

But Is It Art?

In the search for a rational basis for the critical evaluation of artworks, it might seem logical to begin with a definition of what an artwork actually is. However, to do so is to enter problematic territory; within the history of philosophical aesthetics, the problems surrounding the evaluation of artworks have often been engaged in a dance with the problems surrounding the definition of art. There are good reasons why it might be thought permissible to sidestep the problem within this study. It could be argued that, as the central issue is evaluation rather than definition, to adjudicate between competing definitions of art in order to decide whether an artwork should be considered as part of the case study is to pre-empt the discussion, as many definitions of art involve an evaluative element.

Nevertheless, this issue does need to be addressed for the reasons I will set out in the first part of this chapter.

There are many different approaches to the problem of definition and they can be broadly grouped into different categories or kinds of definition; some define artworks in terms of their possessing particular characteristics or producing certain effects on the viewer, others in terms of art as a sociological phenomenon. One kind of definition, which I will call ‘criteria-based definition’, tends to define an artwork as an artifact possessing a certain characteristic or set of characteristics. One example of that kind of definition was set out by Clive Bell in his book *Art*. Bell argued that what he called ‘significant form’ was the essential defining characteristic of art. His term ‘significant form’ referred to relationships

of line and colour within the artwork that are in themselves aesthetically or emotionally moving to the viewer.

Leaving aside any question of the merits of Bell's argument, there would be a problem in adopting his definition for this study: a problem that, to a greater or lesser extent, would arise with the application of any criteria-based definition. The problem reveals itself in one of the examples Bell used in his discussion: William Powell Frith's painting *The Railway Station* (which Bell refers to as '*Paddington Station*').

Few pictures are better known or liked than Frith's *Paddington Station*; certainly I should be the last to grudge it its popularity. Many a weary forty minutes have I whiled away disentangling its fascinating incidents and forging for each an imaginary past and an improbable future. But certain though it is that Frith's masterpiece, or engravings of it, have provided thousands with half-hours of curious and fanciful pleasure, it is not less certain that no one has experienced before it one half-second of aesthetic rapture — and this, although the picture contains several pretty passages of colour, and is by no means badly painted. *Paddington Station* is not a work of art; it is an interesting and amusing document. In it line and colour are used to recount anecdotes, suggest ideas, and indicate the manners and customs of an age; they are not used to provoke aesthetic emotion.¹

So, if this study had centred on reviews of the Royal Academy exhibition of 1858, when Frith first showed *The Railway Station*, we might have faced a dilemma: do we include reviews of Frith's painting, which was one of the most popular that year, or do we exclude them on the grounds that the subject of the reviews does not meet Bell's definition of an artwork? Frith was a Royal Academician and one of the most successful painters of his day, with a professional career that lasted half a century; the risk of applying any criteria-based definition is that we may end up excluding works commonly agreed to be artworks.

Perhaps we should be relaxed about finding a definition of art; perhaps, as W.E. Kennick argues, no defining set of criteria of art can be found, nor is one needed. Instead, we should rely on the common usage of the word by a competent speaker of English. The thought experiment he uses to argue for that position is this: he asks the reader to imagine a warehouse that is full of a great variety of objects, some of them works of art and some not. Kennick argues that, if given the task of going into the warehouse to bring out all the objects that were works of art, any

competent speaker of English who was of normal intelligence would be able to complete the task, even if they had no defining theory of art. Furthermore, he argues that if, instead, one gave that person a defining theory of art and asked them to select on that basis they would be less able to complete the task.

Now imagine the same person sent into the warehouse to bring out all objects with Significant Form, or all objects of Expression. He would rightly be baffled; he knows a work of art when he sees one, but he has little or no idea what to look for when he is told to bring an object that possesses Significant Form.²

Kennick's thought experiment underlines the difficulty in using a set of criteria in order to decide whether something is or is not an artwork. Even if there existed a set of criteria that was universally agreed upon (and there does not), the task of interpreting those criteria and applying them to a range of possible candidates for the status of artworks is one that would be fraught with difficulty. Armed only with the criteria, it is likely that fewer objects would be retrieved and that objects that we would commonly refer to as artworks would be excluded from the selection. Kennick accepted that there might be some articles in the warehouse that might need discussion (for him this simply reflected the fact that our concepts of art are indeed vague), but, importantly, the problems caused, he argued, would be much fewer than in the case of the person sent to retrieve items that possessed significant form.

