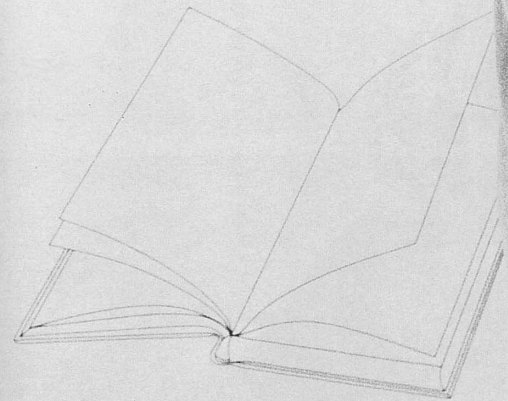
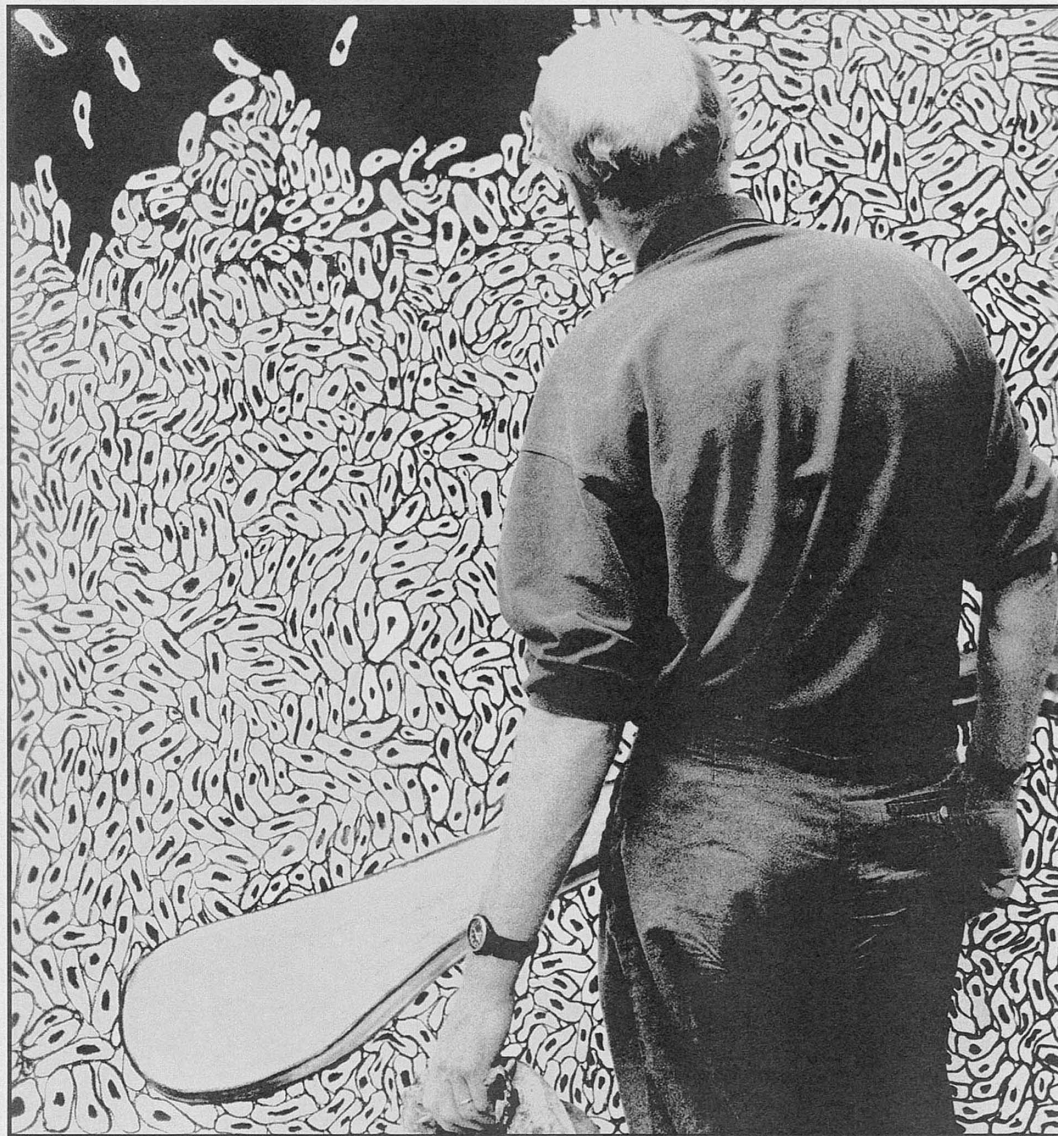


