

Why the London Group?

“Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the result and the project of the dominant mode of production. It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society’s unreality. In all of its particular manifestations — news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment — the spectacle represents the dominant model of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. In both form and content the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system.”

Guy Debord, Situationist theorist

We are all held in the power of the spectacle. In a world of plasma screens, the internet, the mobile phone and the zeitgeist of vast global money markets; images, information and gratification are instantly accessible.

The London Group, an artists collective created of necessity, at the start of the 20th century, seems to have no place in this world. The group is a peripatetic organization, exhibiting where it can. It has been used, visited and colonized by many illustrious, and many forgotten, names through its 95-year history and thus is in a constant state of flux. The shape of the group alters and moulds to the contributing members, and its flexibility has ensured its longevity. Despite its name, the *London* group, the majority are from elsewhere, either foreign born or the sons and daughters of immigrants. Thus there is no brand to sell, other than a guarantee of quality; yet we easily exhibit together, with a variety of styles as eclectic as the agglomeration of the city the group calls home.

The art world is dominated by the few artists, and their dealers, who have successfully harnessed the spectacle, who reaffirm, in Debord’s words, “the choices that have already been made”. Art is the icing on the capitalist cake, with Damien Hirst’s skull the ultimate, perhaps ironic, embodiment of the 21st century equation - art equals money. In this world of the spectacular, the London Group is given little attention, and still less critical acclaim.

But does this mean the London Group has little to offer to audiences outside itself? Where is the place for the group in the society of the spectacle?

By its very nature, the spectacle is short-lived, its value is fleeting. The nature of the media is, and is required to be, brief. Newspapers last a day, news reports last for seconds, these are the dominant models of life. Yet a spectacle quickly becomes commonplace, the shock of the new is no longer shocking, because it is no longer new.

Therein lies the value and strength of the London Group. It does not rely on spectacle, but on co-operation and value placed upon its members’ contributions, which produces something far greater than the sum of its parts.

A parallel could be drawn with great cities, and the architecture of which they are composed. Which is more spectacular, the Eiffel Tower, or the city of Paris? People may visit and marvel at the Eiffel Tower, but they go to live in Paris, and without Paris, who would have the opportunity to see the Eiffel Tower?

Thus the London Group, and similar collectives, are crucial as a substrate of creative activity from which the dominant art world extracts meaning and theory. It is a direct contact for the public with the genuine art world in all its schismatic variety, a place for its members to live. It is not a constructed hypothesis, a repetition of that which already exists, but primary involvement with an active process, forever evolving, mutating and changing shape. It is a mode of access to the eclectic nature of practice, personal viewpoints, varying perspectives. Not separate ideologies, but a collective of ideologies which work to the same end, influenced and affected by internal relationships. Each artist's contribution to the totality of the group, and its primary subjective individuality lend themselves to the possibility of inexhaustible meaning. Culture does not always have to take risks, push barriers or confront difficult questions. Audiences do not wish to go to places they did not expect, yet the London Group allows the space for these, and all things, existing beyond the column inches in yesterday's newspaper.

The London Group makes great art, yet can never provide a spectacle, because it cannot be measured, objectified, branded, made brief. It does not fit neatly into the dominant model of the world, and does not justify the conditions and goals of the existing system. The spectacle of the monied art world reflects the nature of the wider culture, the London Group does not. Yet society, like our group, is constantly changing and evolving. Socially and politically, a loose collection of individuals, acting as a group, may well become the successful model in a new world order, it equally may not. The London group will continue regardless, and it is these factors which have fostered, and will continue to foster the quietly subversive, yet immeasurably great success of the London Group.

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