

LONDON UNDERGROUND

BY TYLER COBURN

Gen Next Rumblings on Her Majesty's Isle



PIL AND GALIA KOLLECTIV'S "ASPARAGUS BALLET"

The Brits are a funny sort. At the time when Giuliani's outrage at the elephant dung-ed up Ofili painting made painfully obvious the power the Christian right still exerts over this country, our English brethren were busy turning their derelict churches into sparkling new residences and sparing themselves an extra dollop of guilt come the holiday season. The years since the Young British Artists (YBAs) first ran amok have fattened the wallets and stomachs of all parties involved, which may keep the young'uns lining up round the corners to get into the art colleges but which may not amount to good work being funneled out the other end. Saatchi's unrelenting importation of hot-to-trot Americans and Hans Ulrich-Obrist's first exhibitions as co-director of the Serpentine -- of work by Chinese and U.S.-based artists -- don't bode well for the local scene. London, like many a city of recent times, seems to have been reduced to yet another port-of-call on the art fair barge.

Yet before we let rip, it begs mention that things are more nuanced than a Berlin-bound flyover might reveal. Temporarily setting aside the artist collectives, non-commercial spaces and seat-of-the-pants radicalism of Gen Next *artistes*, we can observe certain of the largest commercial enterprises trading financial yield for critical accolade by throwing their weight behind exciting art. On this front, the ascendant star has to be **Hauser & Wirth**, whose acquisition of the gargantuan, industrial Coppermill and Edwardian-era Bond St. bank eschews the "cube is cash" tautology of its mega-peers. Swiss artist **Christoph Büchel**, for example, recently stirred things up by transforming Coppermill's huge loading space and attendant labyrinth of offices and storage facilities into an Eastern European-inflected junkscape. Cutting huge chunks out of the facility's walls, through which the endeavoring visitor may gain passage to Death Metal fantasies and Iron Curtain phantasmagoria, Büchel satisfied the art-going public's recent immersive kick.

Ever one to show that museums can still run with the best of them, **Tate Modern** has also amped up its program, rewarding its 4.1 million yearly visitors for their edifying ambulations through **David Smith** and **Fischli & Weiss** retrospectives with complimentary joyrides down **Carsten Höller's** slides. For those looking to unleash their inner child without suffering the slides' exorbitant queues, find your way to **The Wrong Gallery's** flatulent nook. One of the many newbies from Tate Modern's recent re-hang, this pocket of perpetual unruliness secures The Wrong Gallery's place as parasite *par excellence* in the contemporary art world.

Lip service must also be paid to **Frieze**, insatiable beast that it be. Falling somewhere between Miami Basel's non-stop beach party and the sleek and chic Armory, Frieze has continued to provide a model for how to run a top-notch art fair. Much of this should be attributed to Frieze Projects' satellite array of artist talks, discussions, screenings and commissioned projects, which go a considerable distance in suggesting the ways an art fair might have relevance to more than just its population of Botoxed collectors. Sometimes the best hangover cure for art fair binging, it would seem, may actually be a thought-provoking shot to the head.

On the smaller scale, both exciting and questionable things are afoot. **i-cabin**, an artist-run unit in a North London bookbinding factory, has compellingly mixed rule-driven exhibitions of new and established artists with a series of projects at locales like **Around the Coyote Gallery, Chicago** and the **Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge**. Their contribution to "Satellites," a September 2006 group show at New York's Tonya Bonakdar Gallery, saw directors Juliette Blightman and Sebastian Craig riffing on Duchamp's "boîte-en-valise" by carrying aboard their flight a piece of cabin baggage containing, among other things, a sealed velvet box whose contents would only be seen by the airport's X-Ray technician.

The Showroom, a publicly funded space that nestled itself in the Eastend long before White Cube's Jay Jopling claimed it for his own, has spent the past year producing one of London's most stellar series of off-site events. Their forthcoming is "Asparagus Ballet," an amusingly wrought piece of dance by art world *wunderkinder* **Pil and Galia Kollektiv**, set to music by Les Georges Leningrad. Following Jamie Oliver's bombastic introduction of mangos to the masses, I expect "Asparagus Ballet" to single-handedly popularize a vegetable too often marginalized for its pungent, urinary effects.

STORE Gallery's recent move, presumably prompted by the chthonic pull of Hoxton Square, has provided stellar artist **Ryan Gander** with an opportunity to let loose in its old facility. Aptly titled "Associates," Gander's yearlong program of monthly exhibitions lets artists averse to less salubrious forms of career-advancement mount shows and walk away with 100 percent of the profits. Parametric programming here finds its extension *ad infinitum* (or *reductio ad absurdum*, depending which way you swing) with "Temporary Measures," a 12-day/12-artist microcosm of Associates' calendar, which is in every way aided by co-curators **Andrew Bonacina** and **Rebecca May-Marston's** avoidance of thematizing bully tactics, as well as by their well-cultivated fondness for all things performance.

Rounding out the little guys is **Midnight Blue Collective**, an unapologetically scruffy venture housed in the Peckham auto shop squat of its St. Martins and Goldsmiths founders. These art students seem to have a knack for publicity, to say the least, having secured coverage in Sarah Kent's *Time Out London* fall arts round-up and using it as an opportunity to foreground their non-commercial, non-discriminating exhibition policy. During my one visit to the Auto Italia, I listened to a lineup of painfully sophomoric post-punk and examined an old car that these kids had Banks Violated. Looks like Fort Thunder won't be striking twice.

Youngsters aside, it seems that the regent's city has more than enough know-how to hold its own in a sea increasingly populated by New World and third-world creatives. Add to this an ample amount of cultural history, historical shame and repressive, "respectable values" in need of roughening up: English avant-gardists will have fodder for years to come. As The Chapman Brothers currently enjoy major exhibitions at both Tate Liverpool and Tate Britain, it's clear that these little guys need to pick up the slack and get on with it. Bring on the nu-wave.

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