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Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism and Young
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WYNDHAM LEWIS'S VORTICISM AND YOUNG BRITISH ART

Dissertation submitted for the Degree of B.A. Honours in History of Art

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Introduction: From *Blast* to *Freeze*

The self-consciously radical has always occupied a special place in the history of English art: reduced to a handful of vital episodes in an otherwise dreary story. Two of these seemingly rare moments stand in particular to be tested against one another. At opposite ends of the twentieth century, Wyndham Lewis's 1914 magazine *Blast* and the 1988 exhibition *Freeze* have been remembered as volcanic eruptions into their domestic artworlds.¹ Their statuses in this respect have been ensured by their role as monumental points of origin for their respective movements. Whilst *Blast* announced the razor-sharp geometries of Vorticism, routinely termed as England's 'only truly avant-garde movement', *Freeze* has come to mark the tangible beginnings of another new (and now sole proprietor of the term) 'Young British Art'.²

This is a fitting point at which to introduce the primary theme of my argument. *Blast* and *Freeze* are little more than creation myths; the convenient and retrospectively established beginnings necessitated by the narrative art historical form shared by Vorticism and Young British Art. Although *Blast* is often referred to as the genesis of avant-garde modernism in England, for example, Lewis had been developing a 'Vorticist' idiom in his art for several years before either Vorticism or *Blast* were conceived. According to Charles Harrison, the magazine has 'staked its claim to a place in history with a remarkable éclat'.³ Equally, *Freeze* has been canonised on the terms inscribed by critics such as Sarah Kent, writing for the official

¹ I feel that I must justify my reasons for assigning Lewis sole responsibility for Vorticism. Although many art historians have argued that this stance unfairly devalues the role played by other members of the group, it was fundamentally his project: he edited *Blast*, wrote the majority of its text (all of the content that I cite is his), and founded Vorticism's aesthetic through his earlier artistic experiments. For a full discussion, see Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (London, 2000), pp. 101-102.

² Edwards, *Lewis*, p. 101.

³ Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (London, 1981), p. 102.

catalogue of Charles Saatchi's collection, as 'the beginning of a vital period of optimism and enthusiasm' in English art.⁴ In this dissertation, I will compare and contrast the internal and external workings of Vorticism and Young British Art with the schism between their appearances and realities firmly in mind. The course of my three chapters will chart this shift: beginning with their declaredly avant-garde intentions, through their populist artistic strategies and finally to the sensationalist devices upon which they rely.

⁴ Sarah Kent, *Shark Infested Waters: The Saatchi Collection of British Art in the 90s* (London, 1994), p. 6.

1. Avant-gardism

Ian Munton's entry on Vorticism for a recent companion guide to modernism demonstrates the extent to which it has been subsumed into the same art historical framework as Young British Art:

[Vorticism] represents one of the rare occasions when a group of British artists, working together, maintained a distinctive movement over a period of time [...] The only comparable movements are the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of the 1850s and the Young British Artists (YBAs) of the 1990s.¹

As I will argue in this chapter, the similarities bound up in this persuasive classification run much deeper than Munton describes. One doesn't have to delve far into the scholarship surrounding Vorticism and Young British Art to uncover precisely why they have been cast in this way. Simply put, both *Blast* and *Freeze* represent the moment of a self-conscious break with establishment tradition by young, fresh-faced art school rebels. Whilst *Freeze* was famously hosted in a disused building in London's Docklands by sixteen students and recent graduates of Goldsmiths College, six of the eight artists who signed *Blast*'s manifesto (including Lewis) had attended the Slade School of Art. Spurred on by a will to disassociate themselves from the concerns of the previous generations, these two groups subscribed to the popular myth of avant-garde bohemians operating to disrupt England's otherwise mild artistic climate.

A reading of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* highlights how their self-proclaimed aims 'can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois

¹ Alan Munton, 'Vorticism', in *A Companion Guide to Modernist literature and culture*, ed. by David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Oxford, 2006), pp. 176-182 (p. 176).

society'.² His presentation of the avant-gardist project to negate the 'art for art's sake' mentality of aestheticism and embark upon a return to the 'life praxis of men' seems particularly relevant to the oppositional stance shared by Vorticism and Young British Art.³ In both cases, nihilistic and destructive tendencies were flaunted in a diversion away from the high aesthetic values sanctioned by their contemporary art establishments. Whilst the London artworld of the 1980s was preoccupied with what Julian Stallabrass has termed as 'vague, universal truths about man, nature and the elements', it had been presided over in the 1910s by similarly autonomous and moralising virtues.⁴ The art historian and critic Richard Cork, who has written extensively on Young British Art and Vorticism with effectively interchangeable prose, sets the scene by describing the latter's ideological clash with Bloomsbury formalism:

A sense of tradition was pitched against a need for iconoclasm; a regard for sensibility and cultivation clashed with a desire for virility and action; and a preference for pacific insights was flatly in contradiction with a thirst for aggressive discordance.⁵

By actively opposing the institutional privileging of historical, intellectual and ethical concerns in this way, the Vorticists and the YBAs can be seen to fulfil Bürger's analysis of the opening-up of art to the gritty realities of life.

When read through the confrontational strategies that it employed in order to do so, *Blast* lends itself particularly well to Serge Guilbaut's observation that the ideology of twentieth century 'modernism operated as an art of combat, employed by

² Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 49.

³ Bürger, p. 49.

⁴ Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: the Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, 2nd ed. (London, 2006), p. 56.

⁵ Richard Cork, *Vorticism and Abstract Art in the First Machine Age: Volume 1 Origins and Development* (London, 1976), p. 96.

an avant garde which was often tied [...] to the idea of revolution'.⁶ The magazine is regularly classified by scholarship as operating within this military lexicon.⁷ Its deployment of violently modern typographies and abstract designs are seen to act out a coordinated mobilisation of radical weaponry in the face of a tepid domestic artworld. By balancing every 'blast' and 'curse' with a 'bless', Lewis's famous opening salvo recites the modernist incantation of effacing the old whilst simultaneously inscribing the new. Replete in his bombastic rhetoric, *Blast* is a manic vortex whirling to disperse the bourgeois clouds of England's artistic mediocrity: a 'flabby sky that can manufacture no snow, but can only drop the sea on us in a drizzle'.⁸ Although this critique was directed most voraciously against the cultural authority of the Royal Academy, other *ancien régime* perpetrators, such as the Slade School and Bloomsbury, were subject to equal vilification. As Paige Reynolds states, drawing a parallel to Bürger's analysis,

The vorticists imagined themselves in opposition to these groups, as a movement calculated to shock the British public and to reject the long tradition of Bourgeois academic art that these groups represented. From the vorticists' perspective, these movements categorically sought to separate art from life.⁹

Young British Art's rejection of aesthetic theory and artistic tradition must be mapped in relation to this negation and disruption of the contemporary establishment. In particular, Stallabrass has elaborated on the extent to which the new art precipitated by *Freeze* 'attacked artists and conventions favoured by the established art world' in

⁶ Serge Guilbaut, 'Preface – The Relevance of Modernism', in *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*, ed. by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin (Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2004), pp. xi-xvii (p. xiv).

⁷ The title of Andrzej Gasiorek's analysis, 'The Little Magazine as Weapon: *Blast* (1914-15)', illustrates this point most effectively.

⁸ Wyndham Lewis, *Blast*, 1914, rpt. (Santa Barbara, 1981), p. 12.

⁹ Paige Reynolds, "'Chaos Invading Concept": *Blast* as a Native Theory of Promotional Culture', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 46 (2000), 238-268 (p. 244).

order to forge its own position within it.¹⁰ Whilst Lewis had voiced his condemnation of England's cultural heritage via the Vorticist megaphone of *Blast*, YBAs such as Angela Bulloch squeezed the trigger of his oppositional rhetoric by conscripting literal conceptual strategies to mock the art of their predecessors. Stallabrass delineates her project as striving to counter the dominance of work with 'a particularly British inflection, endowing it with a worthy, greenish air'.¹¹ I would assert that *Blast* signifies a similar attempt to rebuke the configuration of geographical isolation from continental modernism with artistic insipidity. 'London is not a provincial town!' Lewis exclaimed, casting his forebears in the same high, mighty and resolutely stagnant light as Bulloch.¹²

It is under these explicitly oppositional terms that *Blast* has often been read as, in the words of William Wees, 'the most successful of all Vorticist works of art'.¹³ In his thorough analysis of the journal, Wees draws on its fusion of form and content, relating the shock value of 'its [bright pink] cover, size and typography [to...] a dogged aggressiveness as it advanced upon its times like a modern barbarian destroying everything old and decadent in its path [with...] hardness, violence and the worship of energy'.¹⁴ As the discourse situation within which Vorticist artworks were presented, *Blast* echoes Bürger's definition of avant-gardism as an assault on the self-inflated bourgeois status of art. 'We are Primitive Mercenaries in the Modern World', its extravagant textual frame of reference announced whilst blasting 'with expletive of whirlwind the Britannic aesthete/ Cream of the snobbish Earth [...] Sneak and swot of

¹⁰ Stallabrass, p. 56.

¹¹ Stallabrass, p. 58. He explains how Bulloch squared up to Richard Long 'with her *Mud Slinger* (1993), a device that decorated the gallery walls with mud, as Long had done laboriously by hand, but now in a rapid and purely mechanical manner'.

¹² Lewis, *Blast*, p. 19.

¹³ William C. Wees, *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde* (Manchester, 1972), p. 192.

