

The Arts

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The lost generation

This summer's degree shows reveal a crop of young artists with the freedom to say what they want but without the ability to do so

by Nick Hackworth

AS summer nears its end, the doors are closing on the last of this year's degree shows, and another crop of fine art students is preparing to face the harsh realities of the outside world. There are just under 20,000 undergraduate and postgraduate art students in the UK now, and in many senses they are the most privileged in Britain.

Since the revolution in art education that took place in the Sixties, fine art degrees have been guided by the principle of maximising self-expression. Students are free to make whatever work they like, in any medium or material — even in the waste products of the human body. They are free to say anything, be it philosophically serious or utterly frivolous.

Yet a trawl through this year's many shows proves this freedom to be largely mispent. Self-expression, seen once as a means, has at art schools become an end in itself. Any visual or conceptual statement, however banal or mindlessly narcissistic, is uncritically accepted as valid.

Strangely, the students don't seem any happier for it. One leaves the shows with the impression that they are lost, uncertain of what they are doing and why. In a thousand white studio spaces sits work that is informed by the most meagre of ideas.

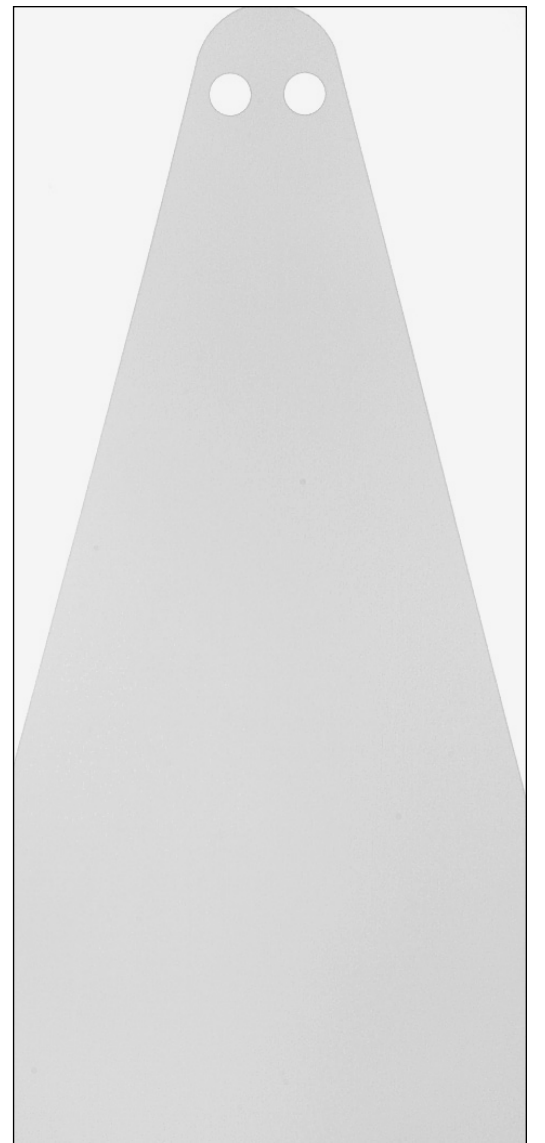
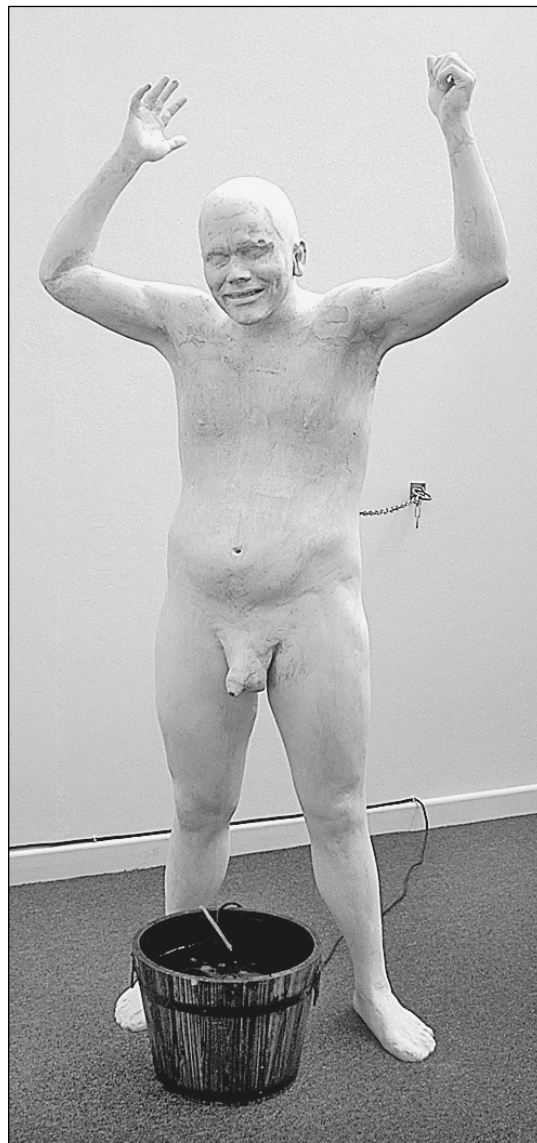
Their painting and sculpture feeds off the visual crumbs of commercial culture or, in keeping with the spirit of the age of retro, merely recycles the styles of the past.

