Pauline van Mourik Broekman:

MUTE

[Texto presentado en el Seminario-Encuentro Publicaciones (no solo) de arte: usos culturales, sociales y políticos (Sevilla, 15 – 18 de junio de 2011) incluido dentro del programa de UNIA arteypensamiento]
I believe the opportunity we have created here, to look at editorial activity in its broadest contours, is quite a rare one. We are not just exploring the delimited terrain of ‘content’ or ‘design’, but rather that strange mix of personal, collective (or institutional) intentionality, cultural-political necessity, and socio-economic context that, first, makes cultural projects happen, and then sustains - or of course destroys – them.

Because it is such a unique opportunity, granted in such incredible company, and because I am far enough removed from the magazine’s beginnings to allow some detachment, I have used our framework here to do a bit of personal archaeology, testing my own assumptions of what Mute ‘is’, why it was founded; what the determining factors were for such a project, etc.

So, what were Mute’s beginnings? What was the terrain that my founding co-editor Simon Worthington and I sought to make an intervention within when we started making the magazine in 1994? Here, again, as part of my archaeological mode, I want to evoke the landscape through aspects that were most visible to us then, even though one would be able to qualify or contextualise them better now, with the benefit of hindsight and greater knowledge.

First of all, there was the art scene. Although it stands as nothing to the size and scope it has achieved in the intervening period, the market already loomed large. Visits to the art fair in Cologne, the Documenta (in 1992), and Venice (probably in 1993), had entirely demystified the – probably tacitly maintained - idea that people’s experience of art existed in some sort of sacral, privatised space; and that this in any way, shape or form stood separate from or outside of global economic dynamics (even if, in retrospect, that may have at the time still turned on more of a Euro-American axis than it does at present).

The publishing efforts which served to support this international activity were likewise multiple and mature. Being from Holland, I read across Dutch, British and American titles, consuming feverishly magazines like Metropolis M, Art Monthly, Artscribe, Flash Art, Artforum, Art & Text.... you get the general idea. Already, I think I was naively attempting to use these magazines as a kind of key to the workings of ‘the system’ (for want of a better word) as a whole, which of course they had far from a neutral view onto.

Simon and my art education had offered little in regard to this. Although there were a few inspiring tutors – like, I suppose, there are at any art school – and we were offered basic lessons on semiotic deconstruction as part of complementary studies, what had been sorely lacking was a
critical vocabulary to analyse these intersections between economy, art and the social. Tellingly, I remember that a lecture by art historian and Art & Language member, Charles Harrison, quite literally blew my mind as he deconstructed the intersections of institutional and private art collections; the cultivation of ‘taste’ and art expertise; and the place of an ostensibly ‘critical modernism’ and avant-garde in and amongst these in the drawing rooms of the rich.

In this impoverished UK art school environment – which I understand in retrospect to be attributable to restructuring processes and the gradual orientation to an international marketplace of foreign student-clients, which of course is now coming to full-blown, nightmarish completion – other forces must also be acknowledged. Notably the chronic sexism and cronyism of the painting and sculpture cultures in art schools; and, sort of twinned with these, a kind of viscerally experienced shame among the more conceptually inclined at the intellectual backwardness and parochialism of British artistic identity. Artists like LS Lowry, Ivon Hitchens and Stanley Spencer were shame facedly evoked to illustrate how far we had to come to even earn a seat at the table of a conceptually inflected internationalism. More legitimately, there was also a kind of revulsion at the upsurge of Transavanguardia and other neo-expressionist movements across Europe...

Certainly, faced with Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Joerg Immendorf and Georg Baselitz the experimental era of the late 1960s / early 1980s felt like it had long past...

These conditions grant you an intuitive idea of the cornucopia of offerings the figure of the ‘yBa’ brought to the British scene. Not only did their work have a sheen of ‘conceptualism’, as it came to be labelled, but they set their sights avowedly on an international horizon, courting collectors, financiers and gallerists like it was an absolutely natural and automatic part of being an artist. Whether this ethos came from Michael Craig-Martin, tutor to many of them at Goldsmiths, or straight from the head of Damien Hirst, it doesn’t really matter. What matters was that they offered a way out of the malaise, combining superficial radicality with market entrepreneurialism.