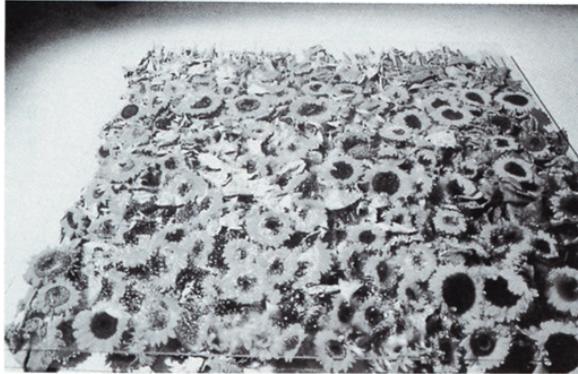


Corris, Michael. British? Young? Invisible? w/ Attitude?. Artforum, May 1992, pgs. cover, 106 and 109.



ARTFORUM



Cover: Anya Gallaccio, *Preserve (Sunflowers)*, 1991, 101 sunflowers and glass, 2 x 59 x 59". See p. 106.

No one celebrates the first of May any more, East or West. But is there anyone who misses it? Surely yes. I'm not talking about the propaganda, the military parades in Red Square, though there must even be people who miss those. I'm talking about May 1 as the symbol of a sociopolitical ideal that seems to have vanished, dissolved.

In this month's "Secret Vices" column, Marco Giusti explores the intellectual, esthetic, and moral void in which the European left is wandering after the collapse of the Marxist regimes.

The crisis of European intellectuals today is palpable: deprived of the ideological underpinnings for their last real inspiration, the events of May '68, and also for the tough debates that have followed that moment (for example over the social contract in the face of terrorism), they are also witnessing a progressive shift to the right in nations like France and Italy, which until recently boasted strong communist opposition parties. The result, for Giusti, is a deep sense of loss.

Others confront the problem without melancholy and with purpose. In this issue of Artforum Komar and Melamid—who, with exquisite irony, have taken to calling themselves "Soviet artists"—use the magazine to challenge artists and general readers everywhere: let's imagine new meanings for the political monuments of communist Moscow, meanings more apt for the times. Not to preserve them, as sterile signs of the past; not to destroy them, as in the worst tradition of victor and vanquished; not even to ridicule them, for in and of themselves they have no guilt, but are innocent ambassadors of their time. Instead let's transform them. Made less oppressive, they may make clearer the meanings worth saving, and those worth sweeping away.

The Yugoslav artist Jadran Adamović tells us about the faceted artistic geography of his country as it emerges from communism into war. Alongside Adamović's essay, Lorenzo Buj outlines the complex historical plots that are the backdrop for this conflict, which is opening up perhaps unhealable fractures in Yugoslavia's cultural world. The suffering certainly include artists, writers, and curators who have played a part in Western European culture, offering it a bridge to the East, and now paying the price of nationalist separatism.

The utopia of socialism has failed the East—clearly, failed it long before the recent collapse. But equally clearly there is no true democracy to act as a counterweight in the West. Thus Peter Marcuse, with the photographs of Camilo Vegara, illuminates one of the pressing problems of capitalist society in America: the acceptance of homelessness as the unchanging condition of an ever increasing population of individuals and families, for whom a technologically advanced country is incapable of furnishing a basic social right. Marcuse speculates on the role that should be played by the architects called upon to design the contradiction in terms that is called "homeless housing." What needs definition, he argues, is not just the esthetic responsibilities of those builders, but the moral ones.

How long can a West without a Marxist opposition remain in its political torpor? At a certain point it will become necessary to cease mourning the dear departed. A renewal of the ideological discourse has to take place, and it will not regain its integrity from the self-satisfaction of the orthodox conservative intelligentsia, American or otherwise. Instead, it will emerge from the action of individuals taking the kind of ethical and intellectual stand that Vivian Sobchack discusses in her book-review column this month—a politically engaged stand that questions the structures of power. Meanwhile, perhaps the production of culture will have to get back to an "elitist" practice—in the sense that a Marxist like Pier Paolo Pasolini gave that word. After all, even in the Greece of Pericles, the audience for Aeschylus was smaller than the audience for the Olympic Games.