However, let us consider a particular warehouse in East London in 2004. This warehouse contained artworks belonging to Charles Saatchi, the champion and most prominent collector of the work of the group of artists who had become known collectively as the Young British Artists, or YBA—Hirst, Emin, Sarah Lucas, the Chapman Brothers and others—who often used everyday non-art objects in the creation of their installations. On the night of 25 May 2004, the warehouse caught fire and many of the artworks were destroyed. There was no warning of the fire and the warehouse was well ablaze by the time the fire service arrived. But had things been different, if there had been some warning and an opportunity to rescue some of the collection from the flames, I am not sure that it would have been wise to put Kennick in charge of directing that task. Unless those evacuating the artworks had exceptionally good knowledge of contemporary art and recognised particular artworks, they

would face very difficult judgements and perhaps fail to rescue a large number of valuable pieces. Those items that might not be recognised as artworks (and those where the question was debatable) would not represent a marginal sub-set; they might well comprise the majority of cases. Although Kennick's argument works when thinking of traditional artworks such as paintings, drawings and sculpture, it runs into difficulty when faced with objects like Duchamp's *Fountain*. The application of his warehouse test would not have been a good way to salvage works from Saatchi's warehouse. As a great many Turner Prize nominees make installation art of this kind, applying the warehouse test to Turner Prize shortlist exhibits would be equally problematic.

So, if the adoption of a criteria-based definition of art (such as the one proposed by Clive Bell) might lead to the exclusion of some works from this study, we can see that Kennick's approach has little to offer as an alternative. The application of either theory to this study would introduce a selective approach to the materials and thus risk skewing our analysis. Perhaps then I could abandon theory at this point; I might feel that I have solid grounds to assume that the cases I am examining do not present any problem of definition as they have all been nominated for a major art prize. If a work has been produced by a trained professional artist, handled by an art dealer, exhibited in an art gallery or art museum, then nominated and shortlisted for the Turner Prize, exhibited in the Tate and reviewed by art critics, then its status as a work of art should not be in question.

However, there are two problems with that approach. The first is that it could be argued that the decision to focus on commentaries on the Turner Prize shortlist exhibitions in itself implies acceptance of one definition of art: George Dickie's institutional theory. Dickie defines an artwork in the following way:

A work of art in the classificatory sense is 1) an artifact 2) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation.³

Dickie makes clear that he is defining 'work of art' as a classificatory term rather than an evaluative appraisal, but what is notable about this definition is that it does not seek in any way to identify the essential inherent features of an artwork; instead, the artwork is defined in sociological terms. It would be wrong to simply adopt this definition as

uncontroversial. It has been widely held that the definition of the term 'work of art' necessarily carries with it an evaluative element; for example, R.G. Collingwood in *The Principles of Art*⁴ distinguishes between 'art proper' and 'art falsely so called' (although, later in the book, he also argues that every human gesture and utterance is a work of art, thereby opening up a third and even broader sense of the term). There have been many critiques of Dickie's institutional definition over the last four decades. Using Marcel Duchamp's Dadaist ready-made *Fountain* as an example, Ted Cohen⁵ took issue with Dickie, arguing that, although an artifact such as a urinal might be presented in a way that meets Dickie's requirement, it might nonetheless lack the qualities that would make it a 'candidate for appreciation'. Ben Tilghman⁶ also criticised Dickie for supposing that a purely classificatory sense of the term 'artwork' can ever be wholly disentangled from an evaluative sense of an object being a work of art.

The second problem is that the artwork status of objects exhibited in the shortlist exhibitions is itself a matter of debate within commentaries on the Turner Prize. Over the years, the reviews and commentaries contain, as a recurring theme, the questioning of the artistic status of objects on display. Specifically, the question of whether an object is an artwork because of its intrinsic qualities or because it has received institutional conferral of artistic status is, in the case of the Turner Prize, far from being an abstract matter of theory. Commentators frequently challenge not only the validity of the judgements made by the Tate directorship and the Turner jury, but also the very notion that those institutions can confer art status. It would be wrong to imagine that this theme is confined to the tabloid press; on the contrary, it surfaces regularly in the broadsheets and in the commentaries of professional art critics,⁷ and, on many occasions, the writers' arguments have echoed the views of Cohen and Tilghman. We must accept that, within the commentaries on the Turner Prize, there exists a strand of criticism that challenges the claim that certain exhibited pieces are in fact art objects. If exhibits such as Tracey Emin's *My Bed* or Martin Creed's *Work No. 227: The lights going on and off*⁸ are in fact, as some critics have claimed, not truly works of art, then they would stand as counter-examples to Dickie's definition.

We can see this questioning of the status of Turner shortlisted pieces as valid artworks in the commentary around the work of 1999 prizewinner Steve McQueen. McQueen's winning exhibition included *Deadpan*,

a video installation in which he re-created a famous stunt originally used in Buster Keaton's slapstick comedy *Steamboat Bill Junior*.

David Lee, editor of *Art Review*, questions whether McQueen's video work can be considered art.

