

STUFF

10 WAYS TO MAKE BRITISH ART LESS ANNOYING IN 2014

By Tom Jeffrey & Oscar Rickett



Some stupid art, photographed by Glen Coco. Graphic work by Sam Taylor.

Have you ever seen a crowd of tourists being shuffled along the **Shoreditch graffiti tour**? It's funny as hell. We should organise a Shoreditch Graffiti Tour Tour where people can stare at depressed families and European schoolkids getting damp by a miserable mural. Anyway, this article isn't about that. This article is about real art that real humans like.

It's always been a mix of the revolutionary and the institutional, art has. As such it's a place of constant flux, where nothing ever changes. In a sense that's part of the appeal, because for every artistic trend "taking over", there will always be dozens of other artists producing work that's exactly the opposite. That's what makes the art world – and London's in particular – so consistently exciting: there's just so much of it.

Unfortunately, it also means that art is subject to **Sturgeon's Law** – by which I mean that 90

percent of all of it is crap. The worst work is the stuff that exists only in white-walled galleries and sterile art fairs, consumed by an international elite for whom the economic downturn was simply page-filler in the *FT*. As the painter William Stevens says of that scene, “The art world is like a balloon floating above the real world – it’s still loosely tethered to our practical reality, but ultimately, it’s utterly disconnected.”

But it needn’t be this way. We’ve identified ten key areas that the art world could do with improving in 2014. It may not surprise you to learn that most of them revolve around money.

1 – Do Something New

Perhaps it’s the recession, perhaps it’s a response to dizzying technology, but the art world has been going crazy for Victoriana these last few years, and this trend needs to be smashed like so many “Keep Calm and Carry On” mugs. First, there was the taxidermy craze, then the obsession with collaging vintage photography and now barely a week goes by without yet another gallery announcing that their latest group show is going to be exhibited in the form of a “cabinet of curiosities” (or *kunstkammer* or *wunderkammer*, for all you aspiring German speakers). It’s basically Movember without the charity, in that it has no redeeming features.

If art is going to improve in 2014, the Victorian crew need to put the gin down and engage with the world around them. Alternately, they could revisit some other period: how about Dark Ages Medieval Europe? Or the wall paintings of ancient Ethiopia? Or cowboy decollage? Just look anywhere beyond *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, please.

2 – Don’t Do This, Though...

The backlash to Victoriana has already begun, in the form of the grandly named **New Aesthetic**, a term coined by artist-writer James Bridle. His **blog** of the same name documents the overlap between modern technology and everyday life, and, following a panel discussion at SXSW in 2012, The New Aesthetic became A Thing. Unfortunately, while the ideas explored by Bridle and others in various magazines and newspapers (surveillance and the military; system failure; the all-pervading nature of technology) are thought provoking, the art that has so far arisen from them has been beneath the concept. Someone needs to start producing genuinely thoughtful work in this area, because an article is not art.



Liberate Tate's The Gift invades the Tate Modern

3 – The Richest People in the Art World Could Probably Stop Taking Oil Cash

This came to a head in 2013 with Tate Britain's unveiling of a great, thematically ordered re-hang in May, and then a smart new renovation in November. The gallery looks great, but it was no surprise to see the staging of a large-scale performance by art-activists Liberate Tate. *Parts Per Million* saw 50 veiled and black-clad figures **processing through the galleries** like extras from a Sunn O))) video. As Kevin Smith from Liberate Tate told us: "The week that Tate Britain reopened after its refurbishment, peer-reviewed research **showed** BP to be the third greatest contributor of all time to carbon in the atmosphere." We understand that a great-looking gallery revamp requires cash, but 2014 would be a lot better if that cash didn't come from one of the world's most lavish polluters. Plus, dude, you're the Tate, you're pretty rich already.

4 – Or at Least Get Your Money's Worth

If you're going to take corporate money, get a proper amount. A key issue highlighted by Liberate Tate and other kindred groups like Platform and Art Not Oil is how little arts organisations actually receive from their controversial corporate sponsors. Tate receives approximately **half a million per year** from BP, a paltry sum when you take into account that Tate's **voluntary income** for 2012 (including charitable donations and public funds) was just less than £69 million. It's time for arts organisations to demand more: at least get your 30 pieces of silver. Don't settle for six pieces of silver and some pocket lint.

But as the government continues to **cut funding** to the Arts Council, arts institutions are being forced to work ever harder for the corporate buck. As Sandy Nairne, the director of the National Portrait Gallery, **told the Art Newspaper**: "Sponsorship is not a donation; it's a deal. It has to work for the business as well as for us." A number of employees at other big galleries echoed

this sentiment, and told us about the demands that sponsors place on their organisations. It's not just enough to advertise the sponsor, they have to be looped in on decisions that relate to the curating of the shows, something that should fall outside of their remit.

