

Speakout: School of Saatchi

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GEORGINA COBURN reflects on the messages emerging from the BBC's School of Saatchi series

PART OF A BBC series of programmes examining *Modern Beauty*, BBC2's *School of Saatchi*, like most reality TV, is disturbingly self-reflexive. A kind of X Factor competition for artists, thousands of hopefuls applied for the opportunity to be chosen by Charles Saatchi as the next young British art sensation.

A self made player in the art market, Saatchi's background in advertising has no doubt contributed to his ability to promote artists of his choosing. Saatchi's patronage, as described by Art Critic Matthew Collings in episode one, has the power to shoot the career of an artist "into supersonic stardom".



The judging panel at work (photo - BBC/Princess Productions/Katie Hyams)

The prize of three years in a London studio and the opportunity to exhibit at The Hermitage in St Petersburg as part of the Saatchi Gallery's *Newspeak: British Art Now* exhibition was not the only prize on offer. The idea of the artist as rock star, the dream ticket of being admitted into the charmed inner circle of contemporary art, of fame and celebrity status, were at the heart of a programme that at every turn prompted the viewer to ask; What is the function of Art?

The School of Saatchi title music *Sweet Dreams (Are made of this)* was not without irony, and the smoky, elusive composite portrait of Saatchi, who never once appears in person on the programme, is consistently held aloft as a figure of ultimate authority. Sound editing has a large role to play in the spin; the mere mention of Saatchi's name in episode one is accompanied by ecclesiastical flurries, or later in the programme a mysteriously powerful surge of orchestration befitting the arrival of JK Rowling's Voldermort.

Setting an unsettling tone of reverence in relation to Saatchi could be seen as slightly tongue-in-cheek; however, throughout the four programme series his unquestioned authority remains central – the axis around which everything (and everyone) else spins. Aired in a time of recession and with the credibility of the art market shaken, it is interesting that an invisible ad man should choose to participate in such a programme.

The meteoric rise of such artists as Jeff Koons, Tracey Emin and Damien Hurst, engineered by the advertising tycoon, has had a dramatic impact on the art market and on public perception of contemporary art in our times. Like a successful ad campaign the Sensation show at the Royal Academy London in 1997 fulfilled the promise of its title, introducing Saatchi's selected YBA's into wider public awareness and notoriety – arguably the best PR tool of all.



In 2007, Damien Hirst's *For The Love Of God*, a 50 million pound diamond encrusted skull promoted as "the most expensive piece of contemporary art ever created" heralded the pinnacle (and some would say collapse) of a cult of artistic celebrity in the service of product over creative process.

When asked if Hirst's diamond encrusted skull "symbolis[ed] the emptiness of modern art – more about money than message?", Saatchi replied: "My dear, the money is the message" (see *My Name is Charles Saatchi and I am an Artoholic – Everything You Need to Know About Art, Ads, Life, God and other Mysteries and Weren't Afraid to Ask*, Phaidon Press, 2009, p.133).

Like many of the artists he promotes, Saatchi represents an interesting case study, a cultural and social comment on our age but certainly not (to any thinking person) an ultimate authority on aesthetics or taste.

The relationship between art and money has always been an uneasy alliance, and the whole idea of patronage of the arts, tied to central institutions of power in any age, is (rightly) contentious. Artistic intent bent by a patron,

funding body or the artists themselves, selling faith whether religious, political or economic, presents the audience and art practice with a potential source of conflict.

If youth, fame and money are the central preoccupations and values celebrated by our age, then Saatchi is indeed King, presiding over a programme where the only valid practice appears to be that of bright young things plucked from obscurity by a multi million pound fairy godmother. The whole idea of instant success and fame, though materially attractive to most, hinges primarily on pleasing the eye of the patron, in this case one invisible man.

Over ten weeks six selected artists Ben Lowe, Suki Chan, Saad Kareshi, Eugenie Scrase, Matt Clark and Sam Zealey – were put through their paces in a series of challenging art projects. A panel hand-picked by Saatchi, including artist Tracey Emin, art critic Matthew Collings, art collector Frank Cohen and Kate Bush, Head of the Barbican Art Galleries, consistently questioned the contestants at each stage of the process, with Rebecca Wilson, a member of the Saatchi Gallery team, as spokesperson for Saatchi on camera.

The resultant four hours made for fascinating TV; comments by the panel, the artists themselves, their work, motivations, creative process and the framework in which they sought success provided an often contradictory picture of art making in the 21st century. Wowing the patron, being original and maintaining your own vision are somewhat conflicting directives depending on your creative point of view.

What was highlighted by tasks such as the life drawing exercise (a skill currently not taught in most art colleges) was the importance of the discipline of seeing and the actual craft of making art – a life long undertaking, and seemingly at odds with the recipe of instant success being promoted by the programme as a whole. The false expectation of many young artists was expressed by one indignant contestant when he stated; “I can’t believe at this stage of our careers that we are still being asked why is it art?”