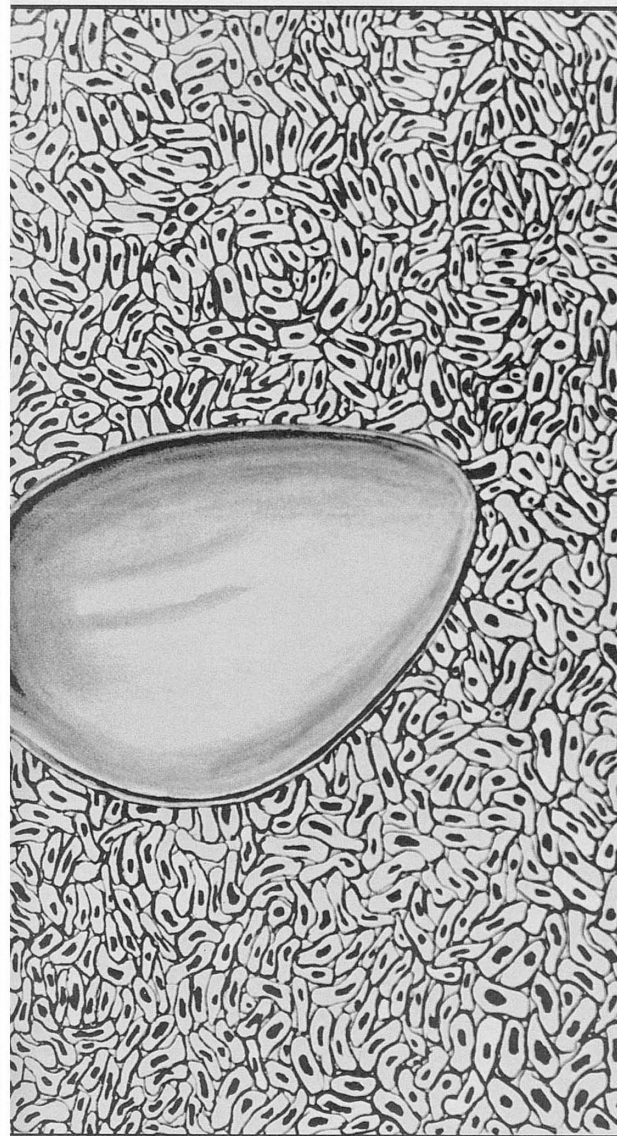
**The
Independent**
Magazine



Who's smart in British art?



In 1988, Damien Hirst organised an exhibition of young artists in Docklands. It's been a riot ever since. But is the Great British art party coming to an end? By Mel Gooding. Photographs by Gautier Deblonde



The art of noise



Bill Woodrow (left) at his Camberwell studio in 1994 preparing new work for his show, *About the Axis – Drawing 1990-95*, at the Camden Arts Centre; dark and driven Sarah Lucas (above), on the town in Soho, 1995

It's not always easy to tell just what is real and what is bogus in the current art world. I say "art world", but there isn't just one: it's rather like London used to be, a collection of villages, a lot of little worlds, some of which run into others – glamorous, posh, down-at-heel. The art world I mean is the one that keeps getting written up in the broadsheets and magazines. The world that you would think revolved around Damien, the ageing *enfant terrible* of young British art.

David Hockney's recent appearance in London (the crowds, the paparazzi, the brouhaha around some brightly painted sunflowers) reminded us that the cult of stardom isn't new in the art world, and doesn't necessarily depend upon unconventional art. It depends upon personality, publicity and money. The public is astonished by the price of artworks, fascinated by the market in them, mystified by the processes of their sale and exchange. And the galleries at the top end of the market play on this, like shops pretending to be museums. Price and value are easily confused; and, if one seems to contradict the other, then it's easy to think that something very interesting is going on. Either you just don't get it, or someone's being conned.

What is undeniably real is that there's a lot of diverse and unpredictable art being made out there, not only in London, and a great deal of nonsense is being written about it – that it revolves around Damien, for instance. (Everybody in this world refers to everybody else by their forename; it's democratic and friendly, as in Tony Blair's cabinet, and it serves effectively as an excluder.) Crucially, it revolves not around individual artists so much as around curators, many of whom are themselves artists or critics, or who run public spaces and private galleries.