¹⁴ Wees, p. 166.

the school-room'.¹⁵ Similarly, the staging of *Freeze* in an abandoned warehouse lent itself perfectly to the nature of Young British Art. Stallabrass describes how its 'scepticism about art's higher purpose found an echo in the magnificent but ruined circumstances of display'.¹⁶ Drawing an unintentional analogy to the iconoclasm bound up in its works, Cork has noted how this unconventional setting involved 'smashing up the cast-iron radiators in order to get them out and create a clean, uncluttered arena for art'.¹⁷ The wanton destruction of such an obstinately Victorian interior motif pointedly mirrors the pincer movement of Lewis's artistic and linguistic plan of attack.

The aesthetic strategies employed by Vorticism and Young British Art highlight further similarities between the mechanisms of the two movements. As I have noted, the heretical sentiment of *Blast*'s avant-garde aspirations pulsates through its monochrome reproductions of Vorticist art. Lewis's painting *Plan of War* (1913, fig. 1), for example, is a huge, churning composition of fractured shapes that grind against one another and buckle up against the picture plane. Harrison has conceptualised this dramatic visual rupture with the past as 'the urge to employ abstract forms as a means of effecting a radical break with tradition'.¹⁸ Compared to the culturally sanctioned aestheticism of the time, it certainly demonstrates a veritable attempt to shake-up establishment decorum. This notion is emphasised by the uncompromised modernity of its abstracted content: redolent of the geometrical bias of machinery and topographical plans. Although Cork has shown that contemporary critics understood *Plan of War* through direct reference from military cartography in

¹⁵ Lewis, *Blast*, pp. 15, 30.

¹⁶ Stallabrass, p. 55.

¹⁷ Richard Cork, 'Everyone's Story is so Different: Myth and Reality in the YBA/Saatchi Decade' in *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade*, ed. by Robert Timms, Alexandra Bradley and Vicky Hayward (London, 1999), pp. 10-23 (p. 12).

¹⁸ Harrison, p. 118.

Fig. 1



Wyndham Lewis, *Plan of War*, 1913.

light of its title, he argues against interpreting ‘these sources too literally’.¹⁹ I would agree that it is most revealing as a further linguistic gesture towards Lewis’s assault on the sentimentality and stodginess of English culture. The stylistic novelty constituted by *Plan of War* is underscored by the combat explicit in the discourse of *Blast*, which was reliant in turn on the spatial reordering power of Vorticism’s abstractions.

Stallabrass draws attention to how, in taking up the mantle of explicitly reacting ‘against the concerns of the previous generation’, Young British Art shares in Vorticism’s aesthetic of iconoclastic savagery: ‘in its nihilistic outlook on [...] degradation and violence as a form of spectacle, it took on the worthy [...] foundations of established British art’.²⁰ The viewing experience of Mat Collishaw’s *Bullet Hole* (1988, fig. 2) is fittingly described by its caption on the website of the Saatchi Gallery:

At first glance, it’s unreadable, like an abstract painting. Then an image registers: a gaping vagina. It’s only with the full realisation that this is a close up of a head wound (taken from a pathology textbook) that the layering becomes complete.²¹

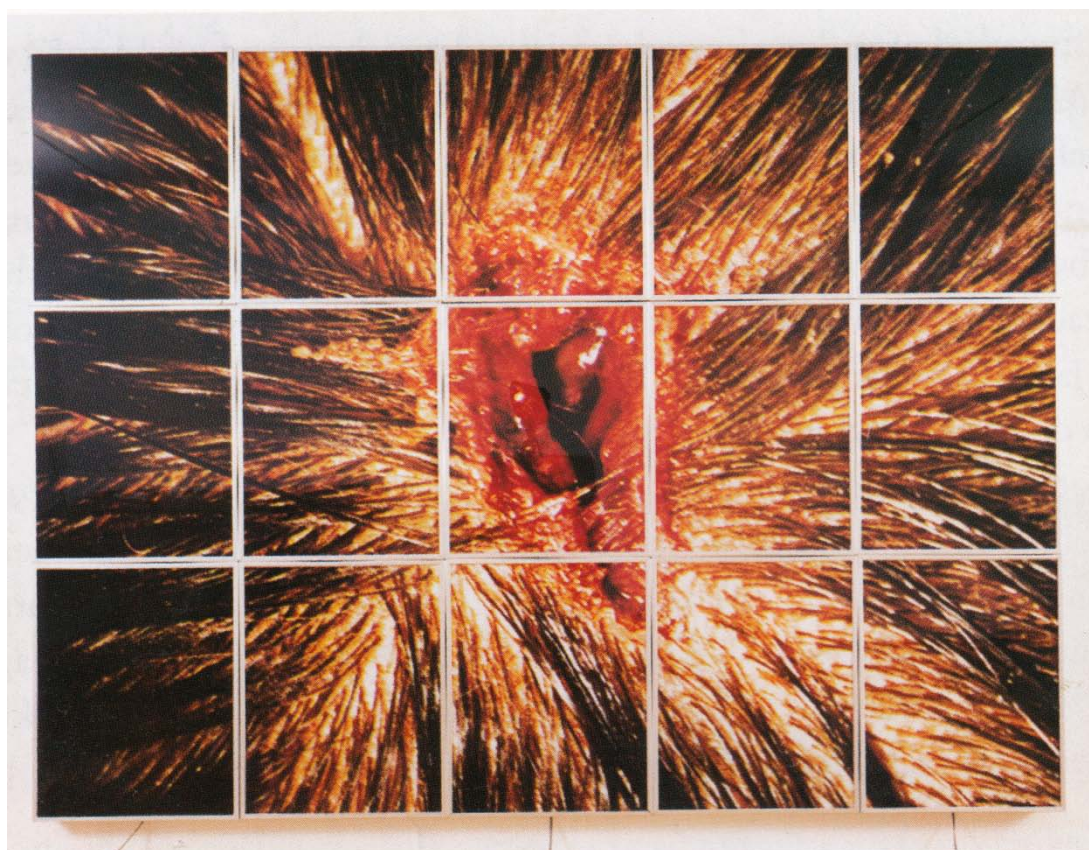
Mounted on fifteen light boxes, this brutal melange of hair and haemorrhage lends itself to a comparison with *Plan of War* on many fronts. Most obviously, its title and content play wholly on the militaristic vocabulary employed by *Blast*. Read on this metaphorical level, it can be seen to constitute a similar wounding of its cultural past, leaving the provincial establishment artworld bloodied and floundering in its wake. The unbridled shock tactics inscribed by its subject, furthermore, diffuse the potency

¹⁹ Cork, *Vorticism*, pp. 163-165.

²⁰ Stallabrass, pp. 4, 60.

²¹ ‘Mat Collishaw – Bullet Hole – Contemporary Art’, *The Saatchi Gallery* < http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/artpages/mat_collishaw_bullet_hole.htm>, accessed 27/03/2011.

Fig. 2



Mat Collishaw, *Bullet Hole*, 1988.

of *Plan of War*'s once-blasphemous formal idiom. As Cork notes, Lewis's painting had left the newspaper critics of the day 'completely disorientated [...] struggling to come to terms with something completely without precedent in English art'.²² By upholding the avant-gardist tradition 'of artists producing work that the public for art neither wanted nor expected, but were forced to swallow', Norman Rosenthal cites Young British Art as a continuation of this practice: 'powerful images [...] become assimilated, their impact diluted. Artists must continue the conquest of new territories and new taboos'.²³ I would agree that the press reception of Vorticist canvases as 'violent assaults that have been planned' equates perfectly with the calculated, full-frontal manner by which Collishaw presents his disturbing subject matter through the distancing device of a mathematical lattice.²⁴

The captioning of *Bullet Hole* as 'an abstract painting' presents a further line of comparison with *Plan of War*. The carving-up of its composition into a neat grid of rectangles is certainly reminiscent of modernist geometrical abstraction. Crucially, however, both works remain reliant on an externalised web of references to life in order for their shocking 'abstractions' to function. Rosenthal attributes this tendency of Young British Art to a 'totally new and radical attitude to realism, or rather to reality and real life itself'.²⁵ Equally, Vorticism embodies a hard, uncompromising vulgarity in order to evoke a return of art to the crudeness of contemporary life. According to Andrzej Gasiorek, 'One of *BLAST*'s central tenets was that artists should engage with contemporary reality, accepting its often alienating effects as a

²² Cork, *Vorticism*, p. 165. It is widely agreed that such works shattered 'entirely new ground, exceptional in the context of British art at the time'. See Richard Humphreys, *Wyndham Lewis* (London, 2004), p. 28.

²³ Norman Rosenthal, 'The Blood Must Continue to Flow', in *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, exhibition catalogue (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1997), pp. 8-11 (pp. 10-11).

²⁴ Paul Konody, *Observer*, 8 March 1914, in Cork, *Vorticism*, p. 161.

²⁵ Rosenthal, p. 10.

brute datum'.²⁶ This notion is regularly cast as the movement's most powerful art historical legacy. Keith Hartley addresses the influence of Vorticism's 'aggressive urbanism and its recognition of the realities of modern life' on British Pop Art, with which the YBAs have often been identified.²⁷ Their concerns can thus be traced through scholarship to stem directly from the lineage of 'the Vorticists' insistence on contemporaneity, on an art that is infused with the essence of life at a particular moment, at the still point between the past and the future'.²⁸

These are the terms by which *Bullet Hole* was selected as the most representative cipher of the formative Young British Art shown in *Freeze*. Cork describes how the 'monumental and gruesome image [was] used as the first illustration in its catalogue', and cites an accompanying essay that attributed it responsible for christening the exhibition: 'dedicated to a moment of impact, a preserved now, a freeze-frame'.²⁹ The formal qualities of Lewis's abstract works have often been described similarly, due, in part, to Cork's decisive role in the canonisation of both Vorticism and Young British Art. His art historical self-positioning is purposefully bound up in the vanguard rhetoric of both movements: a notion that rings clear when drawing on his scholarship from either side of my comparison. Whilst *Bullet Hole* is frozen in the still after (the *Blast* of) a gunshot, he shows how Lewis defined Vorticism by combining 'iconoclastic potential [with...] the calmness

²⁶ Andrzej Gasiorek, 'The Little Magazine as Weapon: *Blast* (1914-15)', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford, 2009), pp. 290-313 (p. 306).