—IP

The Vortex. Long live British Yoof! that great art vortex sprung up in the center of London because "nobody in London thinks that anything outside London is worth looking at."¹ British Yoof stand for the Reality of the Present—not for the sentimental Future, or the sacrosanct Past. "The British 16-year-old school-leaver joins a sub-literal [sic] and sub-numerate under-class. A leprosy of emptiness and recurrent rage marks him and her. Drugged by television in a small island more saturated than any other by the mass media, he and she have been literally trashed."² We want to leave Nature and Humanity alone. "Business as Usual!"³ We need the unconsciousness of Humanity—their stupidity, animalism, and dreams. We also need to consume "continental cultural theory (the 'French disease') the way other people change cars."⁴ We believe in no perfectibility except our own and that of post-Modernism, "which has its roots in the disillusionment felt by many Paris intellectuals in the aftermath of the great upheavals of 1968," and "perfectly catches a mood of helplessness and apathy felt by many on the Left in the face of Thatcherism and the collapse of so-called 'workers' states." Intrinsic beauty is in the Interpreter and Seer, not in the object or content. "We like to think of ourselves as a rope over an abyss between our culture and something that doesn't exist yet, the abyss is like the dead power which is the foundation of our culture, and our work is the nothing or maybe the thing that's between this idea of the fullness of the void and the emptiness of everything."⁵ We do not want to change the appearance of the world, and do not depend on the appearance of the world for our art. We only want the world to live, and to feel its crude energy flowing through us. "The early Eighties taught us that there was a market place for art."⁶ "There are artists, perhaps now in their middle age, who go on painting painting and painting, and who do not bother to show their work, to have their work seen. Their rooms must become smaller and smaller, as they stack the canvases against the wall";⁷ they are not us. Popular art does not mean the art of poor people, as it is conventionally supposed to. It means the art of individuals. Education (art education and general education) tends to destroy the creative instinct. Therefore it is in times when education has been nonexistent that art has chiefly flourished: "In any given age group, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands but also Greece graduate 30 per cent more qualified 18-year-olds than does the United Kingdom."⁸ Is it a mere accident that that is the most favorable time for the individual to appear? The

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task we have set ourselves: to destroy politeness and post-Modern culture. "The galaxy of signs, or was it the black-hole of simulation? Either way no one cares as long as the seemingly endless reversibility of signs continues to be lubricated by cultural 'innovation' and 'content.'"⁹ We will convert the Queen if possible. Why not? Do you think John Major or Neil Kinnock or Paddy Ashdown has the vortex in him? May we hope for art from Lady Di? We are against the glorification of "the People," as we are against the "sisterly" book *My Secret Garden* by Nancy Friday,¹⁰ and against those who pathetically claim to have "utterly lost [their] ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all."¹¹ We are more concerned with how we make work.

The First Manifesto. Blast first (from politeness) England. Victorian vampire, the London cloud sucks the town's heart. A 1,000-mile-long, two-kilometer-deep body of water is pushed against us from the Floridas to make us mild. Officious mountains keep back drastic winds. So much vast machinery to produce: The Turner Prize, *Technique Anglaise*, Wild Nature Crank, "Desert Island Discs": "Presenter: What are your eight favourite records? John Major: Record bankruptcies, repossessions, interest rates, unemployment, VAT...er..."¹² Domesticated Policeman (no guns),¹³ "Masterpiece Theatre." Curse the flabby art collectors and financial backers whose vision of art goes no further than the secondary market; curse those who can

only afford to abandon art and artists and pull the carpet out from under their feet (but "it will not change the visibility of the really good work" because "good artists are visible to the people who really care, and that's all that matters"¹⁴). Blast the specialist, "professional," "good craftsman," the amateur, the art pimp, the journalist. Blast humor: quack English drug for stupidity and sleepiness. Blast sport. Blast the years 1979 to 1990; blast the pasty shadow cast by minuscule Major, wring the neck of all whining late-night show hosts. Blast the deadly chic of Dering Street, the horrors of Hackney (more artists per square meter than any other locale in the Western world; in outlook "just like New York City, only smaller"¹⁵). Oh, blast France too (we could go on).¹⁶

The Second Manifesto. Bless England! For its situation comedies on the BBC and Granada TV, which switchback on blue, green, and red video waves all around the pink earth ball. Bless the vast planetary abstraction of culture and its home, the ICA. Bless all ports, restless machines of light-houses, blazing through the frosty starlight, cutting the storm like a cake, and providing a beacon for all who would land on our shores, because "all the most important modern writers of what we think of as the *English* canon are in fact social marginals of various kinds, when not outright foreigners."¹⁷ Bless Liverpool, Newcastle-on-Tyne, and Glasgow. Bless England, industrial island machine, "a second-order Japan or Germany," "the country which initiated the industrial revolution" and "can now deconstruct it."¹⁸ Bless the cold, magnanimous, delicate, gauche, fanciful, stupid English. Bless Prince Charles. Bless "The Late Show." Bless T.W.O.C.-ing and ram-raiding.¹⁹ Bless "E."²⁰ Bless English humor: the great barbarous weapon of the genius among races; the wild mountain railway from idea to idea in the ancient fair of life; a hysterical wall built round the ego. Bless the solitude of laughter and one ton of Jaffa oranges spilled out on the floor of a derelict warehouse; or thousands of flowers crushed between plates of glass; or windows glazed with Vaseline; or brides iced into their wedding gowns; or little poppet beads strung together and looking nearly like a small bird; or the frock that maybe your mother wore as a girl, or you bought at Whistles, or at a second-hand shop, or you spent a whole month making. Bless Critical Decor, bless Rachel Evans, bless Mariko Mori, bless Anya Gallaccio, and bless Hope.²¹ □

