

LONDON, SEPTEMBER 1997

The Rise of Cool Britannia

Three strangers are lost in Bethnal Green, east London. I am one of them. From a quick glance at one another, it's evident we're going to the same event, not least because there's nothing else remotely 'arty' in this area. We need to get to somewhere off Brick Lane, if only we could find this Brick Lane, so we join forces. This was years before Brick Lane (the nearest tube is *not* Bethnal Green, but we didn't realise!) assumed its 'edgy fashion' status.¹⁰ It was also before Monica Ali's 2003 novel *Brick Lane* and subsequent film (directed by Sarah Gavron in 2007) contributed to this street's fame. Historically associated with crime, poverty and prostitution, this part of town had one of the highest crime rates in the country and its greatest claim to fame was Jack the Ripper. The area was also haunted by the spectre of right-wing extremism, stretching from the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s to the British National Front in the 1980s, whose headquarters used to be in the nearby Shoreditch High Street (in the 1990s it splintered, giving rise to the British National Party).

Eventually, we found our spot. The occasion was Jake and Dinos Chapman's housewarming party-cum-show, the first since *Sensation*, the pivotal exhibition that catapulted the duo to international fame. *Sensation* was inaugurated at London's Royal Academy of Arts in September 1997 and ran until December...