This is a trend that Hirst did have a great deal to do with, as the sole curator of the ground-breaking *Freeze*, the now famous exhibition in 1988 which was put on in a disused building in Docklands. Such venues – warehouses, old factories, closed hospitals – have been a significant aspect of the trend: Thatcherism left many such places for transient occupation. But *Freeze* was remarkable in many ways. It was a student-organised show that didn't look like one – it was entirely professional. It featured work by a number of artists who were to become critically successful very quickly, and justly so: among them, Anya Gallacio, Simon Patterson, Richard Patterson, Mat Collishaw, Gary Hume and Sarah Lucas. All of them were friends of Hirst at Goldsmiths College.

The show announced a decade of extraordinary success for Goldsmiths – not so much for creating a style as for an attitude. Art was important, but it didn't need to be po-faced, pompous or glum; it could take any number of forms, and whatever you made (or did) might count. A lot of old art – especially figurative painting and object sculpture – was called into question. Who was it for? What was it for? Minimal gestures and conceptual concerns were in. So was a diversity of media: photography, video, ready-made objects, installation, film.

Art could be cool and ironically self-reflexive. It could be messy and personal. It could play games with the meanings of words and things and the systems by which things are classified. It could be non-referential, or irresolutely political. It was best if it was witty, disingenuous and ambiguous, hinting at the impossibility of knowing the true nature of things (whatever that might be) because that kind of ironic distance passed for reality in the murky later years of Conservative rule.

The murk had much to do with the recession that followed Lawson's mid-Eighties boom. After a time of near-hysterical euphoria in the sale rooms, and a mushrooming of small commercial galleries promoting

young painters, the art market fell into a deep depression. Galleries went out of business. The rise of the warehouse show, of an art of provocation and imaginatively aggressive promotion, was no coincidence in these circumstances. Young artists could get back to doing what they do best: have a good time, annoy the respectable, catch the *Zeitgeist*.

While the world was going mad with "the new spirit in painting" (the title of an influential, big show at the Royal Academy in 1981), Joseph Beuys was fast becoming the most famous artist in the world – apart, that is, from Andy Warhol. Neither was interested in painting; both, in different ways, were profoundly and irremediably provocative; and they respected each other. Beuys and Warhol represented that line of subversive energy in 20th-century art that had sprung from Duchamp and Picabia, ran through Dada to Rauschenberg and Johns, and on to the radical internationalism of Conceptualism in the Seventies.