The endless number of videos on show are the most revealing, since they provide access to the minds of the students. Who they are and what they think is laid bare before us.

At the Goldsmiths and Chelsea MA shows, there are videos by different artists entitled, with irony playing no



Exhibitionism: student work by, from left, Bettina Buck, Anton Cataldo and Juan Bolivar. "Self-expression, seen once as a means, has at art schools become an end in itself"



small part in the proceedings, "I celebrate myself", "Self-expression" and "About me". At the start of another video the question "Is it a future fashion to ware [sic] armour?" flashes up, followed by the statement "Human Being [sic] created civilisation and brutalism. Do people need weapon and armour to feel safe? We need peace to survive."

The video shows the artist walking along Oxford Street wearing a breastplate, to the mild amusement of onlookers.

IN another recorded performance piece a student waits at the arrivals area of Heathrow for two-and-a-half days, holding a placard bearing her own name — a meditation on the immigrant past of her family. All this, remember, produced by postgraduates who faced stiff competition for their places upon these courses. Imagine what the rejects were like.

Though they might believe themselves to be quintessentially contemporary, these students, and their dismal failings, are children of the Sixties. Back then, while Alex Comfort was busy discovering and publicising the Joy

of Sex and the Rolling Stones the joy of drugs, radical educationalists were doing their bit to undercut traditional conventions.

In the art schools that meant doing away with the compulsory teaching of the disciplines of drawing, painting and sculpture and emphasis on historical continuity.

Students were introduced, instead, to an exciting future in which ideas, innovation and personal creative freedom were all that mattered.

The implicit promise was that artists, freed from painting nudes and bowls of fruit, would metamorphose into avatars of culture.

Back at the degree shows, it is easy to see where it has all gone wrong. In their creation of the cult of self-expression, the educationalists forgot that freedom in itself is meaningless. Unless we have a clear conception of what we want to be free do, be or say, that freedom is wasted.

In their politically-correct

fear of imposing knowledge contained in rigorous syllabuses upon their charges, the teachers abandoned all but the most superficial attempts to ground their students' creative freedoms in aesthetic, political, philosophical or historical contexts.

Many of the cultural giants of the 20th century — Picasso, Duchamp, Joyce, Beckett, Brecht, Goddard, Pollock, Warhol — were iconoclasts. It was believed that simply giving students the freedom to do what they wanted would result in generations of similar artistic heroes.

An exact contemporary of these students, I find myself looking at work by those who have the freedom to say anything but can think of little. I find political art made with the crudest understanding of politics, paintings that aim at beauty painted by those ignorant of aesthetics, quasi-psychological videos made by those who know nothing of psychology.

This is not a reactionary lament for a lost golden age — the past also had its litany of disappointments. It is a condemnation of the continuing failure of modern art education to live up to its promise

of creating artists who successfully unite the aesthetic and the intellectual, thus taking contemporary art to the heights it can achieve.

The most obvious casualties of this failure are the art students, the overwhelming majority of whom will never be practising artists.

The fashionable contemporary art market can sustain only a tiny number, and the rest are left high and dry, with no transferable skills and a style of work unattractive in the wider, lower-status market, which caters for those with conservative tastes, looking to decorate their homes.

BUT we can read something yet more troubling in the students' crude acts of artistic self-expression. By failing to replace the ideology of traditional Western culture with anything as complex, or as rich, the arts educationalists have created an intellectual vacuum, destined to be filled by the logic and values of consumerism.

And when meaningful ideas of what culture can be are totally forgotten, we will know where to place the blame.



Bull market: visually bold work from Maria Von Kohler