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Criticism writing sample

"The Sad State of Contemporary Art"
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Simon Starling, a 38-year-old Scottish artist, won the 2005 Turner Prize. (http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/2005/) The £25,000 Prize, established in 1984, is awarded annually by London's Tate Britain gallery and Gordon's Gin (which might explain a lot—we all know how those Brits love their gin) to a British artist under 50 for an outstanding exhibition or other presentation of their work. It is intended to promote public discussion of new developments in contemporary British art and is widely recognized as one of the most important and prestigious awards for the visual arts in Europe. It is also the most controversial art award, considered by many as well to be outrageous, scandalous, and a big, fat joke. Starling describes his work as "the physical manifestation of a thought process." His winning entry featured "Shedboatshed": a shed he found on the banks of the Rhine, dismantled, turned into a boat that he paddled downriver to Basel, and reassembled as a shed in a Swiss museum. "I don't like to be thought of as eccentric because that's not what my work is about," Starling said Monday in accepting the prize.

Right. . . .

Starling was even-money favorite to win, by the way, which is not surprising considering the history of the Turner Prize.

Tracey Emin was shortlisted for the prize in 1999 for an installation called "My Bed," which "graphically illustrates themes of loss, sickness, fertility, copulation, conception and death—almost the whole human life-cycle in the place where most of us spend our most significant moments," which showed her "vibrancy and flair for self-expression" that revealed a "frank and brutal honesty." It was a bed littered with Ms. Emin's dirty underthings and used condoms.

Martin Creed won the prize in 2001 for "Work No.227: The lights going on and off," which consisted of "manipulating the gallery's existing light fittings to create an unexpected effect." In other words, one room of the gallery was empty; the lights came on for 5 seconds, then went off for 5 seconds. Ad infinitum; ad nauseam. That was it. And he won—this was, apparently, the best that British Art had to offer the world in 2001.

For an award as prestigious as the Turner Prize, it's not enough that one merely create a thought-provoking work of art in charcoal; it must be charcoal "retrieved from a church struck by lightning" (Cornelia Parker, 1997). Another of Ms. Parker's installations for the 1997 Turner Prize, "Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View," "was made by blowing up a garden shed and its contents, and then hanging the scorched and mutilated fragments in a cluster around a single light bulb." Anyone uncertain as to how this can be considered art can rest assured that it is in fact an "'imaginative investigation into the nature of matter'. She tests the physical properties of substances and things, at the same time playing on their public and private symbolic meaning. Her methods of exploration have included suspending, exploding, crushing and stretching."

A December 2004 poll of 500 arts specialists in Britain said Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain," a ready-made urinal he posited as art in 1917, was the single most important work of art in the 20th century. (I don't mean to get off on a rant about British art in particular, but "Fountain" is on display at the Tate Museum, by the way.)

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It's not just the Brits, though. As Suzi Gablik mentioned 20 years ago, "overturning conventions has become routine. As long as we are willing to consider *anything* as art, innovation no longer seems possible, or even desirable." Well, it is desirable to some, apparently, but with no formal conventions left to overturn, what passes for innovation becomes farther and farther removed from what passes for art, until today "art finds itself without any coherent set of priorities, . . . without any means to evaluate either itself or the goals which it serves." Artists today have a tendency to address only other artists—partly because of the general public's lack of visual education, as Zoe Williams points out; because to most people contemporary art implies a loss of craft (the "my five-year-old could have done that" comment), it breeds mistrust, and so, rather than try to reestablish a wider dialogue, artists have become more and more insular, losing sight of what matters. "Originally," Gablik writes, "the modernist assertion of self represented a rebellion." But in the postmodern 21st century, there is nothing left to rebel against—and everyone seems to understand this except the artists themselves. "The artist is not responsible to anyone. . . . There is no communication with any public whatsoever. The artist can ask no questions, and he makes no statement; he offers no information, message or opinion," said German Neo-expressionist Georg Baselitz. This sounds like a condemnation, but in fact Baselitz said it proudly of his art—his point was that only the end product counts.

But if Baselitz (and other postmodern artists) aren't trying to communicate with an audience, what is the purpose of their art? What is the purpose of the end product if not to communicate *something* to a viewer? Even "looking pretty" is a form of communication, and if an artist does not keep the nature of this communication in mind when he is creating a work of art, the message is bound to fail.

"Shedboatshed is an everyday object our perception and contemplation of which is somehow expanded and enriched by a mixture of the fact that we have some vaguely anecdotal, vaguely art-contextual stories about it," writes Guy Dammann, a lecturer in aesthetics at King's and University Colleges in London. But this underlies the problem inherent in conceptual art—without the "vaguely art-contextual stories" it is not really art at all, except insofar as an artist declares it to be so. *The Daily Telegraph* complained of contemporary British art that "None of it makes any sense until you are told what it is about." This is a problem with much contemporary art, not just that from Britain. Seeing Mr. Starling's shed in a gallery, you accept that because of its context it must be art, although you really have no idea why until you know the story. In that sense, it is not the shed itself that is the work of art, but the story.

Duchamp did not consider his "ready-mades" themselves to be art, but rather the thought that went into the concept of positing a urinal as "art," as well as the thinking about art that the ready-made inspired in those who saw it posited as art. When, years later, he was told that his ready-made were considered to be great sculpture. Duchamp smiled and said "Nobody's perfect." And so we entered the era of gallery art. Just as C. P. Snow saw a growing chasm between scientists and artists in *The Two Cultures*, so we now have a vast chasm between conceptual art and aesthetic (for want of a better signifier) art, which over the course of the 20th century became almost wholly distinct from one another.