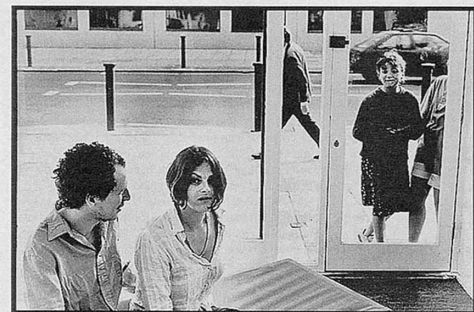
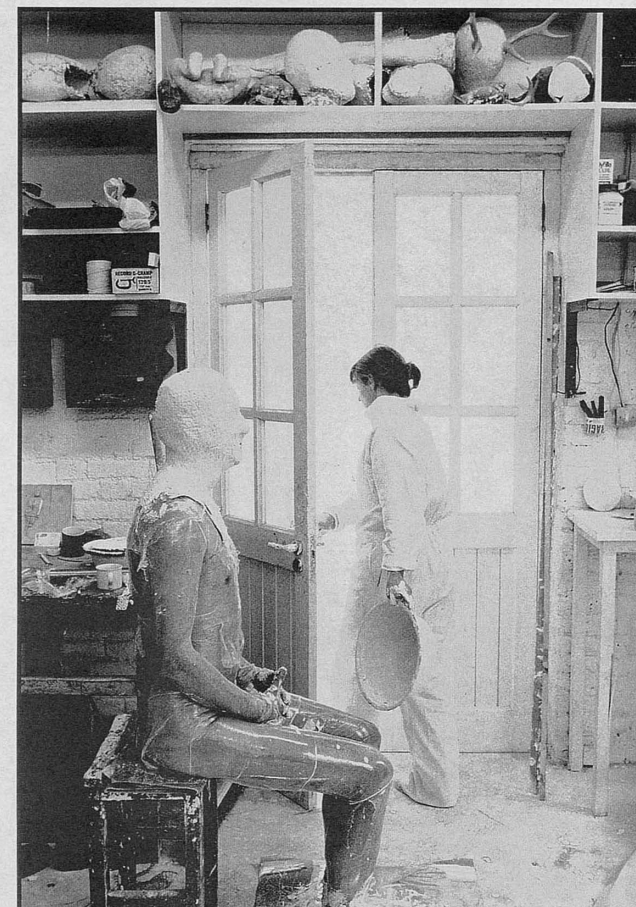
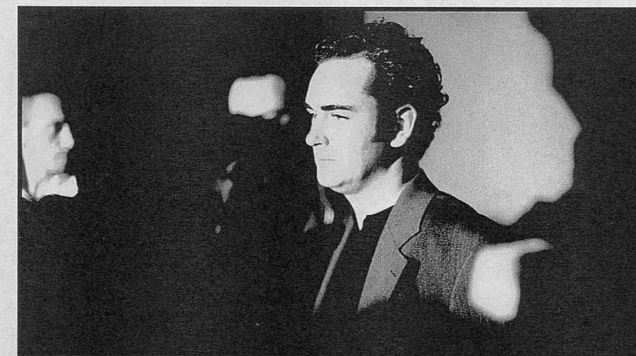
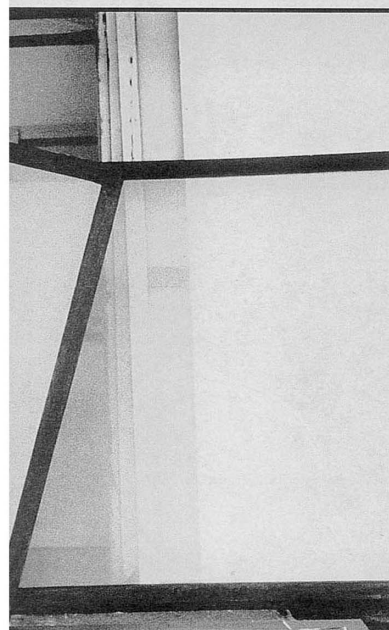
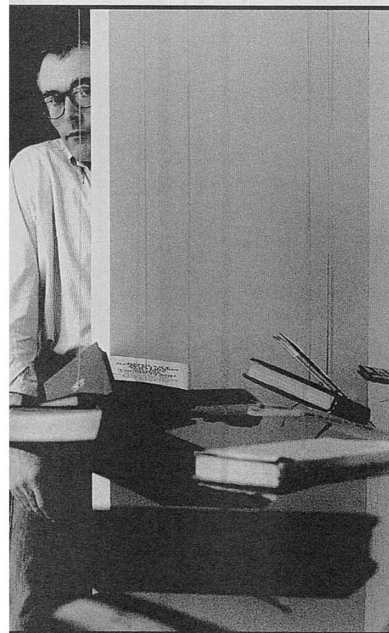
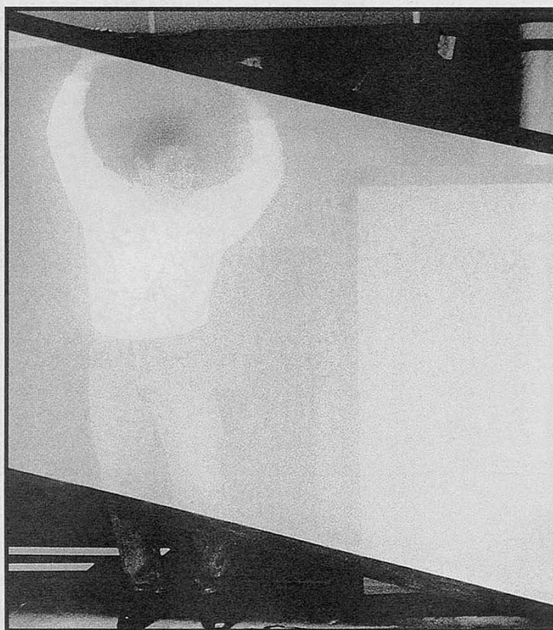
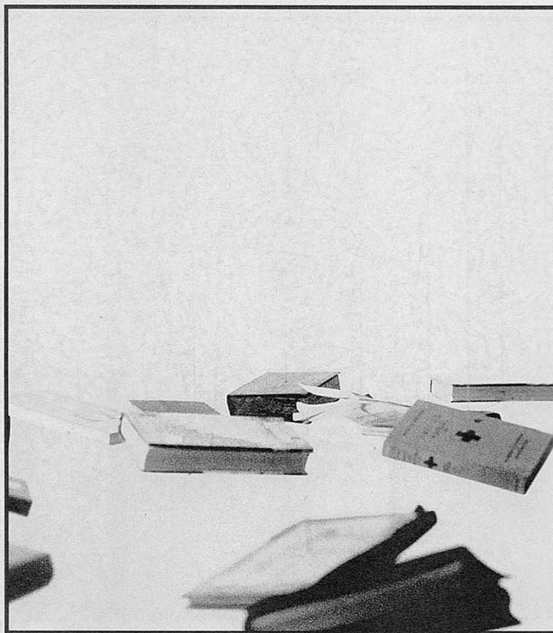
The British tyros of the late Eighties were taught by veterans of that heroic time like Michael Craig-Martin, Bruce McLean, Tim Hood and John Hilliard. Although only vaguely aware of Duchamp, they were dazzled by Beuys, Warhol and Bruce Nauman. And, as the fashion for painting faded, they came into their own. After *Freeze* came a host of "alternative space" group shows.