Michael Corris is a writer and a senior lecturer of art at Oxford Polytechnic, Oxford, England.

1. The conceptualization of a new generation of artists who are fixed in the ambered abundance of London is subject to a number of constraints that abrade and unsettle the normal logic of promotion and curatorial practice. Theoretically, the relationships between class, race, and gender must be made visible, as these ultimately determine how the most important questions of "membership" within a newly imagined avant-garde are settled. The "new generation" of "young British artists" is a cultural phenomenon formed out of specific needs expressed primarily in terms of a presumed national culture. But even that celebratory discourse is subject to pressures brought to bear by historical responses to the collapse of British colonialism, its neocolonialist aftermath, and the prevailing consciousness of the subordination of the early-20th-century English avant-garde in painting and sculpture to the Continental avant-gardes, and, domestically, to the practice of literature. That tension continues to be felt by contemporary English curators as a "preference" for the semiabstract, the blandly narrative, and the environmentally anecdotal in art.

2. Karsten Schubert, quoted in "Discussion," in *Technique Anglaise: Current Trends in British Art*, ed. Andrew Renton and Liam Gillick, London: Thames and Hudson, p. 37.

3. George Steiner, "A nation saved by philistinism," *The Guardian*, 5 October 1991, p. 25.

4. The title of a work by Critical Decor, which, according to Glynis Banks and Hannah Vowles, "presents abstraction as decor, production as industry," and contrasts "the glamor of fame, where Business-as-Usual becomes a trompe l'oeil to disguise the squalor

of recession, and white Eurotrash with no future." Excerpted from the exhibition pamphlet accompanying "Recent History," Canterbury: Canterbury Institute of Art, 1991, n.p.

5. A derogatory term coined by Mel Ramsden and Mayo Thompson during the late 1970s, aimed at the thoughtless use of semantics to interpret art practice.

6. Mike Jarret, "Lure of the chic," *The Guardian*, weekend edition, 5-6 October 1991, p. 38.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Critical Decor, unpublished statement, 1991. The text continues: "Hmm, yeah even right from the start our decision to call ourselves Critical Decor came from this impossibility that we felt art implied. Yeah, and out of this problem we seem to have reached the inevitable conclusion that art itself is something that's got to be overcome."

9. Andrew Renton, quoted in "Discussion," p. 13.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

11. Steiner, p. 25.

12. Critical Decor, undated, unpublished manuscript.

13. Rachel Evans, unpublished statement, 1991.

14. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter*, trans. Russell Stockman, Marlboro: Marlboro Press, 1986, p. 19. Thanks to Susan Wheeler for bringing this reference to my attention.

15. *Private Eye*, cover, 17 January 1992.

16. See, however, the details surrounding the cases of police impropriety (the fabrication and suppression of evidence, etc.) brought by, among others, the "Guilford Four" and the "Birmingham Six."

17. Schubert, quoted in "Discussion," p. 33.

18. An inversion of a remark attributed to Bob Hoskins: "New York City is just like Hackney, only bigger."

19. For example: pig plagiarism, belly, slippers; poodle temper; bad music; sentimental Gallic gush; sensationalism; fussiness; Parisian parochialism; Mecca of the American, etc.

