

Naked Emperors

Days Like These, Tate Britain 2003

Cornelia Parker, *The Distance (A Kiss with String Attached)*
(2003)

[http://www.frithstreetgallery.com/works/view/
the_distance_a_kiss_with_string_attached](http://www.frithstreetgallery.com/works/view/the_distance_a_kiss_with_string_attached)
auguste_rodins_the_kiss_1904_a_mile

Anish Kapoor, *Marsyas* (2002)

[http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-
series-anish-kapoor](http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-anish-kapoor)

Tate Triennial III

TATE BRITAIN

Evening Standard, 10 March 2006

Pure, unalloyed, unadulterated and incomprehensible post-modernism is all that can be said of Tate Britain's *Triennial*, its third reflection 'on the concerns and conditions of current art production . . . in Britain' – so current indeed that artists were still working on their installations up to the very moment of the press view and beyond. Should I, I wondered, turning up very late in the afternoon of that day, take an apparently discarded bundle of newspapers to be a work of art, a stepladder and tools to be another, and heap of miscellaneous detritus to be a third? Since the mid-1970s the visitor to contemporary art exhibitions has had to be wary of the fire-hydrant, the light-switch, the radiator and the dozing attendant in case they are what they are and not the works of art they seem.

There are, however, no dozing attendants in this *Triennial*, for not a chair is to be seen and the weary visitor of a certain age will find nothing on which to rest his bones while seeking enlightenment from the catalogue. Enlightenment? Alas, there's not much of that, for this is one of those catalogues – so fashionable now – not only of almost entirely different contents from the exhibition, but so extreme and unreadable in the modernity of its design that it is itself an exhibit of sorts. 'Look at me', this catalogue screams, but do not expect to read it, for its typefaces are ugly, its layout misleading, its essential information cramped in odd corners and columns, or printed in white on black so that the reader can make no notes; its essays are in black on yellow, and in illustrating things that are not on view and not illustrating things that are, it compounds confusion. This catalogue is a perfect example of post-

modernist subversion in that it renders useless that which should be lastingly useful, it obscures what it should clarify, and on page after page its various contributors weave webs of anti-meaning on a weft of jabberwocky and a warp of gobbledygook.

The curator of this *Triennial* is Beatrix Ruf, of the Kunsthalle in Zürich. Why? Do not accuse me of xenophobia when I ask this question for I ask it in genuine surprise that Tate Britain could find no British curator, critic or historian of contemporary art capable of reflecting on British art now, on our art of this very minute. What can she know of it that we do not? Are her European perceptions of what is happening here much more acute than ours? Are we incapable of seeing British contemporary art in a larger international context? I doubt it, very deeply. No doubt the five curatorial collaborators provided by the Tate urged her to look at this artist and that, but the choices were, I am assured, entirely hers – and very odd they seem.

The collaborators prompt another question. I am certain that a major exhibition in this field put together by six men would have been greeted with screams and squawks reviling such gross political incorrectitude, but this *Triennial* is the creature of six women, yet not a murmur of protest has been heard. This is not a frivolous point – I have observed the curatorial attitudes of women often enough to know that, whether they work in fields that are now art historical or immediately current, their connoisseurship is too often flawed by feminism, corrupted indeed, politically deliberate at one extreme and whimsically indulgent at the other. No major art exhibition should ever be assembled by the monstrous regiment alone.

The ratio of two to one in favour of male artists suggests that there has been no gender bias in the choice, but in this accumulation of lifeless exhibits the critic must differentiate between the corpses and their faecal waste – and the women artists seem largely responsible for the latter. But it has long been so and we should worry far more over the curators' extremely narrow

view of what now is art, for it is very much the blinkered view of the Tate and its outstations, very much the view of the Arts Council and the provincial galleries that it supports, and very much the view of the British Council when it exhibits British art abroad, purblind, prejudiced, authoritarian and ungenerous (and not noticeably Swiss).

I do not recognise this bleak exhibition as representing any specifically British trend in art or as in any sense art necessarily of the period 2004–6. It is essentially the same old tripe and trivia that curators have been peddling for three whole decades, as utterly familiar in Holland, Germany and Switzerland as it is here. No matter whether the artists are the old boys and girls of the Turner Prize, the even older boys of the pre-Serota Establishment, or are still in school, they contribute to the definition of post-modernism as a phenomenon of plagiarism – or as Miss Ruf has it, of appropriation and repetition, of 'democratic borrowing', and of the 'radical fictionalisation' of reality (by which I think she must mean the subversion of the work from which the artist steals – vandalism as well as theft).

One of her critical supporters describes this appropriation as a most basic procedure of contemporary art education as well as production, and the production of art as no more than the constant reshuffling of a basic set of cultural terms. These assertions are largely true, perhaps wholly so where the state's art schools are concerned, for here we are, almost a century since Duchamp first slapped his public's face, still reshuffling his ideas, reshuffling those of Beuys too. In art schools in which students might reasonably expect to be taught the low technical businesses of putting paint on canvas, modelling, carving and casting sculpture, and trying their hands at an infinite variety of print methods, these they are compelled by teachers (and the idiotic gaining of degrees) to abandon in favour of the concept, the thesis and the dissertation, for which they have neither the mature idea nor the command of language (unless they crib it from the internet as an example of reshuffling);

this surely is the subversion of all that they once believed to be canonical in art schools.