This is The Big Society approach to art, but sadly, it doesn't work. According to **recent analysis** by Arts & Business, business investment in the arts actually fell for the fourth year in a row in 2011 (by 7 percent) in the UK. This means even more emphasis on blockbuster exhibitions, shops and restaurants. That means large areas dedicated to flogging chicken pesto paninis and flat whites, enormous gift shops and Turner exhibitions every six months.



Some more stupid art, photographed by Glen Coco

5 – Viable Corporate Sponsorship Does Exist

Take the insurance group Catlin, which has been active in promoting the work of artists fresh out of art school. Launched in 2007 by curator Justin Hammond, Art Catlin incorporates an annual exhibition, a £5,000 prize, a £2,000 "Visitor Vote" prize and a beautifully produced book, *The Catlin Guide*. "I think it's the artists from the smaller schools that most benefit," says Hammond. "If it can give them a leg up; introduce their work to curators and collectors, then it's clearly a worthwhile project."

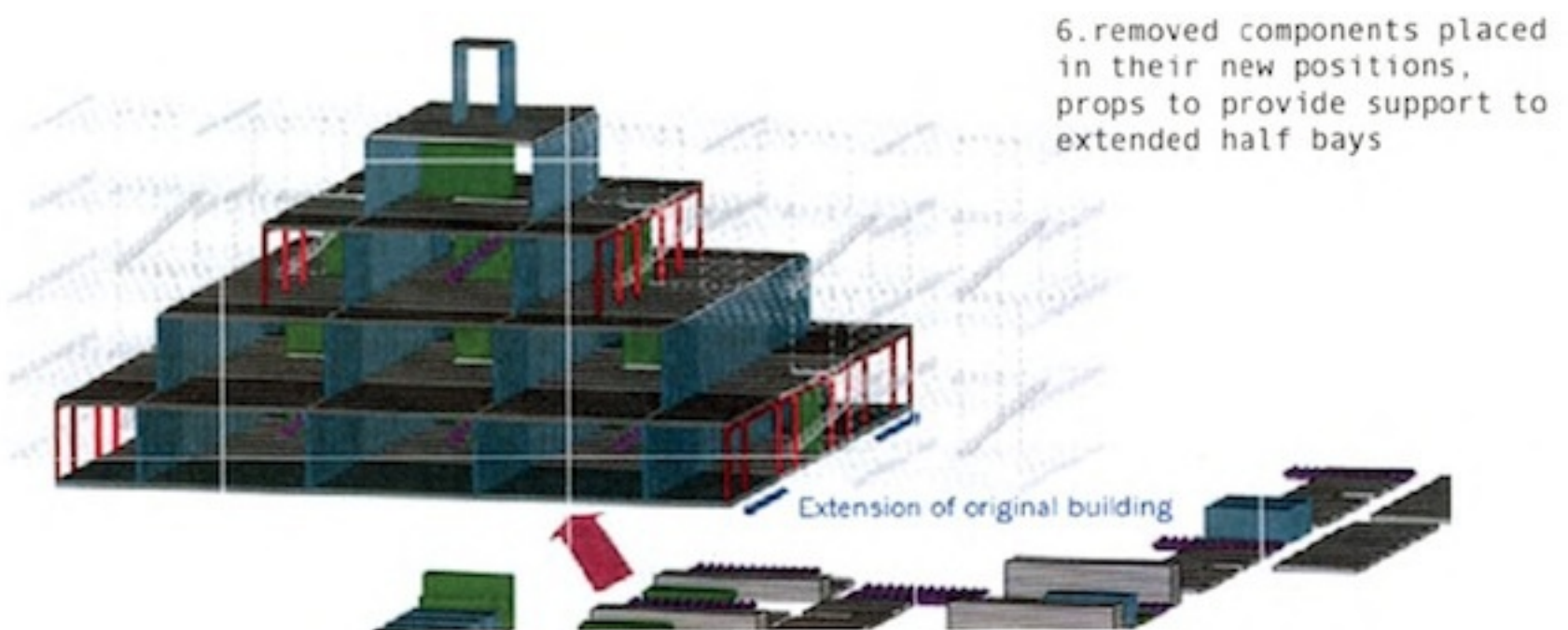
This is important because it provides an alternative to the Medici-style power of big art investors like Charles Saatchi, whose own personal taste continues to affect the work coming

out of art schools. As the sculptor Tom Price told us: “With Saatchi, it seemed to me that there was an awareness of and longing for recognition from him. He has a very particular taste and lots of artists and art students tailored their work to that.” Thankfully, Saatchi’s influence is on the wane, but he’s not the only bullish impresario in the art game.

