



OF PIGMENTS AND PIXELS

By: Peter Plagens (originally published by Newsweek, Dec 1999 - Feb 2000)

Over the past 10 or 15 years, contemporary art has avant-garded, post-avant-garded and trans-avant-gar-ded itself into a downtown, black-clad segment of the entertainment industry. Any remaining gap-if it still exists-between contemporary art and show business is closing by the minute. In the forefront of cultural collapse are, of course, the Young British Artists (art-world folk abbreviate them to YBA). Tracey Emin's sexually confessional art works (such as the tent emblazoned with the names of everyone she'd ever slept with) are almost indistinguishable from guest appearances on sleazy TV shows. Gillian Wearing's videos of herself dancing to the gapes of passersby in a shopping mall could be stitched seamlessly into a comedy routine. Damien Hirst (of pickled-shark-in- a-tank fame) owns a London theme restaurant called Pharmacy which looks so much like the real thing that a couple of bewildered tourists recently stood at the bar seeking headache remedies-in tablet form, that is.

Both Emin and Hirst figured prominently in the recent brouhaha at the Brooklyn Museum of Art over the "Sensation" exhibition of Charles Saatchi's collection of scandal-seeking young artists. And Saatchi, you may recall, is the advertising fellow whose recent hip, flip campaigns include Foster's Australian beer (a kangarooholding a brew says "bollocks" to worrying about pollution) as well as political ads in Britain.

American artists aren't far behind. Galleries in American cities are tilled with the likes of kinked-up configurations of stuffed animals (Los Angeles artist Mike Kelley), scatological videos by Californian Paul McCarthy and wan portraits of vapid showbiz celebrities (New York painter Elizabeth Peyton). As the scholarly art critic Donald Kuspit writes in the current issue of the contentious Chicago magazine *New Art Examiner*, "Avant-garde shock has been domesticated ...Nonetheless, artists continue to try to shock, not only ...to prove that their art is

'advanced,' but to rebel against their own bourgeois predicament." And that's what these artists remain, in an odd way, bohemians in the early-20th-century tradition: they cling romantically to the appearance of scruffy outsiders. Kelley is a professor at Art Center College of Design in California, but he plays delinquent in the galleries. Peyton is collected avidly, but her paintings court a slapdash, distracted look. And Emin's calculated dissoluteness says to society, in effect, "See what you made me do?"

All of this goes back to none other than I Andy Warhol who in the same not entirely salutary way that Ronald Reagan I may have been the most important politician of the last half century-is probably the most influential artist since World War II. It was Warhol, after all, who introduced the idea that struggle and angst had lost their edge and that henceforth the "real" avant-garde artist wouldn't bother to struggle in his work, would be free of inconvenient torment and would stand in no serious opposition to popular culture. But Warhol was already a rich commercial artist when he started posing as an alienated painter and filmmaker in the early 1960s. The pose didn't last long. Soon Andy was silk-screening portraits of movie stars and sports heroes, table-hopping with a Polaroid at black-tie galas thrown by old-money museum trustees and selling his party pictures as art.

The same thing is going to happen to the generation of young artists who follow in the wake of Emin, Kelley, Peyton and Hirst. Actually, it's happening already in the hyperhappy, techno-cartoony photographs and holograms of the late-twentysomething Japanese artist Mariko Mori (she won't disclose her age) and a Dutchman, Micha Klein, 35, who goes her one or two steps better. Klein is a commercial photographer in Amsterdam and contributing artist at Wired magazine who thinks clubs are where it's at, artistically. He recently told a European interviewer, "It's 'Where the new spiritual background is and where art is happening now. Instead of the church, it's the club; the house of love:' Klein runs his images through a computer. His pictures come out the other end as either pink vinyl ecstasy dreams, populated with mugging DJs and fashion models engaged in lesbian petting, or totally digital fantasies stuffed with Happy Faces, peace symbols and a tropical paradise that are sweeter and more false than anything Disney ever imagined. (you can check out Klein's art on the Web: just type his name on a good search engine.)

But even Mori and Klein are only harbingers-not avatars-of what's likely to come. Art is going to get even more like show business. As clean, cartoony pixels come more and more into play, the rebellious grunge with which artists like Kelley, McCarthy and the young Brits infuse their work is likely to go by the boards. In fact, our educated guess is that the computer will eat away at the art object until art becomes an electronic event instead of a thing. In keeping with customs increasingly borrowed from the cyberworld, *teams* of artists will take over from the hoary, romantic and useless tradition of individual artists. (This won't be new, just more overt. At the end of his life, Andy Warhol's name on a work of art made by his minions was like Halston's on a dress-a brand, not a signature.)

And, oh, there'll be lots of sex, strange sex. Why? Because even by 2099 we won't have gotten over our schizophrenia about it. We'll still want to keep it tucked unseen under grandma's quilts in the cedar chest of decency and, simultaneously, plaster it all over everything from magazine covers to birthday cards. So, for the art of the future, think "Toy Story 2" plus Robert Mapplethorpe plus the adult version of Japanese anime, all delivered straight to your huge home wall screen at 8 million Kbps. As the song goes-doesn't it?-there's no business like art business. .