokes children’s collaboration in the making - to use her phrase, is only “spirited away by creative ratiocination.” The Chapman Brothers *Zygiotic Acceleration* and *Tragic Anatomies* are not

less problematic works: what also remains questionable is whether the oscillation between evoking sexual victimisation (pedophilia) – genital organs are grafted onto the faces of adolescent girl mannequins – and the shock of facing it explains the former by means of transgressiveness (88). The interesting part of the chapter from the aspect of theoretical reevaluation is the treatment of the *Disasters of War* (the Goya series), in which she points out that Goya is a reference point for yBa art practice of shock and transgression, as is the analysis of *Bad art for Bad People* series from the aspect of the “Batailllean-Sadean heritage,” which shows that, similarly to Sade’s works, it is “part of a culturally significant vanguard of artistic expression” (99).

The last chapter deals with Damien Hirst, whose oeuvre is probably the most debated among the works of the yBa artists: he is not only attacked by animal rights groups for the immoral way he prepares dead insects and animal corpses to be presented as art, but also for the very commercial nature of his art projects - the effect of which is allegedly based on shock manipulation.<sup>19</sup> Cashell, in her treatment of Hirst’s works, does not resolve the ethical problem of the violation of animal rights; instead she places Hirst’s works on an aesthetic plane: she approaches them in terms of Burke’s sublime and concentrates on the feeling of terror evoked by art. Although she does not solely concentrate on Hirst’s “Impossibility of Death in the

Mind of Someone Living,” in her view it is the most representative example for her interpretation of Burke’s sublime. In her opinion the shark is not simply a *memento mori*, but a sublime object which evokes the feeling of terror “that reaches down into the *id*” (179). In Cashell’s view, despite the dubious ethics of the work, it “should be considered paradigmatically sublime in the Burkean sense,” as the feeling of terror evoked is experienced in a safe environment which renders the possible harm innocuous.<sup>20</sup> To bring the concept of the sublime into the original claim of surpassing Greenbergian academic formal aesthetics through the beautiful is slightly confusing, but it well suits Cashell’s claim of the shock-aesthetics of transgressive art and provides a productive approach for Hirst’s reception.

Cashell’s book is a challenging attempt to reevaluate yBa art, and its theoretical framework might provoke and promote academic discussion; furthermore, it suggests that the yBa might take its place in the canon of art history, ironically enough when the Brit art scene has already moved on.

#### Tünde Varga

##### Notes

1. Anthony Julius, *Transgression: The Offences of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002); Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
2. Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Fall and Rise of Young British Art* (London: Verso, 1999).
3. *Aftershock* came out simultaneously with *Lucky Kunst: The Rise and Fall of*

*Young British Art* – a complex, entertaining documentary-like account of the yBa-story from the perspective of insider friend, curator and critic (also the director of Hauser and Wirth, London) Gregory Muir, also with the intent of reevaluation. Cf. Gregory Muir, *Lucky Kunst: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art* (London: Aurum Press, 2009).

4. See, for instance, Rosie Millard, *The Tastemakers: U.K. Art Now* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001).
5. Rosemary Betterton, “Young British Art in the 1990s,” in D. Morley and K. Robins (ed.), *British Cultural Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 288.
6. James Gaywood, “yBa as Critique,” Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (ed.), *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 90.
7. The terminological categories are not clearcut. For attempts at categorisation see Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* (2004), or Claire Doherty, “New Institutionalism and the Exhibition as Situation,” *Protection Reader* (Kunsthaus Graz, 2006).
8. Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn and its Discontents,” *Artforum* (February 2006).
9. Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Presses du réel, 2002).
10. See *Art Review Power 100 List*, 2009.
11. Every year there is a protest by a group of artists who call themselves Stuckists (referring to Emin’s opinion that their art is “stuck”) led by Billy Childish.
12. Cf. §6 or “The editor’s Preface,” to Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 7. On the correlation of the moral and the aesthetic, see Rodolph Gasché, “Interest in Disinterestedness,” *The Ideal of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

13. See Lucy Lippard, "The Spirit and the Letter," *Art in America* 80 (1991) 238–45.

14. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. J. Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).

15. The lines are a reference to the Pulp song "Ordinary People."

16. Patricia Ellis, "The Complete Grammatology of Panic," *Newspeak: British Art Now from the Saatchi Gallery* (London: Booth-Clibborn, 2010); Chris Townsend, *New Art from London* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006).

17. The catalogue text is designed to evoke Derridean *Grammatology* in its outline of crossed-out personal names, blurred with the Orwellian idea of the shrinking vocabulary of controlled society. Interestingly, the *Newspeak*-exhibition takes place in the ex-Soviet, ex-Leningrad St. Petersburg Hermitage (a symbolic place of art, power and cultural change) and only visits London in two parts.

18. One fascinating example is the Hungarian–British Tania Kovacs's questioning of the correlation between national borders and self-identity.

19. The European director of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals described Hirst as a "sadist" (*The Guardian*, 15 August 2003).

20. See Edmund Burke, Section VII. Of the Sublime. *A Philosophical Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 36, or Immanuel Kant, §28 of *The Critique of the Power of Judgement of Taste*, pp. 138–39.