Sometimes, a space was cleaned up to make it look like the uncluttered, white rectangles of the smarter galleries (Jay Jopling, Damien Hirst's young,

Eton-educated dealer called his gallery White Cube) or the elegant expanses of Charles Saatchi's converted factory in north London, where many of these young artists had first encountered the influential minimalism of Don Judd and the shiny schlock of Jeff Koons. Other times, grotty interiors, stained by the industry that had failed in them, were left as they were found, the better to frame and authenticate the grungy work with which the spaces were filled.

The enigmatic collector of Boundary Road has doubly influenced artistic developments in the past 15 or so years: by showing work but also by buying it in bulk – a mixed blessing, since Saatchi's appetite often denies other would-be collectors an opportunity to buy, and large holdings can as easily be off-loaded as acquired. For the time being, the mysterious millionaire who, on a rare public appearance (to present the Turner Prize to Antony Gormley), wondered aloud what it is that young British artists put in their morning porridge, continues his patronage. He has allowed the Royal Academy (I) to present his collection of young British artists this autumn in a blockbuster called *Sensation*.

"Alternative spaces" have fast given way to prestigious places. In the past 18 months, our baddest and best were showcased in *Brilliant!*, an exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. They have dominated *The British Art Show*, with 14 Goldsmiths alumni showing out of the 25 artists, as well as *Life/Live* in Paris. On the world scene,



THE ART OF NOISE

Clockwise from above: Tracey Emin on show, as always, in her 'Museum' in an old cab-drivers' shop in Waterloo Road, 1996; Richard Wentworth has re-worked ideas of the sculptural for the past 20 years. Here, he prepares for the opening of *False Feeling 1995* at the Lisson Gallery; Scottish video artist Douglas Gordon just after winning the Turner Prize at the Tate Gallery, 1996; Antony Gormley, with wife Vicki, being body cast at his Peckham studio, 1996; Bruce McLean, Professor of Printmaking at the Slade School and one of the most influential artist-teachers of his generation, in his Hammersmith studio, 1995

THE ART OF NOISE

Clockwise from right: grey-monochrome purist painter Allan Charlton at Liverpool Street tube station, 1995; Marc Quinn, perhaps best known for his blood head, 'Self', prepares a rubber sculpture at the

Foundry for his show *No Visible Means of Support*, 1996; the fey and wistful Georgina Starr makes a film for her *Magic* show at the Tate Gallery, 1996. Starr writes, directs and appears in almost all her work



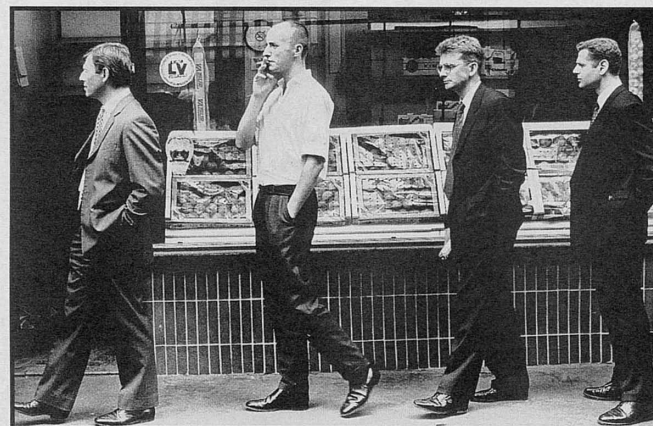
young British art is about the hottest around. Indeed, one of the remarkable things is how long the excitement over their activities has lasted – not so much a nine-day wonder as a nine-year phenomenon – lasted so long, in fact, that some are not so young any more. And that's the problem with being a "young artist": you have to grow up. A recent "exhibition" of bad snapshots showing various members of the gang getting drunk and hanging out gave a distinct end-of-season impression.

