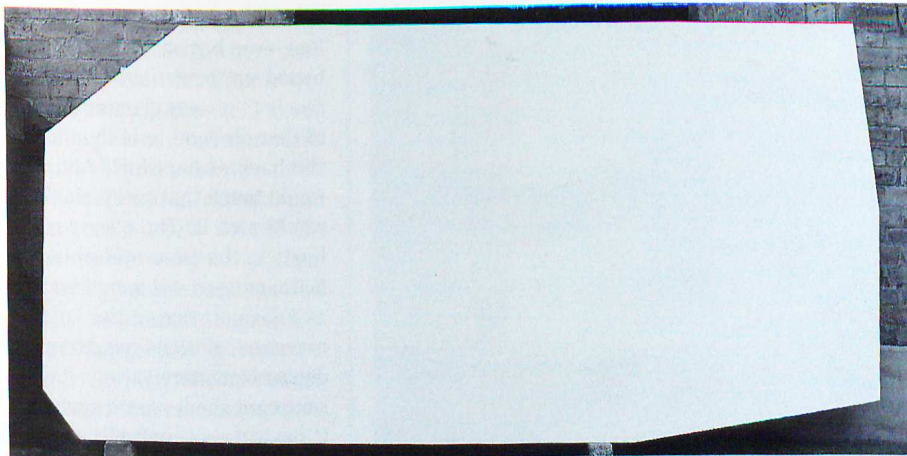


**Terry Atkinson**  
*Distemper Yellow Axe-  
 Head Enola Gay Mute*  
 1990



premised upon the prevailing nominalist reading of the Readymade; language was not deployed as a reductivist 'least object', as an end in itself. Texts were a means of conducting work on art as art. It is curious then, that in this present exhibition, the journals are presented behind glass, thus rendering them unreadable.

The problem of how such work could be 'displayed' in an exhibiting context was addressed within the 'Index' project, begun in 1971 in preparation for the 1972 Dokumenta. This, and the fraught relations of production within this project, led to Atkinson's eventual departure from A&L. The reasons for this Atkinson has outlined in a series of incisive writings that he has published over the last few years, some of the contents of which are summarised in the catalogue that has been reproduced and displayed upon the walls of the exhibition space, recalling an aspect of the Indexing problematic. Part of his disenchantment with how the project was originally displayed was the way in which its ascetic, grey, 'minimalist/conceptual' or 'hyper-modernist' style, could be seen to reproduce the authoritarianism, anonymity and facelessness of late capitalist administrative culture, and of how its power relations seemed to him to be reproduced within the Index project's relations of production. Furthermore, Conceptualism had by this time become easily assimilated by museum culture.

For Atkinson, what was necessary was neither a blind acceleration of the Conceptualist project, nor a simple return to the visual; what was required and what he sought to do was to resituate the dialectic of his practice. The first works he produced after his departure – the World War 1 works – represented a return to history and collective memory. The series of paintings and drawings were deliberately ham-fisted, awkward and unseductive. Continuing Conceptualism's critique of aesthetic competence and conventional representation the images were accompanied by texts and captions that problematised their reception, again extending conceptual art's efforts to open up a space for an active, participative viewer.

This project was taken further in the 80s in the 'Bunker' works that were concerned with the spectre of Britain's historical relations with Ireland and the contemporary conflicts in Ulster. Both in the work and in a related series of writings he conducted a rigorous critical investigation into the status of 'realism' and 'political art'. An approximately parallel practice that interested Atkinson at the time was that of Anselm Kiefer that was similarly engaged with a Benjaminian reclamation of historical memory. But what made his practice distinct from Kiefer's was the distance he established in relation to Neo-Expressionism. The spectacular appearance and

Beuysian aura of Kiefer's work, while not being Neo-Expressionist, could too often be received as such.