The idea that an artist has arrived simply because they have graduated permeates the institutional catalogues of many a degree show. An individual’s god-given right to have an idea without the ability to engage themselves or their audience with visual language isn’t, I would argue, a recipe for a long lasting or noteworthy career. Ideas coupled with written explanation seem to be the dominant model of practice currently being promoted by many of the UK’s art colleges with emphasis on art language rather than practice permeating every facet of the industry.

The artists’ two week commission in Hastings (Episode 2) saw them working collaboratively in pairs with the remit to produce something “bold and daring that the public can respond to” in a number of key seafront locations. “Accessibility” and “impact” were at the heart of the brief. The dynamics between the artists, together with their engagement with the chosen sites and interaction with the public, made for compelling viewing.

Public perception of these works was variable and in some cases reliant upon the explanation of the artists involved rather than meaning derived primarily from the visual experience. The work that most pleased Saatchi was ironically the least favored or understood by the public, judging from the on-camera comments – making ticking the whole accessibility box questionable, especially in light of elitist patronage.

Success in this task was more a reflection of having a sense of humour compatible with the patron's than strong visual communication of artistic intent. Matt Clark and Eugenie Scrase's surreal zoo without animals, constructed on concrete islands in the middle of a boating pond, was essentially reliant on a conceit of labeling in order to get its message across.

What this task did positively highlight was the difficulty, potential complexity and impact of creating work in a public space. This and subsequent episodes also contained bite-sized consumable chunks of art history, explaining to the general audience the origins of contemporary art practices dominant in the art of NOW, including public art, video and installation work.

The mix of information, entertainment and promotion was consistently ambivalent throughout the series, adding to the multilayered nature of the programme. On a basic human level it was impossible not to respond to the artist's individual personalities throughout the whole process as they struggled creatively with the set tasks – sometimes triumphantly.

Episode 3 saw the contestants working to create interventions in Sudley Castle, home of another set of patrons and open to scrutiny by the public. Artists were asked to remove a work from one of three castle rooms and replace it with a work of their own to sit alongside historical masterworks. "Originality" and "engagement with the past" were the directives given by Saatchi's spokesperson.

Many historic homes in the UK currently utilise contemporary art to draw visitors into their properties and increase revenue. Interventions of this kind can be quite extraordinary; Nathan Coley's work at Mount Stuart in Argyll or Kate Whiteford's work at Harewood House in Yorkshire are two examples that immediately spring to mind.

The capacity for contemporary works placed in a historical setting to alter our perception, facilitating a deeper or expansive understanding of the site, was evident in Matt Clark's orb filled with red wine, suspended in the Sudley chapel. Reflecting the entire space and the illumination of its stained glass windows, the piece was a single drop of blood, a connection between the mortal world and the divine. It was more than itself. Saad Kareshi's piles of chapatis positioned in the Sudley library, a gift from his family to the owners of the stately home, was judged the most successful by Saatchi.

The final task for all contestants, staging a group show at the Saatchi Gallery in London, demanded ambition, boldness and impact, in the words of the Saatchi spokesperson, "the ultimate test based on how successful they are in his (Saatchi's) space". Of equal importance with the content in this and other such art spaces is the guest list, and the artists paired up again to tackle various aspects of promoting and presenting the show in addition to creating work.

Interestingly, the winning artist was the youngest of the group, drawing polarised comments from the panel throughout the series. They were unable to decide whether her art was a con or pure genius. Eugenie Scrase's use of found objects, especially in relation to her final work, owed more to chance than forethought, skill or design. Whilst the impaled tree trunk on a fence extracted from a housing estate had impact in the gallery space, it was the result of confident persuasion and accidental discovery alone.

Having an idea and audacity was seemingly enough to win the show after speculation throughout from the panel about whether the artist was “phoney” or a “charlatan.” While Scrase consistently derived inspiration from the objectified world, often in a spirit of humour and absurdity, her creations were often lacking in their execution, offering no more than a quick gag or a 30-second hit.

Fortunately there was also some hope delivered in the finale with an additional award to artist Matt Clark; the opportunity to exhibit at The Saatchi Newspeak show in London and the arrangement of a year’s studio space. Throughout the competition Clark emerged as a thoughtful, sensitive and extremely hardworking artist with singular vision, able to engage the imagination of the viewer. The sincerity and intelligence of his work was inspirational, as was his investment in the crafting of works in three dimensions. The emergence of Scrase and Clark as winners delivered simultaneously aesthetic poison and an antidote.

School of Saatchi is provocative, engaging TV that fundamentally questions why we make art and the function it has in our lives. The perception of contemporary art shaped by personalities such as Charles Saatchi affects both directly and indirectly everyone working in the industry. What is perhaps most disturbing is the idea of artist as rock star that has become the aspiration of an entire generation of young artists, without ever having defined what they wish to say or actually be famous for. Sadly “the money is the message” remains a dominant force in contemporary art and life.

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