²⁷ Keith Hartley, *From Blast to Pop: Aspects of Modern British Art 1915-65*, exhibition catalogue (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 1997), p. 15. For an account of the similarities between Pop Art and Young British Art see John Roberts, 'Pop Art, the Popular and British Art of the 1990s', in *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writings on Recent British Art*, ed. by Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass (London, 1998), pp. 52-79.

²⁸ Hartley, p. 18.

²⁹ Cork, *Young British Art*, p. 12.

of its “still centre””.³⁰ *Blast*’s jet-black ink announced that the ‘new vortex plunges to the heart of the Present [...] the Present is the only active thing’.³¹ In an unconscious salute to this dogmatic approach, Sarah Kent has stated of the YBAs: ‘We are cursed (or blessed) by living in interesting times and at such moments [...] only those fighting a rearguard action cling to aesthetic or moral positions’.³² Like Vorticism, Young British Art basked in the potency of the ‘freeze-frame’: upholding the modern moment in the face of metaphysical pontificating by the establishment.

³⁰ Cork, *Vorticism*, p. 262.

³¹ Lewis, *Blast*, p. 147.

³² Kent, *Shark*, p. 9.

2. Populism

Both the Vorticists and the YBAs, then, based their formal idiom upon the very fabric of modern existence: making an arena of this external world in order to rebel against aesthetic norms and perform Bürger's return of art to life. I will begin this chapter by discussing the similarities of the select pictures of life that they chose to broadcast in this way. Despite Vorticism's subtle exercise in masking concrete signifiers to its urban architectural environment under a veil of abstraction, I will argue that its social iconographies dispute Edwards's claim that 'allusions to the world outside the realm of pure form [are] to be taken as anyone chooses'.¹ Instead, I will situate Lewis within what Stallabrass terms the 'urban pastoral': astutely coined to describe Young British Art's engagement with the 'obscenities, crudities and the detritus of modern urban life [...] an inner-city fabric which is run down, agreeably and often entertainingly shabby'.²

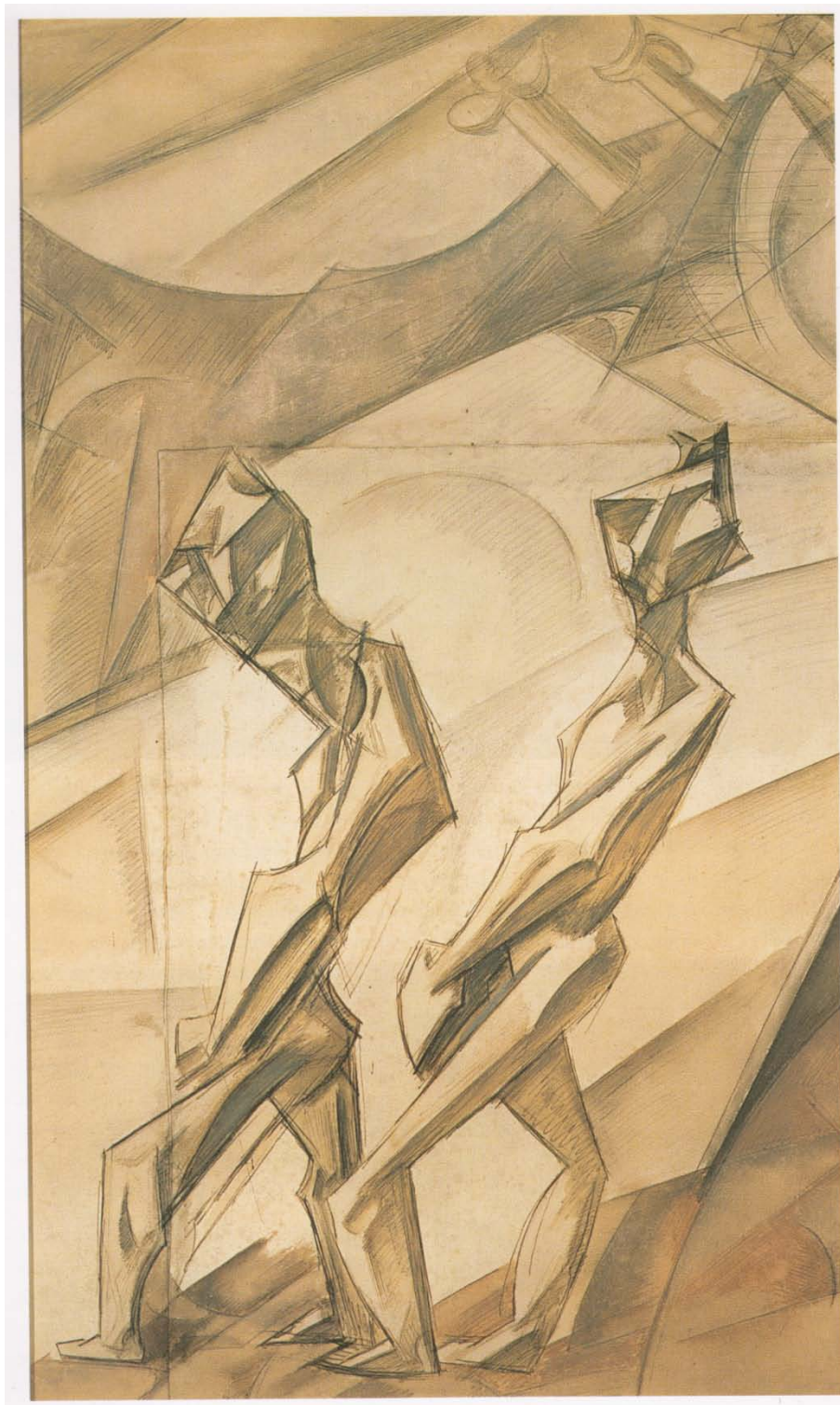
According to Owen Hatherley, an architectural critic with a virulently working-class agenda, Vorticism's spatial geometries engender not only a violent restructuring of aesthetic conventions but also a 'reimagining of England as the centre of a technological primitivism [...] destroying the fiction that this urban, warlike, ultra-industrialised country was a jolly suburban arcadia'. His impassioned reappraisal of modernism thus upholds the movement's 'dirty, raw and smoke-blackened' aesthetic as symptomatic of the world experienced by the industrial British working-class.³ Such experience is illustrated by Lewis's proto-Vorticist drawing *Two Mechanics* (1912, fig. 3), in which two creaking figures heave their muscular bulk through a rusty landscape. For Cork, it marks the moment at which Lewis's 'new

¹ Edwards, *Lewis*, p. 125.

² Stallabrass, p. 256.

³ Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (Winchester, 2008), pp. 23-24.

Fig. 3



Wyndham Lewis, *Two Mechanics*, 1912.

machine-like style finally succeeds in merging with a new subject-matter [...] an urban, industrial art which would interpret through its form and content the changing conditions to be witnessed everywhere'.⁴ Similarly, Edward Comentale has described how 'his work is committed to rendering the process of mechanisation, the reification of human experience'.⁵ Rather than dwelling on the grim realities of this working-class experience, however, the Vorticists, like the YBAs, celebrated the colloquial values of its cultural expression. Whilst *Blast* trumpeted England as an 'Industrial island machine, pyramidal workshop [...] discharging itself on the sea', it also claimed 'anything particularly hideous or banal, as a thing not to be missed. / Stupidity has always been exquisite and ugliness fine'. *Two Mechanics* is, therefore, both a patriotic commemoration and a light-hearted caricature of the 'Anglo-Saxon genius' responsible for England's steely infrastructure.⁶ Etched in scratchy lines that refuse to properly bind to their forms, the figures anticipate the booming vernacular of *Blast*: 'full of swagger [...] a comic and theatrical performance [...] in the spirit of a knock-about comedy'.⁷

This sentiment is paralleled by the boisterous concerns of much Young British Art. Heralding working-class solidarity as an externalised, alternative reality to the hermetic artworld, both movements were influenced by the brash and abrasive tones of popular culture. As Keith Tuma states, 'Most of Wyndham Lewis's discussion of popular culture in *Blast* is directed against the Royal Academy [...] because it is integrated with life in a way that serious art is not'.⁸ Equally, David Hopkins, in an essay on the YBAs, has summarised how such 'allusions [...] served

⁴ Cork, *Vorticism*, p. 30.

⁵ Edward Comentale, *Modernism, Cultural Production, and the British Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 11.

⁶ Lewis, *Blast*, pp. 26-27, 39, 145.

⁷ Gasiorek, *Blast*, pp. 296-297.

