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ART

Cutting-Edge but Comfy

Young London artists are attracting crowds -- not because of their flashy attention-seeking but because their art is understandable and unintimidating

by [Carol Kino](#)

(The online version of this article appears in two parts. Click here to go to [part two](#).)

CONTEMPORARY art depends on hype the way a vampire depends on fresh blood -- at least, that's often the perception. And hype, unfortunately, now obscures one of the art world's more fascinating recent events: the rise of London. Only five years ago, its academic traditions firmly entrenched, its contribution to twentieth-century art deemed modest by most history books, and its contemporary galleries decimated by the international recession in the art market, London was widely regarded as about the dreariest European capital for a young artist. Then the city went on an economic upswing, and its visual artists -- to the astonishment of art observers the world over -- were somehow swept to the crest of the wave. Today, in Britain and on the Continent, galleries showing British artists in their twenties and thirties draw unprecedented crowds of viewers, who are often of the same age. The city's East End has become so honeycombed with galleries and artists' studios that British journalists routinely cast it as the new Montmartre -- if not the new New York.



Gillian Wearing in her video *Dancing in Peckham*. (Courtesy of Maureen Paley/Interim Art).

Perhaps it's not surprising that as news of this has crossed the Atlantic, the tendency has been to dismiss it. For one thing, New York's contemporary galleries greatly outnumber London's. For another, some of Britain's best-known artists have allowed themselves to be marketed here as what they seem to think America wants: a Barnumesque spectacular. In 1996 Damien Hirst had a heavily promoted SoHo debut that featured his showstopping trademark: sliced-up animals in vitrines. Last year the big hullabaloo came from the Chapman brothers, famed for their scandalizing mannequins of Siamese-twin children who sprout dildoes where their noses should be. Discussions are now under way for

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a New York museum to present works belonging to the [adman Charles Saatchi](#), the pre-eminent collector of new British art, who displayed his holdings at London's Royal Academy last year under the rubric "Sensation."

In New York, art's leading edge is coming to be defined by such things as portraiture and a renewed interest in drawing and painting. Shock value and the attendant media hype are pretty old hat -- much of the reason that many American pundits now see the ascendance of British art, hot though it may be among private collectors, as a temporary market phenomenon.

Before dismissing London, however, it's worth considering several things. The new British art that tends to be widely promoted here is usually hawked by dealers who have commerce, rather than cultural enlightenment, in mind. But what seems most commercial is unlikely to convey what London has going for it: a genuine creative scene, galvanized by experimental artist-run shows and publicly funded one-time-only projects. More important, the London art world has accomplished something that its New York equivalent emphatically has not: getting ordinary people interested in what young artists are doing.

THE British public is legendarily hostile to the very notion of "contemporary" art: in 1976, when the Tate spent thousands of pounds of public money on 120 bricks -- an ultra-minimalist work by an American, Carl Andre -- it caused a national scandal. Yet today new British work, surrounded by controversy though it often is, tends to go over so well that when the national lottery announced last year that it would fund individual artists as well as building projects, few attempts were made to rouse indignation with the old rallying cry that all contemporary art is obscure and ipso facto elitist. Damien Hirst and his ilk are now household words to such an extent that the outgoing Conservative Party pointed to young artists as evidence of what Thatcherite entrepreneurialism had produced, and the new Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, wasted no time in trying to co-opt them. (Last year 10 Downing Street was rehung, to much fanfare, with new British abstract painting.) New art inspires such curiosity that it is commonly displayed in public places other than galleries and museums. Not just highfalutin clubs and restaurants but Habitat, the chain of mid-market home-furnishings stores, routinely devotes space to serious art exhibitions. There are even plans afoot to commission artists' installations for Selfridges, one of London's staid department stores. The current craze has prompted a reassessment of an art-historical tradition that has never been regarded as one of Europe's most original or glorious.

THINK pop art, and the image that springs to mind probably involves America, mass media, and larger-than-life celebrity Andy Warhol silk-screening a movie-screen-sized portrait of Jackie Kennedy or Marilyn Monroe. Yet it is a British critic, Lawrence Alloway, who is said to have coined the term "pop art," in the early 1950s, and a British artist, Richard Hamilton, who in 1956 made what is generally regarded as the first pop work: a small Surrealist collage called [Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?](#) It depicts a couple at home, scantily clad and surrounded by modest consumer goods, all of them culled from ads in magazines.