The distinction lies in this: aesthetic art is acontextual, whereas conceptual art can function as art only within the confines of the gallery. If you see Starling's shed (which isn't really even his shed—someone else is the original creator of the actual physical object; Starling's artistic contribution lies only in the art-contextual story now inextricably linked with the architectural work) in a gallery, you must assume it is art, because otherwise why else would it be in a gallery? If you see it in a field, you may see an architectural aesthetic to it, but in all likelihood the shed will never occur to you as "art." Likewise, Tracey Emin's bed can function as art only within the gallery setting; I can't imagine anyone purchasing

this work and displaying it anywhere else—if you see the bed in a gallery, you take it as art because it is in a gallery, but if you see it in my home, your only thought will be, "You need a maid." (When asked if he considered what he made to be art, Starling himself said "Maybe it isn't. It's art because I trained as an artist." If that is the only criterion, then since I trained as a writer, everything I write, from novels to this screed to my shopping list, must be considered literature.)

Whether the aesthetics appeal to you or not, a work of aesthetic art can be recognized as such anywhere; whether it is on the wall of a gallery or museum, or on the wall of someone's living room, or even sticking out of a trash can, everyone who sees a painting will see it as a work of art, whether or not it appeals to them. But Starling's shed anywhere other than in a gallery is just a shed—and even in the gallery, it's value as art is apparent only within the context of the story linked with it; sans explanation, it is simply a misplaced shed. Similarly, Ms. Emin's bed is simply poor housekeeping anywhere other than the gallery. And even in the gallery, acceptance as art is not guaranteed, as with Mr. Creed's concept. If I walked into an empty room in a museum and saw the light going on and off, my first thought would not be that the room itself was a work of important art, but rather that there was a problem with the wiring.

In October 2001, the "internationally acclaimed British genius" (as described by critic Michael Medved, tongue firmly in cheek) Damien Hirst presented an installation at the very prestigious Eyestorm Gallery in London featuring discarded cigarette butts, empty beer bottles, a paint-smeared palette, torn and stained newspapers, half-full coffee cups, partially eaten sandwiches, and candy wrappers.

Because it was "an original Damien Hirst," the "gallery owners confidently predicted that the assemblage would command a price in the high six figures." And that's *pounds sterling*, folks, not just piddly little U.S. dollars.

Unfortunately, the night before the opening, in came the janitor, who, not being an art professional, assumed that the installation was just trash and threw it away.

"I didn't think for a second that it was a work of art," the janitor later told the press.

When the gallery staff arrived, they went out and retrieved trash, separated the artistic trash from the regular trash, then reassembled the original installation, guided by photographs taken the night before. Because it's apparently not art if it's just sitting on the floor any old way—it has to sitting on the floor *artistically*.

(In case you're wondering, the janitor was allowed to keep his job, because he had, according to the supervisor of the exhibition, provoked "debate on the question of what is art—which is always important.")

The underlying problem is not simply that "when everything becomes art, art becomes nothing" (Gablik, 35), but that, as Marx observed, art is not a separate reality. It must be connected with the real world of real life. And postmodern art, conceptual art, no longer connects with anything—postmodern art in general because it has lost its moorings in its descent into solipsism, and conceptual art because it has *purposely* cast aside all possibility of fixed meaning.

Daniel Heninger wrote recently in the *Wall Street Journal*:

> "What we need is an art, a culture, an aesthetic appropriate to the age in which we live—the 21st century, the Age of the Digital and the Age of September 11. Modern art isn't it.
>
> "Modernism was a reaction to the industrial age or the machine age. . . . Its most important cultural values included discordance, challenge, collision, violation, confusion. This is wholly out of sync with what people want or need in the current age. . . .

> "Google, Web surfing, cell phones and 1,000 television channels have also brought us something other than "Grand Theft Auto" and Britney-on-demand. Everyone in the world watched the second World Trade Center tower fall in real time, and will do so the next time. The world we inhabit now is Iraq, Sudan, tsunami, weapons of mass destruction, Rwanda, Bosnia, Beslan. Knowing—and seeing with our own eyes—so much that is so bad is not normal. We don't need to be shocked by art. We now live in a constant state of shock.
>
> "We cannot hide from the world as it is, and should not. But we need some respite. And sometimes we need solace."

Conceptual art cannot give us this respite and solace, because it's whole *raison d'etre* is to confront and contest our notions of art, to perpetuate that state of constant shock. But what Heninger says is that we don't need art to do that for us in the 21st century—life does that itself. By not realizing this, conceptual art voids itself of meaning, and of relevance.

And by doing so, it turns itself into a joke, the punchline to which is the Turner Prize. And the more seriously the postmodern conceptual artist takes himself and his art, the funnier the joke becomes.

According to Charlotte Higgins, arts correspondent for *The Guardian*, when asked what he intended to do with his prize money, Starling said he wanted to throw a replica Henry Moore sculpture into Lake Ontario. "There is a big problem with zebra mussels in the lake which have invaded and taken over and there is a Henry Moore in Toronto called Warrior with Shield. I thought it would be nice to grow some mussels on the Henry Moore for six months, then take it out and exhibit it in a museum." But, he added: "I don't like to be thought of as an eccentric. It's a serious business."

How could anyone possibly think otherwise?

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