⁸ Keith Tuma, 'Wyndham Lewis, *Blast*, and Popular Culture', *English Literary History*, 2 (1987), 403-419 (p. 403).

as one means by which this new generation of British artists could signal their love of the demotic and their distance from the strenuous intellectualism of their politically correct artistic predecessors'.⁹ It is telling of the precise overlap of their social concerns that both the Vorticists and the YBAs paid homage to the categorically working-class entertainment of music hall comedy.¹⁰ In the words of Stallabrass, Young British Art 'tends to appeal to the unity of a British audience in a common culture [through] its roots [...] in working-class entertainment'.¹¹ Sarah Lucas's *Concrete Bladder Ball* (2002, fig. 4) is, to me, the perfect embodiment of his notion of the 'urban pastoral': a soccer ball, the most definitive signifier of the entertainment of the inner-city masses, conflated into the utilitarian concrete of their degraded environment. Like much Young British Art, furthermore, it operates on the level of a crude one-line gag, from which a satisfactory understanding of its strange, punning juxtaposition can be easily gleaned (It's a football – but don't you dare kick it!). Somehow it doesn't seem overly irrelevant that one can imagine the 'rude mechanicals' of Lewis's drawing doing exactly that; punting its crumbling, romanticised form about their scrappy industrial surroundings.¹² By signalling the Vorticists' approval of 'high-spirited and vivacious', but unarguably lowbrow, entertainment, *Blast* set the tone for an art that, like that of the YBAs, could be readily digested by the viewer.¹³ Its polemic aimed 'To make the rich of the community shed their education skin, to destroy politeness, standardization and academic [...]

⁹ David Hopkins, *Dada's Boys: Identity and Play in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2006), p. 58.

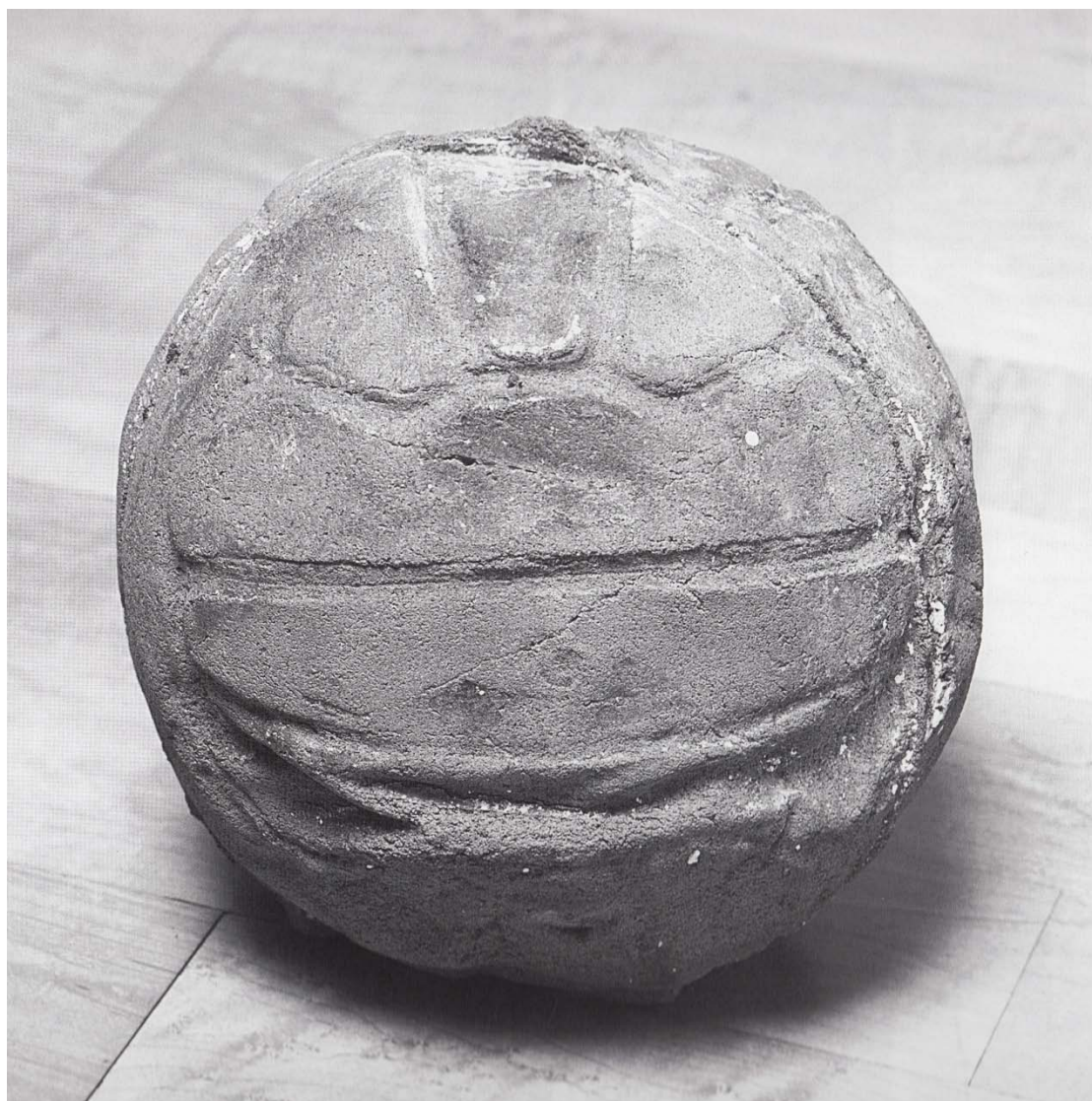
¹⁰ See Hopkins, p. 58; and Wees, p. 171.

¹¹ Stallabrass, p. 238.

¹² Edwards, *Lewis*, p. 72. His description of the picture as 'a wonderfully witty drawing of a pair of rude mechanicals' alludes to the incompetent manual actors in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

¹³ Tuma, p. 411. For my argument's sake, it's a shame that the 'high-spirited and vivacious' sport of football remained unblessed by *Blast*.

Fig. 4



Sarah Lucas, *Concrete Bladder Ball*, 2002.

vision'.¹⁴ Despite the abstract tendencies of works such as *Two Mechanics*, therefore, Vorticism shared in Young British Art's pandering to popular culture in order to negate the well-read knowledge of art history and theory demanded by the establishment.

In both cases, this working-class dynamic must be defined as an attempt to garner wider success than facilitated by self-contained artworld performance. After all, operating under a capitalist structure, the emptying-out of one audience necessitates the opening-up to another. Although Lewis's widening of art beyond its own autonomy is admirable, his extreme negation of high aesthetic conventions placed art at the level of mass commerce. Whilst he retains a critical stance in *Blast*, arguing that 'The finest art is not pure Abstraction, nor is it unorganised life', the YBAs' taking of popular culture as their subject matter often refuses to offer any interpretative frame whatsoever.¹⁵ Stallabrass draws attention to how, operating under market mechanisms, their art's sustained attempt to 'become resistant to theoretical material' is achieved through 'the neutral, non-judgemental position that it adopts'.¹⁶ Lucas's practice of presenting hugely enlarged, but otherwise unaltered, spreads from smutty tabloid newspapers, such as *Fat, Forty and Flab-ulous* (1990, fig. 5), is a case-in-point here. Even ill-conceived endeavours of serious art historical deconstruction, such as Sadie Coles's essay for her catalogue raisonnée, point to the unrefined semiotic nature of such 'red-top newspaper headlines with their already distilled concentrate of puns, slurs and innuendos'.¹⁷ Likewise, Cork has stated that 'the target

¹⁴ Lewis, *Blast*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Blast*, p. 134.

¹⁶ Stallabrass, pp. 94-96.

¹⁷ Sadie Coles, 'Sarah Lucas. Philosopher Poet', in *Sarah Lucas: Exhibitions and Catalogue Raisonné, 1989-2005*, ed. by Yilmaz Dziewior, Beatrix Ruf (London, 2005), pp. 62-63 (p. 62).

Fig. 5

Sarah Lucas, *Fat, Forty and Flab-ulous*, 1990.

seems too obvious to be handled in such an unmediated way'.¹⁸ To reinstate the bawdy humour of a Sunday Sport story about an obese wife put up for sale by her husband is to trawl the murkiest depths of working-class titillation. By quoting directly from the lowest form of the mass media in this way, Lucas's project paints a disturbing picture of the 'unorganised life' that it broadcasts.

According to Stallabrass, *Fat, Forty and Flab-ulous* 'enacts what the newspaper itself does, glorying in its own bad taste and stupidity, amusing its readers with its crude and philistine attitudes'.¹⁹ The art critic Matthew Collings, with whom Stallabrass rarely sees eye-to-eye, has argued that such works are 'really disgusting of course but quite impressive as a single visual blast'.²⁰ This serendipitous, but characteristically vacuous, phrase returns us to a discussion of *Blast*. The dynamism of its typography and layout (fig. 6) has long been recognised as a 'manipulation of the attention-grabbing devices of newspaper headlines and advertising posters'.²¹ Although Wees situates this trope on a similar level to Stallabrass's description of *Fat, Forty and Flab-ulous*, as 'exceedingly brash, if not gauche and in bad taste', Paige Reynolds has astutely configured *Blast*'s appropriation of commercial advertising techniques with the nationalism inherent to its narrative.²² By showing how this 'mass-cultural form [was] honed and perfected in Britain', she upholds it as an invention as distinctly British as the industrial ports blessed in the manifesto (see fig. 6); or indeed the low-end newspapers with which the YBAs were so infatuated.²³

¹⁸ Richard Cork, *Breaking Down the Barriers: Art in the 1990s* (New Haven, 2003), p. 44.

¹⁹ Stallabrass, p. 94.

²⁰ Matthew Collings, *This is Modern Art* (London, 1999), p. 40.

²¹ Wees, p. 165. In his extensive formal investigation into *Blast*'s typographical design, he states that the 'most satisfactory variation of this pattern came when the vertical elements [...] united with horizontal elements both above and below the vertical', p. 174 (as illustrated by fig. 6).

²² Wees, p. 165.

²³ Reynolds, p. 242.

Fig. 6

BLESS ALL PORTS.

PORTS, RESTLESS MACHINES of	scooped out basins heavy insect dredgers monotonous cranes stations lighthouses, blazing through the frosty starlight, cutting the storm like a cake beaks of infant boats, side by side, heavy chaos of wharves, steep walls of factories womanly town
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BLESS these **MACHINES** that work the little boats across
 clean liquid space, in beelines.

