

VACANT POSSESSION

Critical Decor are exhibiting their "New Work" in the now literal cultural void of the nineties. Hannah Vowles and Glyn Banks — "Art in Ruins" — investigate.

THE dream is over. The designer decade is rapidly turning out to be nothing more than a brief interlude in the long drawn out drama of the crisis and inevitable collapse of capitalism.

For a while monetarism — Reaganomics and Thatcherism — allowed some not to feel guilty about being greedy. But now the party's over and everyone is wondering how big the bill will turn out to be, and whether the usual victims — the global poor — can be squeezed enough by the captains of industry to ensure a safe return to business as usual. As the implications of the world's dwindling non-renewable resources, industrial pollution and general ecological collapse finally begin to sink in, cynics propose the twin solutions of free-market mechanisms and eco-racism towards the Third World. Eco-Tech, the next new opportunist architectural movement, quietly gathers pace, promising to save the planet and the British Steel industry at the same time.

Every day we see played out before us in the Middle East the battle of two dinosaurs who until recently co-habited the empire of the American military-industrial complex quite happily. The military would be glad of an opportunity of testing out the effects of "technological war" (to save the economy), while the industrial corporations would prefer simply to secure control over the world's diminishing oil supplies until alternative energy can be made more profitable.

Whatever the outcome, the American way of life which is also our way of life is, like oil, fast disappearing into the black hole of recession; the reasons for which, thanks to Saddam Hussein, can be displaced onto the Third World.

To the welcome threat that the ecological issues and the oil crisis make to an over-developed consumer-lifestyle, must be added another important factor — that of the Third World debt. Just as without the minerals fraudulently expropriated from Zaire, almost no jet plane could take off — and yet the population are amongst the poorest in the world, so the unpayable debt, if not scrapped, will have global repercussions.

For some, the designer decade was the party of all parties, where excess was the new order. Style magazines were launched (and studied in cultural studies departments), new wave post-apocalypse furniture was specially made for Thatcher's young upwardly-mobile new men, and "everyone" went to Japan. In that world of high-profile entrepreneurial initiatives, with sponsorship, display and promotional graphics employed as trompes l'oeil to disguise the cultural void, art and architecture became the mere coat-hangers on which to hang all manner of theory, nothing more than design plus vat (value added theory) — the object as an exemplary promotional advertisement for enterprise culture. The object itself is thus a trompe l'oeil masking its disappearance into promotion, its transcendent purity being merely the sales pitch to shift

commodities in the cultural marketplace. Just as history became heritage, all became part of the culture industries.

At a recent exhibition at the Imagination headquarters however, the spirit of the eighties lived on. Claiming to be dealing with the problematic position of art in a world dominated by design, the exhibition with its over-designed catalogue, demonstrated the fact that the constant recycling of abstraction is nothing more than minimal decor. And with its fascination with design and marketing, art has for the most part been robbed of its last resistant function — that of its ability to provoke critical thinking.

Here both the architecture and the art demonstrate the prediction that as the "anxious object" (of art and architecture) disappears, we begin to realise that advertising does not exist to promote the consumption of the object but the converse, that the object exists to promote advertising. "Abandon reality (and with it the object) — live in your imagination" may once have been the cry of the situationists, but it is now the desperate battle cry of late capitalism.

If some, like the students of Goldsmiths art school, still seek refuge in imagination, and others look to Europe, some begin to look to those who did not do so well from the boom, only to find, as with architecture, that this time as the pendulum begins to swing away from the private to public sector, that it has been so impoverished that instead of business as usual there is nothing but a resounding silence.

Critical Decor, Toby Morgan and David Pugh in a low-profile parodic initiative on the lines of a government Enterprise Allowance Scheme, took possession of an empty gallery space, victim of a punitive full-repairing lease and the new Uniform Business Rate, occupying the territory of the now literal cultural world of the nineties.

Their "New Work", referencing minimalism, belies the vacant premises (promises) of minimalism's claim to abstract purity. Five primed white canvases bought off-the-shelf from an artists' suppliers, hang in a row with bar-code price stickers in place of labels, electronic pricing mechanism as information. Marcel Duchamp brought a urinal into a gallery and it was recognised as art — the readymade as art. Critical Decor bought blank canvases into a gallery and they are recognised as commodities — art as readymade.

A halogen lamp fixed on the wall between two of these canvases casting a shadow, further pollutes the fiction of their parodic claims to minimal purity, while illuminating a billboard-sized poster on an adjacent wall — a photocopy of a black and white photograph of the two artists dressed in white, standing either side of an identical off-the-shelf blank white canvas. Across the top reads "BUSINESS AS USUAL".

Two white males, Eurotrash with no future, the "self-portrait" both echoes the reportage-style of thirties Depression

documentary photography, thus evoking sentimental pity for two victims of the blank generation of the failure of Thatcher's enterprise culture, while also knowingly referencing the eighties appropriation by promotional culture of the fashion industry of Depression-aesthetics, thereby simultaneously making bleakly clear that that pity is reserved for pure white youth's lost opportunity to carry on business as usual.

On another wall is painted "SILENCE", silence being the naturally unspoken command in

the cathedral of art. The bar-code prices, a photographic lamp poised illuminated as if ready to assist the documentation and thus media promotion of the exhibition, a stack of five more blank white canvases apparently in the process of being hung for exhibition, the interfering halogen lamps — these are the conditions and devices conventionally "invisible", here polluting art's aspirations to transcendent purity, and brought in to focus as the hidden mechanisms and hidden labour in the consumption of art.

This makes visible the usually hidden conditions of art on the one hand, the blank refusal to proffer content as titillation for an industry which denies its constitution as such on the other, together with the promotion of the vacant but fetishised identity of the artist. It was a perfectly executed and well-timed demonstration of, and provocation to, our pornographic necessity for the disappearance of art today, in order that art can be reborn as a perfect mirror image of our over-cultivated imaginations.

Only by committing theoretical suicide and by refusing to

flatter us in this way can the artist or architect force critical reflection, not pessimistically but realistically, on the usually hidden economic and political mechanisms which, like advertising today still attempt to turn our real-life air-conditioned nightmares into decor.

"New Work" by Critical Decor at the former Air gallery, Rosebury Avenue, London EC1. Critical Decor are interested in any temporarily vacant property in London which may be suitable for an installation of their work. Contact Toby Morgan 071-602 0956, or David Pugh 071-221 0542.



Silence: "the naturally unspoken command in the cathedral of art".