

TALES FROM THE CITY: New York

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I ran into Hal Foster at the Zoo Art Fair this past October and asked him what he thought of it, and of the London fairs in general. Foster is a thinker (and he seems to enjoy reminding you of this whenever these kinds of questions get served up to him), so he confessed that he could not escape the feeling that contemporary art in London was still 'young' in comparison to New York: young not in terms of the age of the city's artists, but in terms of the sensibility of its scene. 'Fragile' was another word he used, as if to suggest that contemporary art on the Thames still required care and gentle nurturing before being cast out of the nest to face the Scylla of artworld irony and the Charybdis of commercial cynicism.

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But then contemporary art in New York, it would stand to reason, must be seen to have matured beyond its childhood (1960s) and its adolescence (70s), and even beyond its heady days at university and those early years on the job (80s and 90s), when 'promise' was still a noun with a future. Where, one must ask, does that leave it now? Safely in middle age? Biding time until retirement? Do the studio buildings that pepper the old industrial zones of Brooklyn and Queens now play home to the cubicles of the New York artworld's company men and women? Have artists now joined what Siegfried Kracauer called the 'salaried masses'? Or is it 1.5 kids and a weekend house with his and hers fixies in the garage? - aka the hipster American dream.

The rationalism implied by such (faux) maturity just doesn't seem to fit. The Weimar sensibility that saw the consolidation of Kracauer's administrative classes alongside a genuine avant-garde and intellectual flowering in the 1920s was conditioned, overall, by a severe economic depression (patently not the case today); and 'the fifties' in the US, those golden years of an ascendant America, were drowned in an oppressive decorum and an ideologically driven innocence that simply does not resonate in any way with the present (innocence has been exchanged for assumed guilt, and decorum is a cocktail party joke).

No. If the art scene in New York has matured, then it has done so, I think, as an ageing libertine, but one who is yet able to orchestrate so many spectacles of decadence in which youth is either hardened or consumed. In other words, you no longer enjoy the orgy, you survive it.

Lamentable? Perhaps. But at least it's a sensibility without illusions. In most quarters, self-satisfaction has given way to self-loathing. (There remain a slew of imagined holdouts, largely located in the offices of so many new 'alternative' or 'independent' lit- and art-critical rags that admirably hold virtuous the 'life of the mind', but nevertheless appear to believe that the only antidote to self-satisfaction is its derivative: self-seriousness.) It is as if everyone of a certain age looked into the mirror of Claire Messud's brilliant novel *The Emperor's Children* (2006), whether they had read it or not, and found themselves bare to the world, with their entitlement out there swinging in the wind.

How do artists respond to this situation? The good ones get down to work. Not because it's the safe thing to do, or because there is an aesthetic system in place that rewards effort over achievement (which there is, but that's a topic for a different column), but because none have come this far only to let hype about markets, money or the relative youth of one 'scene' versus another get in the way of what it is they simply feel it is their responsibility to do. If that is a sign of age, so be it.