Alloway and Hamilton were both members of the Independent Group, an alliance of artists, architects, and critics who met in London throughout the early 1950s to discuss subjects that were newly in

vogue, such as advertising imagery, science-fiction movies and comic books, American car design, and the sociology of London's working class. They also mounted several experimental shows, most of which promoted collaboration between fine arts such as painting and sculpture and applied arts such as architecture and graphic design.

Because of this collaboration -- and because Britain had recently laid the groundwork for the socialist welfare state -- some critics place early pop in the lineage of such left-leaning utopian art movements as Constructivism and the Bauhaus, which sought to integrate art and design and thus revolutionize everyday existence. Yet pop's great leap was to be pragmatic: rather than expecting artists to remake the world, it proposed that fine art should take a cue from life, by broadening its subject matter to include popular culture and directing itself to a wider audience.

The aim, Alloway wrote in the catalogue for the Independent Group's next-to-last show, in 1956, was to make art "as factual and far from ideal standards as the street outside." As for Hamilton's seminal collage, it was intended to be mass-produced, and was in fact distributed throughout London as the show's advertising poster. Held in a state-run gallery in the East End, the show was called "This Is Tomorrow." "[The show] believes that modern art can reach a wide public," the press release claimed, "if it is handled without too much solemnity."

Today the most noticeable characteristic of the art one sees in London is that much of it is endearingly unsolemn -- and obviously British. At least, that's what struck me a couple of years ago when, wandering through a London art fair, I happened upon a curiously mesmerizing video, by Lucy Gunning, called *The Horse Impressionists*. In it five women imitate horses, with varying degrees of seriousness. One, in a mackintosh, rears and whinnies in a London park; another neighs horrifically in a garage and then smiles sweetly into the camera. Some months later I was stunned to see the video decoded in an art magazine in an utterly poker-faced way as having to do with the "special" relationship between girls and horses, perfectionism, fetishism, idol worship, and other presumably universal female concerns. Perhaps. But one would have to be wearing blinders not to see the fetishism in question, whatever one makes of it, as especially English -- and funny. As Anthony Wilkinson, the dealer on the art-fair stand, pointed out, "It's like Monty Python."

Related links:

- [Lucy Gunning](#)

A short biography and a sample of her 1994 work, *The Singing Lesson*.

- [Gillian Wearing](#)

A short biography and samples of her work.

I had a similar reaction watching several works by Gillian Wearing, another video artist. Video is probably Britain's most engaging contemporary art form; with the national strength in television, it's no wonder. Wearing, like her fellows, has sometimes been characterized as a new documentarian, ostensibly because she goes against the self-effacing, self-conscious English grain by turning the camera on herself. A better reason for the label might be that her videos, which echo everything from Victorian photography to modern television programs and ads, frequently star real people. Watching them, it's possible to believe that one will find out something interesting about the person -- or even oneself.

Wearing once bandaged her entire face, like a woman she'd glimpsed in the street, and walked around her neighborhood [documenting bystanders' reactions](#). Another time, she set up her tripod in a crowded shopping mall and spent twenty-five minutes dancing before it to music in her head. Wearing says that London audiences usually find her behavior in this last piece astonishing, but what fascinated me was the reticence of the crowd: hardly anyone pointed or stared; most took

studious pains to avoid her. (Apparently, when this video was first shown in France, the audience couldn't get over this either.)

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TO see work that has something to do with the life of the place it comes from is no small thing. Today, at least as the self-styled art-critical vanguard has it, nationalism in art is a thing of the past. Artists the world over are presumed to speak the same post-Postmodernist language and to address the same postcolonial concerns, whether the subject is "narrative," "the body," or "meaning." Possibly because the main commercial market for the work of young British artists has been European and American collectors, there has been something of an attempt to peddle that work on the basis of this international language -- a strange Esperanto that few but insiders understand. Also, of course, young artists are eager to be perceived as international rather than local talent. But none of this changes the fact that British art enjoys a definite advantage -- especially on its home turf -- because it also speaks plain English.

One may illustrate this by pointing to any number of artists at work in London today. Mark Wallinger made his name in the early 1990s with a series of conceptual projects having to do with bloodlines and class; for one of these he bought a racehorse with a consortium of collectors and ran it under the name *A Real Work of Art*. Tracey Emin is little known here but is a mainstream star in Britain -- largely for moving autobiographical performances and videos in which she speaks frankly about, for instance, her adolescence as the town tart of Margate, one of the seaside holiday spots that are the butt of many a joke. The artists who find inspiration, as Richard Hamilton so famously did, in that ubiquitous English subject the home are legion. Simon Periton makes objects such as gates, masks, and safety pins out of intricately cut paper doilies. Stephen Pippin has reinvented photography by turning washing machines and toilets into neo-Victorian long-exposure cameras. The painters Gary Hume and Ian Davenport are renowned for their use of gloss house paint. Even Rachel Whiteread, Britain's most eminent young sculptor, began by making models of hot-water bottles, sinks, and bathtubs, eventually working her way up to casting the interior space of a living room and later an entire East End row house.