Wyndham Lewis, *Blast* (detail from p. 23), 1914.

If *Fat, Forty and Flab-ulous* demonstrates a somewhat extreme example of the iconographic assimilation of the national press, then Young British Art also drew from its sophisticated repertoire of populist visual communication in more subtle ways. Stallabrass lists how the preoccupation of its content and style, as shared by Vorticism, with ‘violence [...] the British character, celebrity, gossip [...] one-liner art, jokes, clichés, the use of advertising strategies [...] grunge and anti-intellectual posturing’ all stemmed from the tabloid concerns that it reflected.²⁴ The aesthetic strategies of both movements, then, borrowed from popular culture and the mass media in order to appeal to the British working-class. Whilst these lowbrow domestic concerns had been necessitated by a desire to make their art accessible to a wider audience, however, they were further compounded by the fact that its dissemination to this audience was only possible by infiltrating the very medium that they had taken as their subject. Figuratively put, demotic material was bitten into, chewed up, and spat back out through the same channel. As Stallabrass clarifies: ‘These concerns were largely seen through media eyes, as they had to be, for an appeal to a wide audience could only be mounted through the media, and success would be measured by media visibility’.²⁵ It is at the level of engagement with this complex system of mass communication, I will argue, that the ambiguous relationship between the appearance and reality of both movements becomes most apparent. As an art historian of famously Marxist convictions, and one of the YBAs’ most forthright critics, Stallabrass’s fundamental contention is situated within this diagnostic of their principle performative function. In part, he argues, their courting of the role must be seen as symptomatic of the ‘increasing dominance of the visual mass media’ brought about by the wider pull of the twentieth century.²⁶ Young British Art is thus

²⁴ Stallabrass, p. 131.

²⁵ Stallabrass, p. 132.

²⁶ Stallabrass, p. 86.

understood through its postmodern fornication with our globalised, spectacular society: a complicit sub-agency of this teleological rise. By linking its success to its operation in the seedy arena of tabloid newspapers and glossy magazines, Stallabrass outlines how it ‘set out to attract the mass media with a variety of tactics’; most of which had been borrowed from the mass media beforehand.²⁷

At first, Vorticism seems to fit a much more straightforward model in its appropriation of the mass media; employing *Blast* as a communicative vehicle of experimental typographic production in the vein of other manifesto-driven European movements. As Christopher Crouch points out, however, whilst this played out on one level as an equivalent to the stylistic disruption of their visual art through the ‘rejection of the past and the encouragement of new formal languages [here...] it was the capitalist market that determined the contact between artist [...] and their audience’.²⁸ Comentale elaborates in the specific context of early twentieth century London, ‘the avant-garde attacked the purposelessness of autonomous art only to valorise the constant activity of its own creation [...] and thus aligned aesthetics with the productivism of a larger economic praxis’.²⁹ This can be traced back to the interest in popular culture shared by Vorticism and Young British Art. Thomas Crow’s astute essay on the subject reveals how ‘the avant-garde serves as a kind of research and development arm of the culture industry [...] it refines and packages [before being...] repackaged in turn for consumption [and...] returned to the sphere of culture where much of its substantial material originated’.³⁰ Consider the extent to

²⁷ Stallabrass, p. 132. There is a well-established school of sociological thought approaching the links between high culture and the mass media under capitalism. See Christopher Crouch, ‘The Modernist Mass Media’, in *Modernism in Art, Design and Architecture* (London, 1999), pp. 92-111.

²⁸ Crouch, pp. 100-102.

²⁹ Comentale, pp. 30-31.

³⁰ Thomas Crow, ‘Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts’, in *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*, ed. by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin (Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2004), pp. 215-264 (p. 253).

which the aesthetic of both movements was geared towards reproduction in newspapers and magazines. I would argue that artistic production within the realm of the mass media has always been ineluctably structured by its principal function as a commodity exchange, and therefore the ‘temperament and tactics’ stance of the YBAs is not as unprecedented as Stallabrass suggests.³¹

In her perceptive essay, Reynolds relates Vorticism to a field of recent scholarship on ‘marketing modernisms’ by drawing on its manipulation of the ‘promotional culture’ of English commerce. Charting its existence as a deliberately provocative public narrative, she shows how *Blast*’s first advertisement appeared a whole three months before the magazine was published: setting the tone for the ‘aggression that would characterise Vorticism’ and the shrewd marketing tactics with which it would become synonymous.³² Indeed, the inception of the movement had been born of a series of disputes that literally unfolded in dining rooms and teashops across England, as Lewis’s cries of artistic disassociation from his contemporaries were published noisily in the correspondence pages of national newspapers. Cork argues that this ‘posing and publicity-hunting was a simple matter of self-defence’ in the context of London’s oversaturated artistic milieu:³³

While [Roger] Fry's aesthetic ideal was based on [...] abhorring any form of deliberately self-seeking publicity, Lewis and his friends were attracted by extremism and shared the Futurists' determination to furnish themselves with radical reputation by any means they could devise.³⁴

Although Reynolds’s agenda takes issue with the validity of seeing this ‘tactic [as] derived from their association with (and subsequent dissociation from) Italian futurism’, what we must note above all is the way in which Vorticism’s well-

³¹ Stallabrass, p. 4.

³² Reynolds, p. 238.

³³ Cork, *Vorticism*, p. 225.

³⁴ Cork, *Vorticism*, p. 96.

broadcast spurs to active inauguration were churned into a spin-machine of mass media coverage in the run-up to *Blast*'s publication.³⁵ As Harrison states, the controversies of modern art had long since 'been established as good copy for the popular press': just as they would continue to be long into the future.³⁶

³⁵ Reynolds, pp. 240-241.

³⁶ Harrison, p. 86.

3. Sensationalism

Concisely put, the 1997 exhibition *Sensation* was the most spectacularly engineered media phenomenon in the history of English art. Held at the Royal Academy, that bastion of elitism blasted so rigorously by Lewis, it participated wholeheartedly in the avant-garde tradition of public controversy as a means to establishment canonisation. By marketing Young British Art in such hallowed halls, furthermore, *Sensation* attracted an unprecedented amount of criticism from the national press. In her introduction to *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade*, Sarah Kent claims the famous stir caused by Manet's *Olympia* in the 1865 Paris Salon as an art historical precedent for the exhibition: framing the ensuing media storm as 'a tribute to the power of the work [because it...] aroused such strong reactions in a public notoriously indifferent to contemporary art'.¹ The book itself, a ridiculously oversized tome bound in floral fabric and replete in crazy, text-obscuring graphics, serves to sanction the YBAs' headline-grabbing controversies by reproducing newspaper cuttings throughout its catalogue of Saatchi's collection (just as they're mounted in the reception of his gallery).² The overwhelmingly negative ambiance of the mass media reception to *Sensation*, however, does not automatically register its oppositional statements as authentic or legitimate. Nor does it certify, as Kent would lead us to believe, that they were 'experienced as a frightening challenge to accepted values'.³ Whilst a few exhibits were subjected to extreme hostility, more often than not the well recapitulated 'controversy in which high art was considered to have been sullied by vulgar or obscene material' gave way to fumbling incomprehension and

¹ Sarah Kent, 'Nine Years' in *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade*, ed. by Robert Timms, Alexandra Bradley and Vicky Hayward (London, 1999), pp. 8-9 (p. 8).

² Matthew Collings, *Art Crazy Nation: the Post Blimey Art World* (London, 2001), p. 84.

³ Kent, *Young British Art*, p. 8.

poking fun.⁴ Collings has aptly expressed the complicit sigh exhaled by the mass media as it rushed to play its prescribed part: 'it's art-with-no-skill coming round again but this time being disgusting and immoral as well'.⁵ Damien Hirst's signature style of presenting dead animals pickled in glass tanks, which I will address shortly, has long been a staple of modern art parody in cartoon strips from the left to the right of the media. One particularly enterprising journalist even posed in front of a fish-in-cabinet variation with his own cone of chips under the entertaining headline 'Daily Star takes the CHIPS to the world's most expensive FISH' after it had been purchased by Saatchi in 1991.⁶

Likewise, Vorticism must be considered within a reading of modern art as modern oddity in the wake of Futurism's raucous arrival in London. Jonathan Black has discussed the speed with which the Italian movement was 'toned down and debased to the level of "life-style" accessory', becoming a tabloid-inscribed umbrella term from which the Vorticists were rarely distinguished by journalists.⁷ Wees cites how sensational headlines such as "'SHOCKING ART: Pictures Designed to Jolt the Senses" [...] accompanied by facetious descriptions of paintings and, occasionally, clumsy attempts at parodies of the new art, became standard fare in the popular press'.⁸ Although Cork notes that this ubiquitous atmosphere of mass media coverage

⁴ Stallabrass, p. 217. The most extreme press reactions were levelled at the work of Jake and Dinos Chapman, Chris Ofili and Marcus Harvey (whose painting of Myra Hindley was vandalised twice). See Stallabrass, pp. 208-218.

⁵ Collings, *Modern Art*, p. 86.

⁶ John McJannet, 'Daily Star Takes the Chips to the World's Most Expensive Fish', *Daily Star*, 27 August 1991, p. 3.

⁷ Jonathan Black, 'Taking Heaven by Violence: Futurism and Vorticism as seen by the British Press c.1912-20', in *Blasting the Future! Vorticism 1910-1920*, exhibition catalogue (London: Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, 2004), pp. 30-39 (p. 32).