In the later 80s he continued to resituate his practice, this time in relation to late-postmodernist 'endgame' painting and the critical claims made for it. He has been one of the few artists to have consistently questioned the relations between theory and practice, arguing as he does that the notion of 'theory' is itself 'undertheorised'. The recent *Mute* and *Signature* paintings deal with the historical meanings of Postmodernism and the problematics of intentionality. Not content, as he has said, to sail along with the 'regatta of the floating signifier' his work has an obdurateness and a difficulty lacking in much art of the 80s. In comparison with much art of the time his practice is 'homeless', in that it cannot be reduced to the terms of any fashionable 'critical theories'. Atkinson has maintained his adherence to the conceptualist ethos that art must incorporate within itself a critique of criticism and has continued to find theory for practice rather than wait for it to be 'theorised'. However, in ploughing your own furrow you run the risk of self marginalisation – particularly in today's context. Atkinson's practice is without doubt exemplary, but what it offers as a resource to contemporary art is a different issue. ■

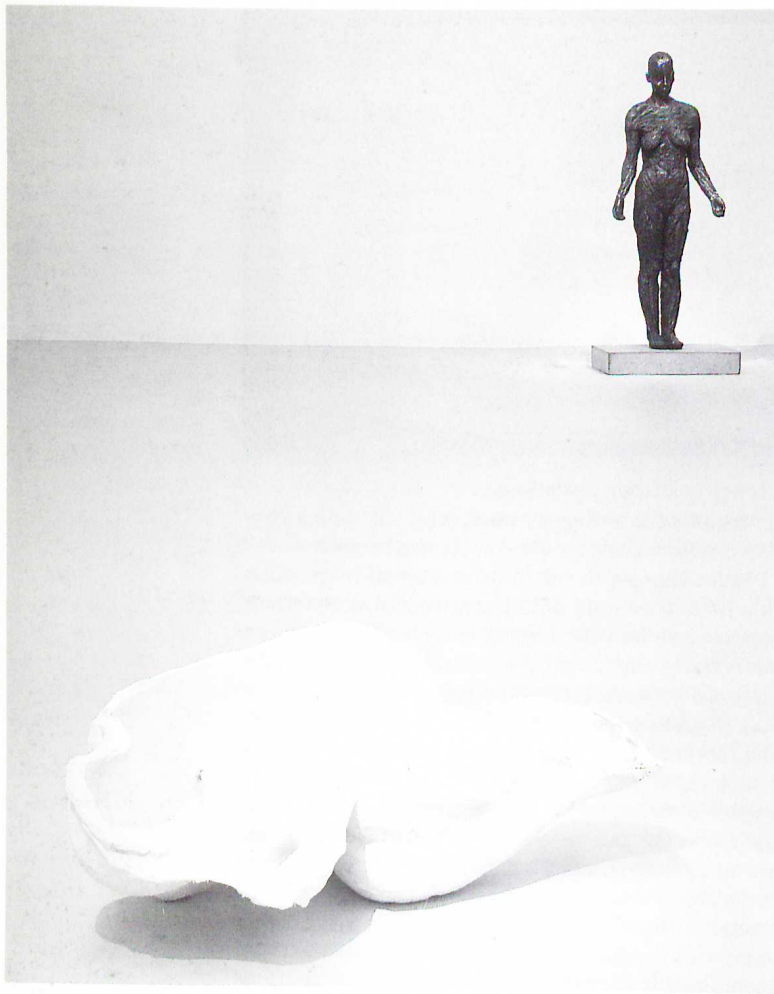
**Robert Garnett** is a London-based critic and lecturer in Art History.

## ■ Young Americans Part 2

**Saatchi Gallery** London March 21 to May 12

You'd be hard-pressed to find a place and time in art history as self-consciously, as deliberately political as American art in the early 1990s, and yet that is just what is finally absent in Saatchi's two-part 'Young Americans: New American Art in the Saatchi Collection'. Like an exhibition of Russian art circa 1915, minus the revolutionary spirit or a collection of 19th century caricatures stripped of political accusation, a cross-section of recent American art which only once brushes against government policy (Gregory Green) and barely sideswipes issues of feminism (Janine Antoni, Kiki Smith) is somehow overlooking the glaring point of the moment. Saatchi was evidently bent on ditching the politics and what many (particularly continental Europeans) dismiss as that tiresome, American political correctness *schtick*, and go for the art. What we see again in part 2 of this American extravaganza, with Jacqueline Humphries, Tony Oursler, Richard Prince, Charles Ray and Kiki Smith, is what Bau-





Kiki Smith  
*Virgin Mary* 1992  
*Basin* 1990

drillard had termed (in his book *America*) the 'anti-Ark', a swarm of unaccompanied individuals queuing up for the deluge with only themselves – no mate, much less a community – to rely upon for survival. All the work then is deceptively introspective, broody even, and creates an atmosphere hardly indicative of much collectively-spirited contemporary American art.