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- [Mark Wallinger](#)
A short biography and samples of his work.

Such work, deeply grounded in British preoccupations, is fairly easy for the average person to understand. When the auction house Christie's rearranged its sales categories last year, it designated all such art "Brit Pop." Yet the work I see in London often seems to hark back to a more fundamentally populist commandment: Find art in everyday life. The results can be strangely enchanting.

Consider Cornelia Parker, who -- reprising an old Surrealist idea -- recently showed some "automatic" drawings she had made by polishing several tarnished silver objects and framing the cloth. Anya Gallacio, known for working with flowers, in one famous piece carpeted a museum floor with 10,000 red roses; more recently she used glass crystals and white light to raise a rainbow in a gallery. Tacita Dean, who

makes drawings and films having to do with ships and tales of the sea, once supplemented her oeuvre with a video in which she and a friend execute that old folk-art trick of putting a ship in a bottle.

IT seems odd that pop art should suddenly be flourishing in Britain now, because it never really has before. Except for a handful of painters, including David Hockney and Peter Blake, pop in the sixties became a largely American movement. Much of what we now think of as British pop was hammered out by former students of British art schools who went into some other field: retailers and fashion designers such as Terence Conran and Mary Quant, and musicians such as John Lennon and Ray Davies. Today more graduates of those same art schools seem to be making their presence felt as visual artists. Perhaps that's because art has finally reached a point at which most of its usual forms jibe surprisingly well with things the British tend to be good at already.

Think of the ongoing vogue for performance art and installation art, which dovetail neatly with national pre-eminence in theater; or the mind-bending gyrations that conceptualism can require, which are hardly outlandish demands on an audience already acclimatized to puns, word puzzles, and acrostics. How logical that the ready-made object, an idea that has animated art since Marcel Duchamp showed that famous bicycle wheel in 1913, should find renewed life in a nation practically blanketed with historically charged artifacts and antiques.

Nothing, perhaps, expresses this consanguinity so neatly as "editions" -- any artwork produced in quantity, such as prints, artists' books, or the small sculptural objects generally known as multiples. Editions, which have been produced since casting and print methods were invented, during the Renaissance and before, boom whenever artists concern themselves with making art for the masses (Arts and Crafts textiles, Art Nouveau posters, 1960s pop prints).

Editions rose again in early-1990s London -- this time as something small and cheap enough to make by hand on a recession-era budget. Sarah Staton, who runs the editions project SupaStore Deluxe, noticed that her friends all seemed to be making multiples and trading them among themselves. Staton herself, then on the dole, was working on a project having to do with traveling sales: every day she would pack her own small artworks into a valise and shop them around to London dealers. "It came from trying to reknit life experience back into art," she once explained to me. "It was a kind of game." Somewhere en route she decided to sell her friends' work, too, and SupaStore -- a traveling project that has journeyed throughout Britain and to Europe and New York -- was born.

Staton stocks such ephemera as artists' magazines and artist-designed phonecards and T-shirts. She also shows more rarefied multiples whose aesthetic falls somewhere between collectibles and the sort of prosaic household wares one might find on a London market stall. Recently, for instance, she was showing Elizabeth Le Moine's doll-sized coat hangers and plastic beach balls, housed in jewelry boxes. On another visit to SupaStore, I fell in love with (and bought) a tiny hand-bound book by Mark Pawson, which compiles the many unstandardized wiring diagrams that come packaged with British electrical plugs. (Fortunately, the most populist thing about multiples is that they're often quite cheap.)