⁸ Wees, p. 39.

was ‘playing right into his [Lewis’s] hands’, he refuses to fully acknowledge the level of collusion at which it took place.⁹ For Wees, however,

What started as journalistic exploitation of the avant-garde ended as just the reverse. In paying the compliment of imitation, the Vorticists beat the press at its own game. But in a larger sense they won no victory.¹⁰

David Peters Corbett has notably elaborated on Vorticism’s complicity in this spectacular mechanism with an insightful argument that can be readily applied to Young British Art. By elucidating on how the avant-gardism ‘represented by Lewis and Vorticism is in important ways an illusion’, it is understood on the terms I have outlined; ‘of the ambiguous relationship between the Vorticists’ [...] socially acceptable iconoclasm, and a radically oppositional account of modernity which would qualify as “avant-garde” in Peter Bürger’s sense’. *Blast* is thus reduced to ‘a cultural performance, a brilliant display of art-political fireworks’ that emerges at the same artificial level of engagement with life as the YBAs’ courtship of the mass media.¹¹

If *Blast*’s ‘deliberately scandalous appearance, typography and opinions were there to support the art that Lewis and his colleagues were producing’, then the YBAs can be seen to take Corbett’s analysis to its logical conclusion: making the superficial public appearance of Vorticism, ‘hung about as it was with all the paraphernalia of radical modernism’, the very substance of their work. Every aspect of *Sensation*’s internal and external logic, from the shock-tactics of the art on display to the title of the exhibition itself, ‘insists on its own radicalism, its own likelihood of exclusion by an outraged society’.¹² In both cases, furthermore, the public performance enacted by

⁹ Cork, *Vorticism*, p. 234.

¹⁰ Wees, p. 40.

¹¹ David Peters Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art 1914-30* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 25, 40.

¹² Corbett, pp. 39-41.

this marketing strategy gestured unequivocally back towards the artists themselves. Although biographical sensationalism has been a staple of art history writing for centuries, Lewis is significant for his pioneering self-awareness in the context of English art. As Edwards has stated, 'For Lewis, an image of himself, in art as well as life, tended to be an appearance to present to the world, a calculated statement, not a revelation of the hidden self'.¹³ It was by artificially engineering his identity to such a remarkable degree that he laid the ground for a trend taken to its extreme by the practice of the YBAs.

Yet again, Corbett's assertion that '*Blast*'s exuberant aggression and arrogance, its intensely self-conscious flouting of "convention", provided the public medium in which the image of the artist as genius could be broadcast' speaks more loudly for the strategies of *Sensation*.¹⁴ Through its symbiotic relationship with the mass media, Young British Art functions most actively to promote the personalities behind the art, which are often just as important as the art itself. Sarah Lucas's populist iconographies, for example, act as a cooperative body to inscribe the artist herself as an avid participant within that culture. Martin Prinzhorn has described this effect in nonsensical prose as 'a kind of collage [...] not simple self-reference; at the same time, it is an insistent revelation of her own artistic strategies and working methods'.¹⁵ This self-reference may not be simple, but it is total. In the notably less convoluted words of Heidi Reitmaier, 'it is Lucas that consistently surfaces as the individual who heroically claims her identity in her work [...] her] demeanour is a complex play of identifications [...] but also it is quite simply an adoption of a

¹³ Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis Portraits*, exhibition catalogue (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2008), p. 19.

¹⁴ Corbett, p. 40.

¹⁵ Martin Prinzhorn, 'The Bare Image', in *Sarah Lucas: Exhibitions and Catalogue Raisonné, 1989- 2005*, ed. by Yilmaz Dziewior, Beatrix Ruf (London, 2005), pp. 8-11 (p. 9).

stylistic guise as a visa, a distraction'.¹⁶ By refusing to provide artistic comment on her subject matter of mass cultural material, she gives us just one alternative route to reading it back into the context from which it was appropriated. Fundamentally, her work reflects back at her through the disguise of a working-class mirror.

For Stallabrass, all this 'contributes to Lucas's grungy image, a purveyor of smut with a dark soul, eyes fixed steadily upon the cruelties and crudities of the urban world'.¹⁷ Such a description seems to have been written for her macho presentation in the 1996 self-portrait *Fighting Fire with Fire* (fig. 7), in which she squints lazily outwards, cigarette languishing from the downturned corner of her mouth. The formal similarities with a photograph posed by Lewis in 1913 (fig. 8), just prior to his role as ringleader of the Vorticist circus, are remarkable. His levelled gaze of confrontational masculinity, albeit with a dandyish flair, anticipates Lucas's image down to a tee: a head and shoulders composition; smoking artfully; hair parted meticulously down the centre. If he is nothing more revealing than 'a carefully reconstructed character, an aggressively unsentimental role Lewis consciously chose to play', then her stylised androgyny offers an equally artificial construct of the artist to the world.¹⁸ To me, it makes little difference that Lewis is male and Lucas is female: in both cases, 'the artist appears masquerading as an artist'.¹⁹ More significant is the extent to which they masquerade as the same artist, wearing the same figurative, and almost literal, clothes (in an extension of the metaphor, elsewhere Stallabrass describes Young British Art's 'costume of hard modernity that it had slung over its shoulder in defiance of the hesitations of the past').²⁰

¹⁶ Heidi Reitmaier, 'What are you Looking At? Moi?', in *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writings on Recent British Art*, ed. by Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass (London, 1998), pp. 113-128 (pp. 117-120).

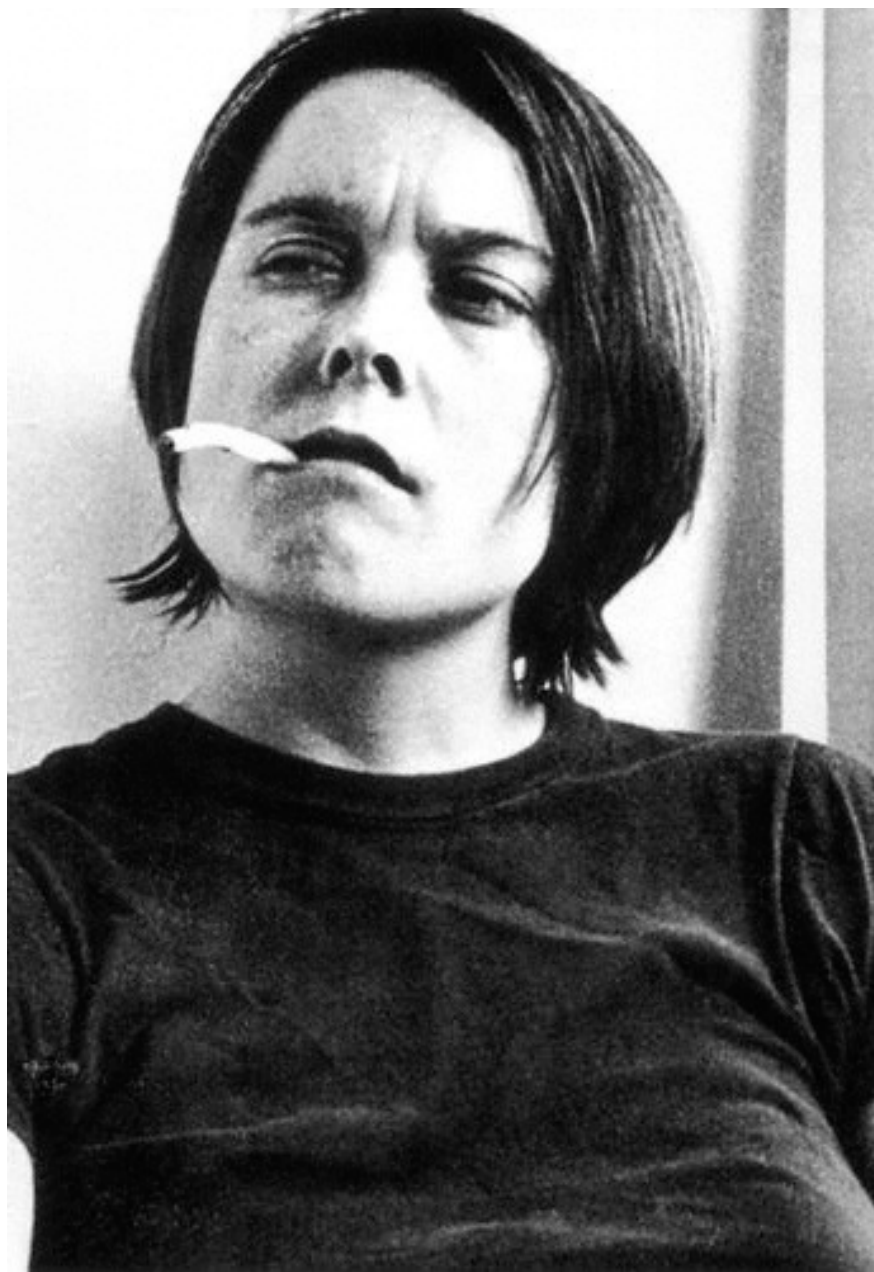
¹⁷ Stallabrass, p. 95.

¹⁸ Wees, p. 145.

¹⁹ Stallabrass, p. 94.

²⁰ Stallabrass, p. 60.

Fig. 7



Sarah Lucas, *Fighting Fire with Fire*, 1996.

Fig. 8



George Charles Beresford, *Wyndham Lewis*, 1913.

