



■ Fire down below

It may seem hard to credit, but there are those abroad, especially in continental Europe, who actually envy the media coverage contemporary art receives in this country. It is true

that this admiration is usually directed at the amount rather than the quality of the coverage on the familiar grounds that even bad publicity is better than mere indifference. Some commentators, both here and abroad, have gone even further and claimed that the unprecedented mainstream media interest in contemporary art in Britain is testimony to its rude health. Others, particularly in Britain where the visual arts in general, and contemporary art in particular, had hitherto been treated either with indifference or with active contempt, even dared to express the hope that this new level of interest suggested a sea-change in media attitudes, an unprecedented willingness to engage with new art. Certainly the visual arts are no longer ignored, as they had been in the past, at least by the popular press and media.

Initially bemused by the apparent symbiosis between the media and museums and galleries in Britain, their counterparts in the rest of Europe, especially in France and Germany, have now begun to take notice, driven partly by the same forces that changed the face of the arts in Britain, chief among these being the drastic withdrawal of public funding that threw our museums and galleries into the arms of the private sector. Initially, many commentators abroad, including in the United States, pointed to the Turner Prize as the chief factor in raising the media profile of the contemporary visual arts in Britain. An array of similar prizes sprang up, the two best known, perhaps, being the biennial Hugo Boss Prize, set up in 1996 (its second recipient being Douglas Gordon in 1998 who had won the Turner Prize two years before), and the Vincent van Gogh Biennial Award for Contemporary Art in Europe – familiarly referred to as ‘The Vincent’ – set up in 2000. Despite the fact that they are hosted by the prestigious Solomon R Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht respectively, and have been awarded to a wide range of internationally recognised artists, these prizes have nevertheless failed to generate as much press and general interest as the Turner Prize. More drastic measures may be required to achieve the same kind of impact, it seems.

If they haven’t already done so, museums

and galleries in the rest of Europe will probably soon begin to adopt similar methods to those that have now become the norm in Britain, first among these being the employment of a professional PR agency, a trend begun in the commercial sector but soon imitated by the public sector throughout Britain. Their role in keeping the visual arts on the front pages of our newspapers by generating a seemingly inexhaustible supply of stories, stunts and photo opportunities, aided and abetted by equally media savvy artists, cannot be underestimated. However, some stories no PR agency or museum press department could dream up. Such a story is the fire that broke out at the Momart warehouse in Leyton on May 24: nor, perhaps could they have anticipated the kind of coverage it would generate.

‘Didn’t millions cheer as this “rubbish” went up in flames?’ screamed the *Daily Mail*. No one should be surprised, perhaps, at the reaction of this particular so-called quality paper, but worryingly, it set the tone for the majority of coverage across the ‘quality’ media, from the BBC’s ‘Question Time’ and ‘Any Questions?’, its radio equivalent, to the broadsheets. There were exceptions: some art correspondents, as opposed to ‘arts’ correspondents, took a more balanced view of the impact and possible consequences of the fire, but others, who should know better revealed an extraordinary degree of wilful ignorance and outright hostility. Take this from the *Independent*: ‘It’s odd to hear talk about irreplaceable losses. Really? You’d have thought that, with the will and the funding, many of these works were perfectly replaceable’. Really? ‘I hope many of the burnt pieces are remade. But I bet they won’t be. After all, it would be such a fantastic bore. And most of this stuff is so 90s now! We’ve done that. Got to move on.’

This is more than the usual ‘build ‘em up knock ‘em down’ syndrome familiar from the tabloids, it is more than mere *schadenfreude*. No amount of irony can mask the pent-up resentment that underlies such writing, the smouldering ‘fire down below’, in Joseph Conrad’s memorable metaphor – all the more dangerous for being invisible. However, this piece was as

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nothing compared with that published in the *Observer* under the somewhat predictable title, ‘Bonfire of the Vanities’. Comparing the ‘Leyton holocaust’ with ‘tragedies’ from the past (a commonplace of much of the coverage) such as the catastrophic fire that destroyed the fabled Library of Alexandria and, closer to home, the one that destroyed Holbein’s mural of Henry VIII and his family in Whitehall the writer concluded that, ‘What happened at Leyton was at worst a mishap, at best an overdue act of aesthetic cleansing [...] Fire is, reliably clean and purgative. Who needs criticism when cremation is an option?’

Such sentiments bring other fires uneasily to mind: book burnings under the Nazis, for instance, followed by the destruction and dispersal of so-called decadent art – *entartete kunst* – by the likes of Max Beckmann, Max Ernst, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka. One of the members of the five-man commission set up by Goebbels to select works for the ‘Entartete Kunst’ exhibition in 1937 and to purge galleries of decadent art, was one Wolfgang Willrich, who wrote an influential pamphlet, *Cleansing the Temple of Art*. There are lessons to be learned here.

In all this vitriol directed at contemporary art, especially at the work of artists associated with the yBa phenomenon that has been the staple of both main and non mainstream media for the last decade, the true cost in human as well as cultural and economic terms has been almost entirely lost (see Artlaw p49). The savagery of so much of the press coverage of the fire, and of the correspondence it generated in the letters pages of newspapers, has revealed the true picture of contemporary art’s relationship with much of mainstream media. There has been no sea-change, it is merely that editors know a good story when they see one, even if it happens to be about art, and journalists respond accordingly.

Those who envy the high profile enjoyed by contemporary art in Britain should be aware that there is a price to be paid for getting into bed with the media. ■