6 – Think About Who Art Is Actually for

A proposal to rebuild part of Elephant & Castle's now-demolished Heygate Estate as a temporary pyramid conceived by **Mike Nelson** provides a clear example of where art's been going wrong. The estate was sold by Southwark Council to the Australian-based Lend Lease Group for a paltry £50 million, in what has been **described, following the leaking of a council report, as** “one of the most corrupt land deals in living memory”. As private developers were converting social housing into blocks of one-bedroom flats going for £380,000 a pop, public funds were being readied for investment in a fancy pyramid thingy to boost advance sales. Seriously, if anyone should understand the cruel irony of that, it should be artists, right?

Fortunately, the pyramid deal is **now off**, with its commissioners Artangel announcing that they are "very disappointed by Southwark Council's decision" to scrap the plan. The irony this time – or one of the ironies, at least – is that, according to local resident and blogger Chris Morris, when locals tried previously to use parts of the abandoned estate for vegetable growing and art shows, they encountered “obstruction” from the council. "It seems as if Artangel have the privilege of direct access to the council and developers, whereas local people do not," Morris told *the Guardian*. Valuing elite-sponsored voids over community-backed projects is the kind of cronyism that keeps art from engaging with anyone beyond a small minority. This is something that must change.



One of the drawings showing Mike Nelson's plans to turn social housing into a temporary pyramid

7 – Think About What Art Actually Does

2014 will see continuing collaboration between the arts and the sciences, and this is undoubtedly A Good Thing. The Arts Catalyst’s exciting Republic of the Moon opens in January, and science-related shows are also taking place at Two Temple Place and the British

Library. The Wellcome Collection and GV Art will continue to assert their pre-eminence in this field, while King's College London's new Science Gallery opens near London Bridge in 2015.

But it's worth remembering that art can be more than a one-dimensional tool. Great art means many things to many people, and when organisations based beyond the world of art gain massive influence, the art that is produced under their watch is in danger of becoming myopic. Interesting art, with all its grey areas and ambiguities, is not the same as good communication. Art that is effective at communicating a single idea or effecting a specific policy change is unlikely to be an interesting work of art in itself. Science attempts to provide answers to the questions the world throws at us, but art can never be so definite.

8 – No More Art Fairs

So. Many. Art fairs. So. Much. Terrible art. FFS. Recent years have seen the launch of a dizzying array of new fairs, from the cutting edge SUNDAY Art Fair, to the video-focused Moving Image London, the big bucks Art13 (from the original founders of Art HK) and the totally "independent" Other Art Fair – also founded by Tim Etchells of Art HK (although nobody's supposed to know about that). It's not possible to fill so many fairs with genuinely good artists, and so crap gets in. In that way, they're in danger of becoming art's answer to vanity publishing.

Even the big dogs – Frieze – sense this. "We have no further expansion plans for Frieze – we are just trying to do the best fairs and magazines we can," director Matthew Slotover told us.



Above: some art by Tracey Emin. Photo by Glen Coco.

9 – Unless...

2013 saw the largest iteration yet of **Sluice art fair** – a platform for the work of artists from beyond the mainstream. Founded in 2011 by Karl England and Ben Street, the 2013 edition was truly exciting, crammed with an array of artist-run projects, baffling curatorial initiatives, oddball conceptual stunts and some unfashionably beautiful pieces.

“Sluice provides a platform for artistic practice which is not conventionally visible in art fairs, focusing on artist-led activities, including artist-run spaces, collectives and publications,” says Street. “We set it up to allow such practices to be part of a larger conversation. The question of whether or not Sluice is even an art fair is moot. In fact, it exists in order to ask that question.”

Sluice represents the kind of critical engagement that we hope to see more of throughout 2014. There’s plenty of it about – from painters such as Trevor Kiernander, Kerry Brewer and Nadine Feinson and galleries like GV Art, Danielle Arnaud, TJ Boulting and Breese Little. 2013 also saw amazing work produced and/or exhibited by the likes of Steven Morgana, Pratchaya Phinthong, Laura Culham, Anais Tondeur, Emily Speed, Hondartza Fraga, Mark Peter Wright, Amy Todman, Luke Franklin and Hestia Peppe. In Venice, Richard Mosse’s video installation in the Ireland pavilion demonstrated quite how powerful socially engaged art can be.

London continues to dominate Britain's art world, and like any kind of monopoly that's a real problem, but initiatives like Grizedale Arts, Beacon Art Project and the recently reopened Ditchling Museum demonstrate that there is life outside of the capital. According to the Arts Council, over the last three years more than 70 percent of Lottery investment has gone outside London. As the old estates are knocked down to be replaced by an ever-expanding mass of glass and steel (and the odd aborted pyramid), is it too fanciful to wonder how long artists will be able to continue living and working in London? Perhaps, one day soon, all new art will be an art of "the regions" – leaving only Saatchi's children to sell curiosities to oligarchs. For now though, let's be optimistic and see what 2014 has in store for us.

10 – Don't Forget to Check Out the Shoreditch Graffiti Tour, Yo

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