Reitmaier adroitly disarms the feminist readings of empowerment that Lucas's gendered strategies often inspire in her advocates by reducing her self-presentation to 'a playing through of a variety of masculine tropes'.²¹ Although she constantly reroutes our viewing position by diverting our attention back to her person, it cannot be interpreted on female terms because it does so through such overtly male points of reference. Fundamentally, the tabloid humour and working-class amusements of Lucas's subject matter draw on the same uncompromisingly masculine energies as the aesthetics and ideologies of *Blast*, which, as Corbett states, functioned most efficaciously 'as the public voice of Vorticism under Lewis's leadership'.²² The extent of such purposeful alignment with the male urban vernacular is so great that Lewis has been nicknamed a 'chav' whilst, according to David Hopkins, Lucas 'was flirting with a persona much-discussed in the pop sociology of the age, that of the "ladette"'.²³ Their role within the worlds of pop or fashion is another point here. Edwards describes how Lewis

flaunts a sense of style that is palpably linked to the whole reckless ethos of pop at its most exciting [...] his imagery and style have been taken over virtually directly into popular culture [...] It is the edgy, external style of this work, apparently fending of nihilism with its own energy, that makes this appeal.²⁴

However, Peter Suchin is considerably more sceptical of how, thanks to the YBAs:

The categories of fine art and pop seem increasingly indistinguishable. While this might be thought to be a good and democratic thing, it is

²¹ Reitmaier, p. 118.

²² Corbett, pp. 39-40.

²³ Hopkins, p. 60; and see Hatherley's chapter "'The Great London Vortex': Wyndham Lewis as Chav', in *Militant Modernism* (Winchester, 2008), pp. 23-28.

²⁴ Edwards, *Lewis*, pp. 4-5.

often forgotten that the pop world is a multi-million pound capitalist industry, not a neutral, 'natural' ideologically untainted space.²⁵

This blurring of high and low culture engendered by the artistic practices of Lewis and the YBAs thus returns us to the same diagnostic of their capital production as raised by their mass media complicity. Considered within the meteoric rise of the cult of celebrity, they perform in this arena to communicate with a wider public, who are acutely aware of their corresponding role. The complex mechanics of this act are assimilated into Lewis's play *Enemy of the Stars*, which was published in *Blast* and set in 'some bleak circus [to be...] very well acted by you and me'.²⁶ For Comentale, 'it signals the performative aspects of all identity and thus [...] the interdependence of individual and mass [...] Lewis has agreed to perform the avant-garde impresario, but he asks that we uphold our promise to play the part of the outraged public'.²⁷

This idea is made most radically apparent in the Young British Art camp by Damien Hirst, who, in the servile words of Kent, 'has come to epitomize the wild boy whose shock tactics and cool media manner give art a high profile and a bad name'.²⁸ It is certainly true that the startling presence of *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991, fig. 9) dominates our psychic conception of the movement, just as the ominous dead shark in a tank dominated both the physical experience and critical reception of *Sensation*. Cork, a persistent apologist for the YBAs, has accused the ways in which 'the media resorted to shameless tactics in their determination to attack [the exhibition as...] a deliberate display of ruthless media manipulation'. As I have argued, however, Young British Art recruited the very same

²⁵ Peter Suchin, 'After a Fashion: Regress as Progress in Contemporary British Art', in *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writings on Recent British Art*, ed. by Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass (London, 1998), pp. 95-110 (p. 105).

²⁶ Lewis, *Blast*, p. 55.

²⁷ Comentale, p. 17.

²⁸ Kent, *Shark*, p. 6.

Fig. 9



Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991.

techniques in order to function. Riddled with contradictions, Cork's defence of *Sensation* paradoxically upholds 'sympathy among those who instinctively felt that vandalism was unacceptable' for a generation of artists who established themselves by vandalising the artistic legacies of their forebears.²⁹ It is little wonder that his review of the exhibition fell short of understanding 'the work of Glenn Brown, whose slick pastiches of painters [...] amount to little more than flashy displays of technical skill'.³⁰ In fact, as Stallabrass shows, Brown creates illusions of thick brushstrokes sweeping across entirely flat, sterile canvases for the sole purpose of mocking the signature styles of established artworld figures.³¹

To return to *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, Cork's exposition of its formal quality is somewhat far-fetched:

Although quite motionless, and therefore clearly dead, the creature retains an uncanny ability to disconcert. Seen from the side, the shark's head appears to hover close to the glass. But when we move to the front, it suddenly jumps towards the centre of the tank.³²

This flimsy analysis struggles notably to gain footing on a work that stands against such interpretation: the art-linguistic parameters honed by Cork's Vorticism refused access by an entity of steel, glass and rotting flesh. In fact, the sensationalism inherent in such a dramatically phenomenological approach sets the tone for the reality of much Young British Art. It is, however, on the superficial terms of its 'powerful and inescapable engagement with death' that most interpretations uphold the work as a grand, if blatant, philosophical thesis on the mortality of the human condition.³³

According to Martin Maloney writing in the *Sensation* catalogue, for example, 'Hirst,

²⁹ Cork, *1990s*, p. 7.

³⁰ Cork, *1990s*, p. 180.

³¹ Stallabrass, p. 58.

³² Cork, *1990s*, p. 30.

³³ Cork, *1990s*, p. 8.

understanding Collishaw's coup with the gunshot wound photograph, created work that brought together the joy of life and the inevitability of death, in the process transforming the secrecy of Collishaw's voyeurism into mass spectacle'.³⁴ On this note, Stallabrass has incisively related *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* to the YBAs' popular culture obsession by asking 'Does the shark really get us to think about mortality [...] or does it simply remind us of *Jaws*?'.³⁵ Although Lewis forwards an art that takes modern life as its starting point, it is crucial to point out that 'he sees this art as an analytical/conceptual tool that abstracts what is most essential from contemporary reality'.³⁶ Unlike Hirst, he firmly believed in art's capacity to offer a refinement of such unadulterated sensations, and not an intensification of them.

In a strikingly prophetic passage in *Blast*, Lewis writes: 'The Artist, like Narcissus, gets his nose nearer and nearer the surface of Life. / He will get it nipped off if he is not careful, by some [...] shark sunning itself'.³⁷ As demonstrated by the over-reliance of Cork's analysis on teasing out a thrill-seeking drama from an otherwise unremarkable work, Hirst's shark is the very 'surface of Life' itself: nothing more than an animal corpse translated into a gallery space and framed with all the slickness of a glossy magazine. For Stallabrass, the emptiness behind this trumped-up 'dumb naturalism' is a familiar trope of Young British Art; 'a vacuous quality which is the work's defining characteristic'.³⁸ Even a title as suggestive as *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* serves to heighten its ambiguity by cajoling viewers into undergoing the futile task of garnering a deeper

³⁴ Martin Maloney, 'Everyone a Winner! Selected British Art from the Saatchi Collection 1987- 97', in *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, exhibition catalogue (London: Royal Academy of Art, 1997), pp. 26-34 (p. 33).

³⁵ Stallabrass, p. 26.

³⁶ Gasiorek, *Blast*, p. 299.

³⁷ Lewis, *Blast*, pp. 134-135.

³⁸ Stallabrass, pp. 27, 156

truth from the work. As was the case with Lucas, furthermore, this void of tangible meaning necessarily gives way to a carefully engineered biographical reading of the artist. Robert Garnett has argued accordingly that the ‘regressive, conservative nature of his work was masked [...] by the coolness and slickness of [...] his own self-promotion’.³⁹ Although I have shown that Lewis partook in a similarly shameless act of self-display in order to market himself through Vorticism, his art retained a separate, higher purpose that is entirely absent today. ‘Hirst is as much or more known for his lifestyle as for his art, and he takes care to ensure the two are thoroughly entangled’, Stallabrass adds, demonstrating how ‘it is possible to continue making art without an interior life, or without marking out a separation between life and art’.⁴⁰ Crucially, this is not a fusing of ‘art’ and ‘life’ in Bürger’s avant-garde sense: in fact, by taking the exterior life of the artist as a spectacle to compensate for the facile reality of its art, it couldn’t be more divorced from it.

Collings remarks that Hirst’s works ‘are presented as ads, even though they aren’t advertising anything’.⁴¹ How wrong he is; they’re advertising everything. By piling on shock after shock in order to distract from their inherent banality, they serve no role other than to market Hirst the artist at the centre of the vacuum of Young British Art. He represents an exhaustion of Lewis’s trajectory of mass media manipulation: ‘The fashioning of the work as a logo for the personality, and the confections of a persona, is something that many artists do; but here [...] the process comes to a conclusion as both artwork and self disappear into pure image, pure celebrity’.⁴² According to Garnett, then,

³⁹ Robert Garnett, ‘Britpopism and the Populist Gesture’, in *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writings on Recent British Art*, ed. by Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass (London, 1998), pp. 13-23 (p. 15).

⁴⁰ Stallabrass, pp. 20, 48.

⁴¹ Collings, *Modern Art*, p. 64.

⁴² Stallabrass, pp. 29, 49.

it is questionable whether he any longer operates within the remit of contemporary art; he is rather a media phenomenon, and his single contribution to the new British art is to have been responsible for the revival of the knowing 'shock' tactic, and a now widespread infantile narcissism and a craving for attention of any variety.⁴³

Whilst Lewis's practice foreshadows this pessimistic diagnosis of the legacy of Young British Art, with its overreliance on the artificially manufactured cult of the artist, my conclusion will show how he came to stand above it.

⁴³ Garnett, p. 16.