That teachers reject and cannot teach these ancestral skills because they themselves command none of them, is now accepted in every art school in the land – they command only the babble and hogwash of the Serota world. Imagine teaching French, not as a language, but as the concept of being French; imagine teaching music as a concept, discarding every instrument on which music can be made; imagine teaching surgery as a concept without a scalpel and a corpse. After a century wasted copying copies – let me suggest that we glance back to the fifteenth century in Florence, the century in which the Renaissance developed and consolidated step by step, that we measure the distance between Masaccio's Brancacci Chapel and Michelangelo's Sistine, and then that we compare this distance with that that inches from Duchamp to the feeble Duchampian insults of today.

Nothing in this exhibition is of any quality. Peter Doig, who once seemed to show the promise of a provincial Canadian painter, has contributed what may well be his worst painting, but that does not prevent a Tate curator from writing of his sophisticated visual language and conjuring associations with Gauguin, Matisse and Munch. Another Tate curator extols the work of Jonathan Monk who, having found some amateur drawings of women's heads dating from the 1920s, has embellished each with a drawing pin, thus converting them into his own work. This is less 'democratic borrowing' than downright theft, yet another Tate curator questioning our notions of authenticity, justifies it as a respectful reference to Duchamp and Rauschenberg. How can these curators write such drivel? I know of no other field in which such intellectual dishonesty could be acceptable.

There has long been need for a debate on the border territory between art and pornography, the only serious question raised by any exhibit – in this case by images of the kind given to sperm donors in fertility clinics. These date from the 1970s and are of

Christine Newby, whose professional name as a sex model was Cosey Fanni Tutti. Using the same name she is now an artist 're-framing her experience' in this form of 'performance art'. By the simple expedient of declaring herself an artist now, Miss Newby has elevated to the level of art, the plain, straightforward, gross photographic records of her sexual parts and what she and others did with them all those years ago, and there they are in Tate Britain, the temple of contemporary art, framed and hanging on the wall.

There is no point in expressing outrage at the exhibition of Miss Newby's parts – they and their ilk are familiar to every adolescent in the land – but there is some point in outrage at the feebleness of the argument for promoting them as art. Miss Newby and her apologists are naïve and silly women, not profound philosophers; these Tate curators would never exhibit pages torn from the trade organs of plumbers, boilermakers and grocers 're-framing' their workaday experiences, nor elevate the life of a London rent-boy as performance art. What they give us here is a tiresome feminist argument, without merit and dishonest.

As there is a great deal of video in this exhibition the diligent visitor must set aside at least half a day for it (even if there is nowhere to sit) – half a day of such numbing boredom that advertisements on television seem, by comparison, engaging, witty, wise, beautiful and exquisitely constructed. The photography, every miserable scrap of it, we have seen a thousand times before – but that's post-modernist reshuffling. So too the installations. As for painting, drawing and sculpture – nothing here is worth a first glance, let alone a second. Had Beatrix Ruf gathered all this rubbish together in order to condemn it for its lack of aesthetic and intellectual weight, and demonstrate its arid conformity to the Serota Rules (though even he cannot be blamed for all the dismal banalities to which his mindless acolytes have sunk), this exhibition might have had some contrary merit, but she praises it, claims to understand it, seeks to interpret it, and with arguments of guileful sophistry, gulls the bewildered public yet again.

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Peter Doig, *Echo Lake* (2000)

<http://beta.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/doig-echo-lake-p78390>

Cosey Fanni Tutti

http://throbbing-gristle.com/COSEYFANNITUTTI/content/content/photo_2006_Tate_files/blocks_image_3_1.png

THE TURNER PRIZE

Instituted in 1984, four years before Serota's Rule was established, the Turner Prize was essentially the creature of the Patrons of New Art, a body formed to assist the Tate Gallery in its acquisition of works of contemporary art. From the very beginning it was much mocked (not only by the popular press), and the vicissitudes were so many that Serota began to take charge of it even in 1987 when he was still Director-designate. In 1990, with the bankruptcy of its sponsor, the Prize was suspended, its rules and purposes reconsidered. Relunched in 1991 with the sponsorship of Channel 4 – partly Faustian Bargain, partly a symbiotic relationship that gives the television channel an inexpensive fixed feast every year and a great deal of popular exposure – it has been on a more or less even keel ever since. Many, however, aware of how manipulated the Prize has been within its very narrow orthodoxy, now feel that, having achieved its aim to popularise contemporary art (in which it has been far from alone), it has no purpose and, now habitual and dully consuetudinary, should be terminated.

I have never been able to take it seriously, so fumblingly inept were its beginnings and so obvious has been Serota's management of judges and artists, the former almost invariably his intellectual allies, the latter his favourites. In 2001 I wrote of the Prize exhibition that it was 'more vain and futile than any of its predecessors [it was the year of Martin Creed's electric light switched on and off] and we are compelled to wonder if the Prize has run its course and should now be abandoned . . . ' Nothing has changed.