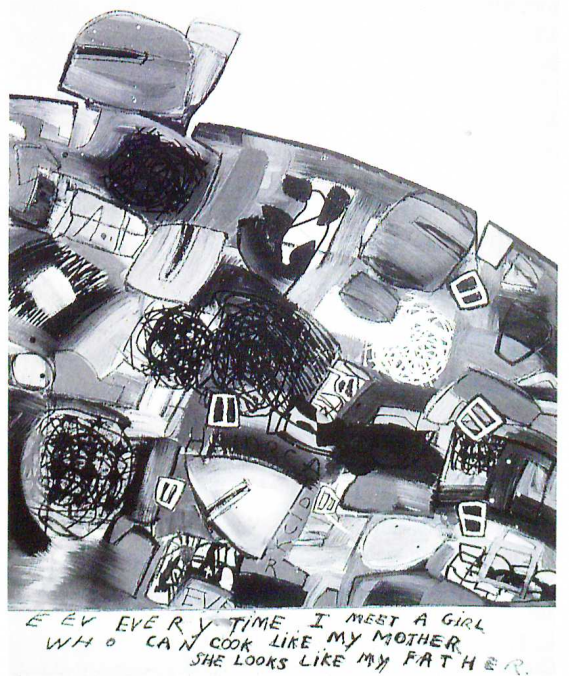
Nevertheless, we'd like to thank Saatchi, first of all, for *sharing* (to use a favourite *fin de siècle* Americanism) an unforgettable group of recent Richard Prince paintings (most untitled, 1995). The lighthearted prankster formerly known as Prince takes his painting very seriously these days, pouring everything he knows on to the canvas as if half-expecting it all to slide off like a giant slug. Anything that sticks is painting, so we watch the swirls and scribbles and flat bits slump pathetically like a bad joke told badly. All his previous work is heaped on to the canvas and left to settle, as if Prince were confessing his own mid-life crisis, sorting it all out publicly – what went right, what went wrong, what to do next. I thought of Mark Rothko, the blackness which overcame his pictures towards the close of life, seeing in contrast an expanse of white canvas elbow its way into Prince's pictures, capping it all off as it were. If painting is an act of mourning (Bois) for Richard Prince it is so on an intimately personal, rather than historical level, and for this reason he has unexpectedly emerged as one of the most exciting painters around.

In other venues, Charles Ray's 8-ft high *Mannequin Fall '91* has been installed further from the entrance, which effectively allows you to assess her real size only gradually. A perfectly 'normal' mannequin from a distance, she seems to swell as you come closer. But even if

Richard Prince  
 Untitled 1995

she was standard-sized, she embodies a tellingly masculine, even boyish view not only of womanhood but of the hyped-up, power-tower version of womanhood as well. She is in no way glamorous or stylish – not least because of that obscene, spindly plastic prop winding its way up the back of her skirt. And not even Alexis Carrington would touch that tacky, sickly satin pink suit; only a man would pick it. The cherry-red nail polish and matching lipstick, the false eyelashes, the Brenda Starr hair, the bedroom eyes – it would be a dull conclusion to see her as a fashion victim; she isn't. *Mannequin Fall '91* is an oversized, glorious misinterpretation of beauty, even the department store variety. Ray has very skilfully created a sculpture about *men* disguised as one about *women* – as if she were conceptually in drag! – and the naked exhibitionist, *Male Mannequin*, 1989, standing sheepishly in the background seems to confirm her true subject. This pair, set alongside Ray's 1973 *All My Clothes* (echoing Bas Jan Ader's late 60s installation of all his clothes spread out on a roof) creates a kind of clothes-horse leit-motif and unfortunate foil to Kiki Smith's bronze *Virgin Mary*, stripped not only of autumn fashions but of skin and muscle tissue as well. At least Ray's woman occupies the realm of fantasy; in Smith's portrayal she is all leaks and scars, split open and severed like so much wasted British beef. Her carved woman is most effective in a plaster-cast sculpture entitled *Trough*, 1990. Hung like a basin, this hollow, split female cavity, this woman on the half-shell, does conjure images of the feminine, of Venus not rising but sleeping amidst the foam and is perhaps the only subtle example of Kiki Smith's work on view.