Conclusion: From Vortex to Vacuum

In his review for *Sensation*, Richard Cork comments on its unusual surroundings for an exhibition of the YBAs: ‘The rebels have stormed the bastions of conservatism, and howls from outraged Academicians are still bouncing around the walls of Burlington House’.¹ As with much of his related art criticism, one can imagine this description being levied on the Vorticists with equal panache. Wyndham Lewis’s complicit role as a socially accepted iconoclast of the 1914 London artworld, functioning under the conditions of the modern marketplace for the bourgeois clientele that he outwardly resented, certainly left him in line for establishment canonisation. Ford Madox Ford wryly predicted in a review of *Blast* that its supposedly oppositional author would be ‘in twenty years the weighty voice of Baron Lewis of Burlington House’.² For Peter Suchin, the institutional assimilation of Young British Art engendered by ‘*Sensation* was, surely, the final nail in the coffin of the claim that [it...] represents the authentically scathing gaze of disaffection or dissent’. Just like the Vorticism of Ford’s sceptical assessment, ‘As an officially sanctioned avant-garde it could have no other destination or intent’.³ Whilst one can only speculate that Lewis had set his sights on becoming a fully-fledged member of the Royal Academy, everything that *Blast*’s vehement rhetoric stood against, his journey to such success was never completed: fatally cut-short by the outbreak of war mere moments after it had begun. Although military mobilisation is often too readily cited by art historians as a crisis of artistic modernism, and the convenient end point of Vorticism, Andrzej Gasiorek is correct in claiming that ‘Lewis came to believe that

¹ Cork, *1990s*, p. 178.

² Ford Madox Ford, ‘Mr Wyndham Lewis and “Blast”’, *The Outlook*, 34 (4 July, 1914), p. 15, in Corbett, p. 42.

³ Suchin, p. 106.

BLAST had belonged to a cultural milieu in which the avant-garde's radical aspirations had been compromised from the outset'.⁴

This sentiment is most evident in *The Caliph's Design*, a polemical pamphlet that he published in 1919 after returning from the front. According to Toby Avarad Foshay, it is both 'a work of the immediate post-vorticist period and a product of Lewis's chastened sensibility following his service in the Great War'.⁵ Before championing the role of the artist in bringing the total architectural environment of a new world to life, Lewis projects the inherent faults of the ill-fated Vorticist project onto a wounded beast in a sensational bullfight; for is 'that not a fairly good picture of the bloody spectacle that we, Public and Performers, present?'.⁶ Whilst he implies that both artists and their audiences are to blame for this sorry state of affairs, he recognises that they 'are locked in a symbiotic reinforcement of decadent and dispirited experimentation [...] an act of cynical despair over the lack of content in life or art'.⁷ Foshay's argument thus draws on Bürger's analysis of the avant-garde by showing how 'the modernist revolution had allowed itself to be contained within the bourgeois institutional straightjacket of studio, gallery and press [...] it had perpetrated the decadent aestheticism against which it reacted'.⁸ The same could be said of Young British Art: as Lewis acknowledges of Vorticism, it 'is written of with a monotonous emphasis of horror and facetiousness in the Press'.⁹ Even when it is praised, moreover, it is on meretricious terms that register nothing deeper than the manifest openness with which it has been subsumed into the spectacular workings of mass-produced culture.

⁴ Gasiorrek, *Blast*, p. 313.

⁵ Toby Avarad Foshay, *Wyndham Lewis and the Avant-Garde: The Politics of the Intellect* (London, 1992), p. 6.

⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design: Architects! Where is your Vortex?*, 1919, rpt., ed. by Paul Edwards (Santa Barbara, 1986), p. 10.

⁷ Foshay, p. 10.

⁸ Foshay, pp. 12, 17.

⁹ Lewis, *TCD*, pp. 11-12.

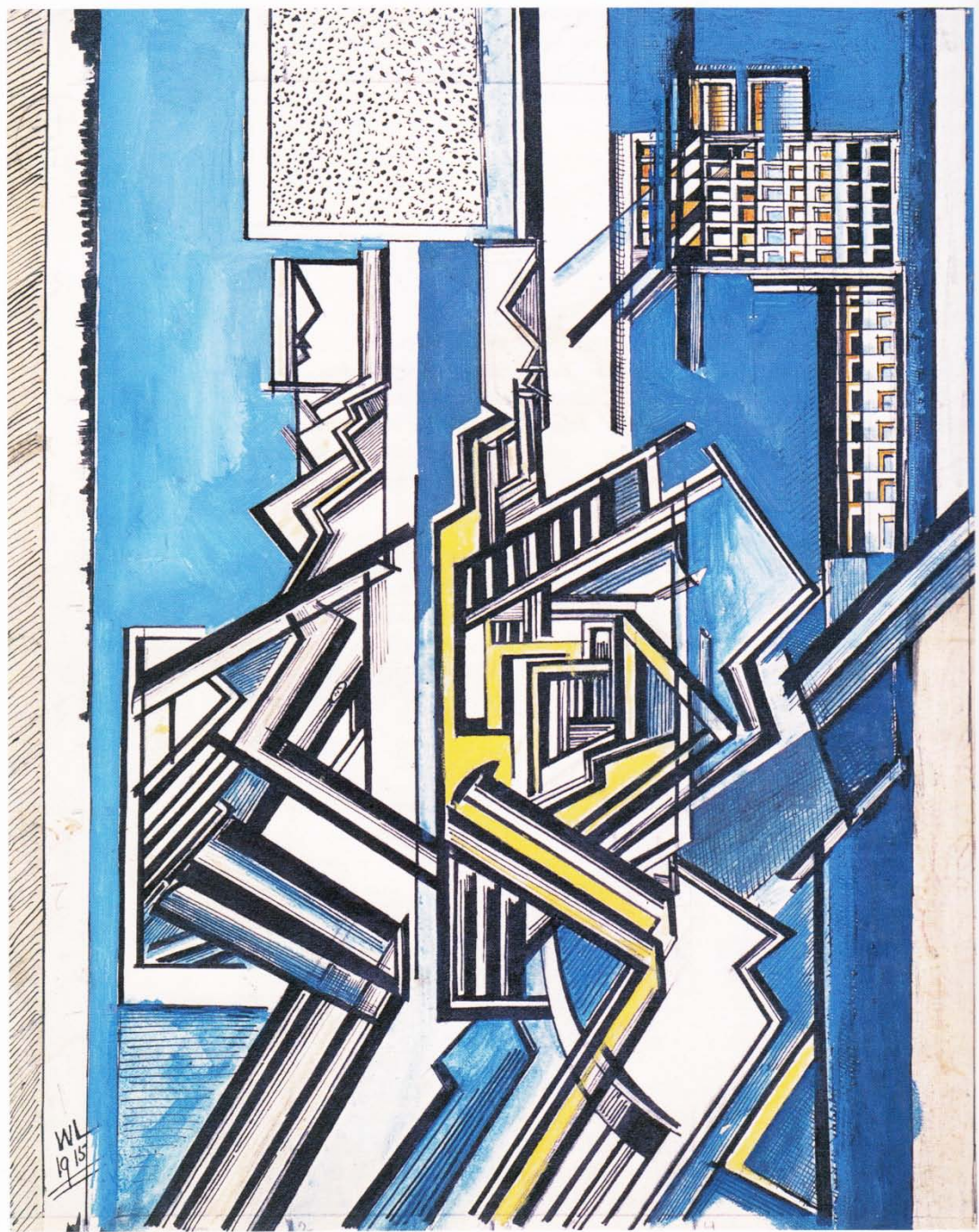
In conclusion, Garnett has summarised this dire situation as ‘a carnival of fetishised and mostly facile populist gestures [... a vacuum] filled by an anything-goes free-for-all, lacking any coherence or agenda other than careerist attention seeking [...] enthusiastically devoured by the media across the board’.¹⁰ It is telling of Lewis’s sharp intellect that he anticipates each of these insidious aspects of contemporary practice in *The Caliph’s Design*. Although, despite their pretensions to avant-gardism, neither Vorticism nor Young British Art fulfilled Bürger’s model of an art politically engaged in life (rather, they compounded their own aesthetic autonomy), here Lewis declares precisely that. As noted by Gasiorek, ‘*The Caliph’s Design* sought to develop Vorticism’s revolutionary potential by extending it into the realm of social space, envisaging a situation in which avant-garde art plays a leading role in the transformation of everyday life’.¹¹ The essentially architectonic structures of Vorticist works such as *Design for Red Duet* (1915, fig. 10) were thus recast as genetic blueprints for a new world. Whilst Lewis now advocated a modernist cleansing of London’s ‘ugliness, banality and squalor’, these were the very qualities with which his Vorticism intersected the concerns of the YBAs. Paul Edwards has suggested that the translation of his pictorial abstractions onto the architectural drawing board was little more than an overly idealistic impulse, impossible to achieve.¹² I would reinstate, however, that such optimistic aspirations are what is so crucially lacking from Young British Art. In a time of financial hardship and globalised media, the weary, unrelenting bullfight of a contemporary art that does nothing more than reflect mass culture through over-hyped and over-paid celebrities is precisely what we don’t need.

¹⁰ Garnett, pp. 19-20.

¹¹ Andrzej Gasiorek, “‘Architecture or Revolution?’ Le Corbusier and Wyndham Lewis’, in *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (London, 2005), pp. 136-145 (p. 138).

¹² Paul Edwards, ‘Afterword’, in *The Caliph’s Design: Architects! Where is your Vortex?*, ed. by Paul Edwards (Santa Barbara, 1986), pp. 145-160, (p. 155).

Fig. 10



Wyndham Lewis, *Design for Red Duet*, 1915.

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List of Illustrations

1. Wyndham Lewis
Plan of War, 1913
 Oil on canvas, 255 x 143 cm
 Whereabouts unknown
2. Mat Collishaw
Bullet Hole, 1988
 Cibachrome mounted on fifteen light boxes, 229 x 310 cm
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3. Wyndham Lewis
Two Mechanics, 1912
 Pen and ink, wash, 56 x 33.5 cm
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4. Sarah Lucas
Concrete Bladder Ball, 2002
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5. Sarah Lucas
Fat, Forty and Flab-ulous, 1990
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6. Wyndham Lewis
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10. Wyndham Lewis
Design for Red Duet, 1915
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