Whereas multiples incarnate the blithe intermingling of commerce and art that characterizes today's London scene, they also bring to mind the

time when the city's art market first began to swing -- in the early eighteenth century, when Sotheby's, then a fledgling auction house, was set up to deal books; English artists first clubbed together to create a market for their work; and the canny artist-entrepreneur William Hogarth made a pile by selling prints of his paintings -- those famously satirical vignettes of London life. It doesn't seem at all surprising that London's yearly artists' book fair, held each fall, should be the brainchild of Marcus Campbell, who for years has co-run a rare-book shop in the Piccadilly Arcade (he is opening his own shop in the Bankside area, a growing arts neighborhood). One of the city's hippest editions publishers has been Ridinghouse Editions, run by Charles Asprey -- "of *the Aspreys*, you know," someone always seems to mention when his name comes up, referring to the well-known jewelers, founded in 1781. Until Ridinghouse closed up shop recently, Asprey did a tidy business in limited-edition books and prints, as well as editioned film and video. Once, with Abigail Lane, an artist whose concerns are often described as "Gothic," he produced a short 16mm film of moths circling a naked bulb. An earlier and more notorious Ridinghouse project was a blue video by the Chapman brothers, starring two Soho ladies of the night and a sculpture of a sex toy modeled after an Italian dealer's head.

A few multiples publishers eschew commerce entirely. One is Matthew Higgs, the publisher of the cult editions project Imprint 93. The idea came to Higgs five years ago, when, stuck in a dull office job, he looked around and suddenly realized, as he recently told me, that "there was this amazing amount of free equipment to be appropriated." Office supplies were diverted to his friends, and the resulting artworks were distributed by mail, thanks to the office postage meter.

Higgs mostly produces photocopied books. My favorite, by Hilary Lloyd, notates in a deadpan, anthropological way the male come-ons Lloyd gets in the street. Other pieces simply point up the nature of paper: one, by Ceal Floyer, is a single book-sized leaf with one corner dog-eared; for another Martin Creed wadded a sheet of typing paper into a ball.

Higgs, who no longer holds that office job, now finances Imprint 93 himself, and plans to post the fiftieth element in the series -- in an edition of about 200 -- this year. Yet all this time, he says, his runs have never been sold; you can acquire them only if he sees fit to add you to his mailing list. "It's an informal network that grows quite naturally," he told me, "in the way that your address book grows as you meet people." The only requirements for inclusion are that he meet you by chance and that you do something that interests him. The British Library is collecting the series, but that's because Higgs ran into, and liked, a curator there.

With its subversive, underground quality and its distribution by mail, Imprint 93 has clear roots in Fluxus, a sixties movement that aimed, among other things, to make art that couldn't be commodified. (Yoko Ono, who was in Fluxus when she met John Lennon, is probably its most famous member.) It strikes me that Imprint 93 also trades in a fundamentally British coin, by being something that money can't buy. And those who ended up on that very limited mailing list made it into the right club.

ANOTHER key to art's popularity in London is that people outside the art world have ready access to it. The most interesting work is often shown not in some central gallery ghetto, as it might be in New York,

but in outlying neighborhoods. City Racing, for instance, an artist-run space in South London, has mounted many legendary shows in an old betting shop near a cricket ground. (It will close this fall.) Hales, a commercial gallery even farther south, is tucked into the basement of an unprepossessing café. The Cabinet, until recently in Brixton, a West Indian neighborhood, once hung a show of portraits in the local pub. Interim Art, which helped to spur the East End boom, is in the dealer's own home -- one in a street of identical row houses in a working-class neighborhood.

I once tried to explain the thrill of this to a friend in New York, who nodded and said, "I know -- guerrilla spaces." At the time, I agreed. As I've thought about it since, though, that combative characterization hasn't seemed right. When there's a gallery in the local High Street, chances are good that people who live nearby will stop in to visit. Besides, such galleries, no matter how subversive they may intend to be, fit into an established history. That many of London's most important public galleries are in outlying neighborhoods is a legacy of the late nineteenth century, when the burgeoning middle class broadened the market for English work; founding free galleries for the benefit of the urban poor became the philanthropic thing to do. The South London Art Gallery, where many important shows of new art are now held, was built in 1891 as the pinnacle of a campaign to bring civic focus to a dreary, rapidly expanding urban neighborhood. The Whitechapel Art Gallery, another avant-garde stronghold in the East End, opened in 1901 after a twenty-year crusade by a consortium of worthies who sought to present contemporary art to the working masses. Their success resonated even fifty-five years later, when the Independent Group mounted "This Is Tomorrow," its bid to bring art to a broader audience, at the Whitechapel.

There are those who believe that because the current London scene is so deeply rooted in the past, it can't really be considered modern. Certainly those roots negate the notion, so often used to hype British work, that the art coming out of London today represents a complete and shocking break with history. Marketing a movement on the basis of sensationalism is one of the oldest tricks in the book. But that populist bedrock is what's likely to keep art in London swinging on, long after the hype has passed it by.

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