But it's no bad thing, not because of the bad art (there's always plenty of that) but because good artists like Damien Hirst, Douglas Gordon (Turner Prize winners in 1995 and 1996), Fiona Rae, Sarah Lucas, Christine Borland, Tacita Dean and Simon Patterson need space and time to get on with their work. Nobody wants to be an ex-young British artist.

Meanwhile, others continue to do good work without that volume of publicity. In the Eighties, the boom was in painting and in what was then called "the new British sculpture", much of it promoted with great skill at the Lisson Gallery by Nicholas Logsdail, who began as an artist and is still the most intelligent dealer/curator in London. Alan Charlton, the grey-monochrome purist, doesn't stop when Cork Street and the critics make a fuss of bright-colour ironists like Fiona Rae. Artists of an older generation, the young stars of the late Sixties like Patrick Caulfield and John Hoyland, still surprise with wit and invention. Frank Auerbach is alive and well, as ever, in Camden Town. And the metaphoric-object sculptors, the young British artists of the Seventies and early Eighties – Alison Wilding, Antony Gormley, Bill Woodrow, Tony Cragg, Shirazeh Houshiary, Richard Deacon, Richard Wentworth *et al.* – are still around, still on song, still poetic or funny or both.

If you really want to know what's happening now, in the perpetual present, you need to travel between those worlds, to be aware of the cross-overs between the generations. Above all, you must pay attention to the art with no fear of being wrong about whether it's good or bad on somebody else's value scale. Don't mind if you don't seem to have been invited to the latest party.

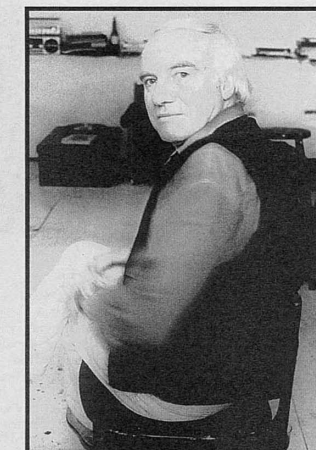
The young French photographer Gautier Deblonde has been to some of the wildest shindigs and can drop forenames with the best. But what makes him distinctive is the quality of his attention to the individual who makes the work. Deblonde



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Clockwise from left: Jake and Dinos Chapman preparing 'Cyber Iconic Man', 1996, in their Brick Lane studio for their show at the ICA. They always work together and the TV is always on; painter Patrick Caulfield

at his home/studio in Primrose Hill, 1995; Grenville Davey, laconic winner of the Turner Prize in 1993, at Leadenhall Market, 1995; Turner prize finalist and bright-colour ironist, painter Fiona Rae at her Hackney studio, 1995



has taken the necessary journeys, across borders, between worlds. And everywhere, with an extraordinary intuition, he homes in on the human reality of the artist, that place where it really happens.

Here is Michael Craig-Martin, Professor in Visual Arts at Goldsmiths, who continues to create immaculate visual conundrums in his own fastidious manner whilst provoking generations of students to *think* art as well as make it. And Richard Wentworth, whose wily and subversive intelligence has re-worked ideas of the sculptural for the past 20 years.

Wentworth, an inveterate crosser of generational boundaries, finds the unexpected in the ordinary, the enigmatic in the banal. Bruce McLean, now the Professor of Printmaking at the Slade School, is another of the most influential artist-teachers of his generation: dynamic and hyperactive, yet exemplary in his generosity to younger artists. And here are those who have taken what has been offered and made their own world with it: Sarah Lucas, dark and driven; Tracy Emin, on show; Douglas Gordon, gravely facing the darkness; Granville Davey, laconic; Georgina Starr, fey and wistful. Deblonde has an extraordinary eye for the real, and no time for the bogus. Being an artist himself, he knows that Art is the party that's never over, and that we're all invited. ●