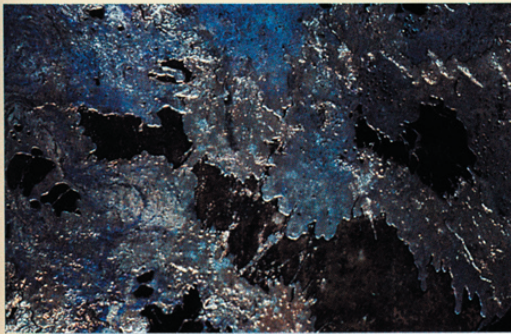
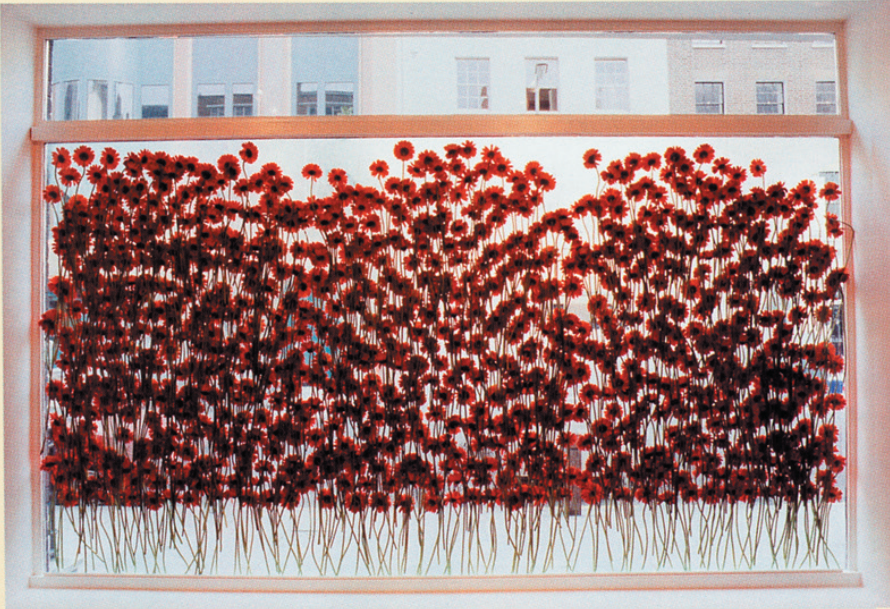
20. Fredric Jameson, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature: Modernism and Imperialism*, Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1988, footnote 9, p. 14.

21. Steiner, p. 27.

22. "T.W.O.C.-ing": street talk for stealing cars; derived from a police acronym for "taken without owner's consent." "Ram-raiding" is burglary using stolen high-performance cars to ram through the plate-glass fronts of retail shops in malls.

23. That is, the drug Ecstasy.

24. A map of the relationships between the above-named artists might be drawn that places Critical Decor in opposition to Hope (the "Void," being roughly equivalent to an anarchic negativity, opposed to the threshold of art as represented by Kisch) and, in a neighboring figure, positions Mori, Evans, and Gallaccio in a triangulated relationship to the destruction of the Pygmalion myth.



Anya Gallaccio



Are we really to believe that simply by letting things be as they are, Anya Gallaccio creates evocative works of transience? It could be argued that Gallaccio's "scatter" piece of one ton of Jaffa oranges is indebted to the art of the '70s; or that her covering of the entire floor of a London art gallery with lead, melted down at different temperatures in order to achieve a variegated color, owes its origins to Richard Serra; or, finally, that her installations of flowers under glass, as they undergo the various stages of decomposition, are ultimately beholden to a Beuysian approach to natural systems. And yet none of that is really true for some critics: to them it is just as plausible to suggest that Gallaccio is lost in a Turner-esque dream. Photography abets and betrays Gallaccio. In the first instance, what we can never see in reproductions of her work is its particular presence, its ushering in of "aura" through the back door: the pungency of rotting vegetation, the delicate coloration of intricate fungal networks, the all-encompassing perfume of morbidity. The existence of such a profoundly ephemeral body of work is certainly not new to contemporary art; neither is the implied theme of mortality, decay, and loss one that has not been dealt with before and, perhaps, with more grandeur. But something more than the flowers might be said to be disintegrating here. Consider a publicity photograph of the artist taken while she was completing the task of covering the main floors of the gallery with molten lead. Alongside the disdain for monumentality, the need to invoke fundamental and irreversible processes of change upon the chosen gallery site, one can discern a pose of defiance: the artist's (feminine) body is cloaked by a variety of protective coverings and gear, her gender rendered invisible, in stark contrast to the machismo of the famous photographs of Serra flinging molten lead that invariably overlie our cultural imagination. But that gear does not simply mask Gallaccio's femininity; it also shields herself from both recognizability and the outside world. Granted, the macho uniform allows for the enactment of the (male) pose. But at what cost? While it is depressing to imagine life wholly through the metaphor of organic decay, is it any less pessimistic to take the paving of the gallery with lead as a herald for a new regime? Both the decaying flowers and the gently poured skein of molten material are somehow reciprocal figures in a deeply conflicted toxic emplotment of being, and strike this writer as leaving the whole question of empowerment in a state of melancholic suspension and ill health.