Tony Oursler fared much better here than in his overkill exhibition recently at London's Lisson Gallery. One gets the impression that his signature video-face-on-dummy-body sculptures are infinitely pliable in size and set-up, verging on the gimmicky, but to their credit, they are compelling company. The texts, regrettably, always sound somewhat thin and disappointing, perhaps because these techno-cushions command our attention so fully that we listen to them devoutly, as if expecting an oracle. Instead one soon begins to feel rather silly watching an electronic scarecrow complain ceaselessly about dismemberment, and the initial fascination wears





off. In Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' he discusses our extreme sense of fear and bewilderment when confronted with beings which are neither dead nor alive, and certainly Tony Oursler's sculpture successfully occupies this disturbing, undefinable ground. And this could be extended by analogy to all the works on view as if, when presented as part of a collecting, rather than curating, project, the life has been woefully sucked out of them. Surely, Saatchi deserves our recognition, gratitude even, for so doggedly buying contemporary art all these years; if only it didn't look so lifeless in that space. In this context, for instance, Jacqueline Humphries' giant, painterly, menstrual drips – which no doubt aspire at political, feminist and art historical resonance – are reduced merely to playing the bright red stripes alongside Saatchi's hand-picked American stars. ■

**Gilda Williams** is an art critic and editor at Phaidon Press.

## ■ Sex and Drugs and Explosives

**London Artforms** March 28 to May 23

This is an exhibition about international terrorism. At least, that's what the curator thinks. 'You know, sex and drugs and explosives', is all that a 14 year-old New York boy could tell reporters after his friend had blown some of his own fingers off when constructing a pipe-bomb at home. In the catalogue, curator Kenny Schachter bemoans the fact that, within minutes of the Oklahoma bombing, a step-by-step recipe for the explosive device was posted on the internet. The creeping uncertainty that this creates in the population, and the pervasive recognition that this is simply how things are, is meant to be the starting point for this show. He could have let the artists know.

One work which does attempt to explore this theme is Jon Tower's *ePeace.com*, which allows us to say whatever we wish to 12 luminaries of Tower's choosing. They include Gerry Adams, Saddam Hussein, the Vatican, Queen Elizabeth, OJ Simpson and the US President – as if he couldn't name his own leader (all of these artists are New York based). Simply fill out your message on one of the pre-printed cards, then post it through a computer disk slot on the wall. Your message will then be e-mailed to whomever you selected. This is a positive approach to a form of technology which is hyped as being easily accessible but which is nothing of the sort (though I'm hardly optimistic about what effect these messages will have). But asking gallery-goers to summarise on-the-fly what they want to say to world leaders is unlikely to garner the most informed, thought-out opinions. This is a familiar, cynical trick, giving the appearance of democracy when it is anything but. Not that this is a malicious piece – I'm sure it's well intentioned – but the mechanics of a democratic, global peace discussion requires a little more thought, or it is in danger of stifling what it intended to promote. Of course, it may not have such high-minded ambitions, perhaps as a dysfunctional home-brew technological resource it's an ironic play on the internet – certainly it's amusing that behind the disk slots, the cards simply fall into two halves of a *pommes frites* box attached to the back of the wall. But the question remains: is this naïveté *faux*, or not?

That many of these works lack clear intentionality is perhaps understandable, since the curator states 'of



course my shows are chaotic, that's the point'. Well, he is right on one point: the show *is* fairly chaotic. Between the splodgy acrylic painting of Brendan Cass, Devon Dikeou's presentation of his *zingmagazine* and John Lekay's cast crash helmet which suggests that you 'kill yourself for recognition', lie two Plexiglas cases, each containing childish sculpted demonic heads and crystalline ice formations. But this is not ice; it's a self-forming by-product of the sculpture's material: paradi-chlorobenzene, which is the stuff you find in toilet fresheners. While it might look like frozen orange juice, the lurid colours remind us of its toxicity. And although the toilet may initially seem like the best place for it, one ought to pause to consider how alarming it would be to encounter it washed up on the beach.

Leading us through into the next room is Rachel Harrison's *Orlando Shuttle III*, a curving corridor/tunnel seemingly thrown together out of scraps of wood and plaster-board. It is extremely badly-made, which is to say that its badly-madeness has been realised excellently: the sensation that it is unstable is thoroughly convincing! Pinned to this is a colour photograph showing the inside of what must be the Orlando Shuttle: a small vehicle for shuttling passengers to and from aircraft at Orlando airport. The carriage is empty save for a guard and a woman who are obviously sharing an intimate moment. Perhaps this is the function of the corridor: to shuttle us between spaces in an intimate manner; it *is*

Clockwise from top  
**Brendan Cass**  
*K-6 Cadaver* 1996  
**Jon Tower**  
*ePeace.com* 1996  
**John Lekay**  
*Draco, Serpens Calidus*  
1995