Is it art? It might be but it does not look like it to me because McQueen's work is so visually unexacting and fails to add up to more than the sum of its parts, which surely always plays a prominent part in good art. It is in no sense visually alluring, beautiful or memorable...⁹

In listing the qualities Lee sees as lacking in *Deadpan*, he identifies some of those which in his view are necessary for an artifact to be considered a work of visual art: beauty; visual allure or being visually exacting; memorability; and being more than the sum of its parts. If we accept Dickie's definition then the lack of these qualities is not an issue; *Deadpan* is simply an artwork that (according to Lee's evaluation) lacks those qualities. We might, as a result, conclude that it is a very poor artwork, but it is nonetheless an artwork.

However, Cohen argues that the lack of any such qualities would disqualify *Deadpan* from being an artwork: for how could *Deadpan* be, as Dickie calls it, a 'candidate for appreciation' if (as Lee claims) it has no qualities to be appreciated? This throws into question the separation of the classificatory and the evaluative that underpins the institutional definition. Dickie addresses this issue in a later refinement of the formulation that is, if anything, even more starkly anti-essentialist than his definition of 1971: by the time he published *The Art Circle* in 1984 the reference to 'appreciation' had vanished:

A work of art in the classificatory sense is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.¹⁰

In attempting to remove the evaluative dimension from the definition of art, Dickie removes the classificatory difficulty caused by competing or opposing evaluative judgements. Many critics strongly disagreed with Lee's evaluation, as did the Turner Prize jury that year. In *Frieze*, Andrew Gellatly called *Deadpan* 'multi-layered, fascinating and complex',¹¹ while Adrian Searle, in the *Guardian*, described it as 'lyrical' and 'undeniably beautiful'.¹² If such judgements about the presence or absence of aesthetic qualities such as 'beauty' and 'visual allure' may

vary widely between individuals, it might be thought that, when looking at some other aspects of the piece, finding agreement amongst critics should be more straightforward. Lee makes two claims to support his contention that McQueen's films do not constitute art: that his work lacks originality and technical skill. In fact, on the first charge Lee goes further than simply saying that *Deadpan* lacks originality:

His much discussed and praised piece based on Buster Keaton is as flagrant an example of plagiarism as you will find in any art gallery and succeeds only in polluting the memory of a comic masterpiece.¹³

Notwithstanding the obvious adoption of Buster Keaton's original idea in McQueen's film, other critics did not see this as plagiarism. Victoria Button argues that, in the use of a stunt from a slapstick comedy shorn of its narrative context, McQueen 'has taken a moment of silliness, a cinematic cliché, and given it powerful resonance'.¹⁴ In a similar vein, art historian John-Paul Stonard, writing on the Tate website, describes *Deadpan* as 'transforming a slapstick motif into a visually rich exploration of cinematic conventions'.¹⁵

There is a similar lack of agreement on the level of McQueen's technical skills. While Lee describes his work as 'unwatchable for those raised on the efforts of professional filmmakers',¹⁶ Adrian Searle, in the *Guardian*, describes them as 'impeccably shot and edited'.¹⁷

Clearly, to try to decide whether to include works such as *Deadpan* in this study on the basis of their possession or otherwise of certain qualities deemed to be defining qualities of artworks is beset with difficulty. However, it might be argued that, no matter how difficult it might be to put into practice, it should still be attempted. If we wish to establish on what basis evaluative judgements of artworks are made, then polluting our evidence base with reviews of 'art falsely so called' might run the risk of perverting or obscuring our analysis. Although Lee and Searle may disagree about this specific artwork, clearly, for Searle as much as for Lee, the appraisal of technical expertise forms part of the evaluation of the artist's work.

In the reactions to the Turner Prize shortlist exhibition that year, McQueen was not the only nominee to be accused of exhibiting work that failed to be art because of a lack of technical skill, nor was he the most notorious. The great art scandal of 1999 was Tracey Emin's *My*

Bed. Marjorie Millar, in her *Los Angeles Times* article, referred to the issue of technical skill in her report on the controversy:

Anyone who has ever looked at the deceptively simple brush strokes of a modern painting and thought, “I could do that,” would certainly have a similar response to Tracey Emin’s “My Bed” installation at the Tate Gallery. Emin is one of the contenders for Britain’s coveted Turner Prize for contemporary art. Her “My Bed” is a double mattress heaped with stained and dishevelled sheets, surrounded by the debris of indulgence—discarded stockings, empty vodka bottles, cigarette butts, a used condom and menstrual-stained underwear. Seems easy enough to amass. The question is, would you want to?

Or, as the critics and some of the public flocking to an exhibition of the four finalists for the Turner Prize have been asking: When is an unmade bed a work of art and when is it an unmade bed?¹⁸

David Robson’s defence of Tracy Emin’s work in the *Daily Express* came at the height of this furore over the piece. He directly challenges the claim that Emin’s *My Bed* is not art:

The stupidest thing that gets said about her (by lots of sensible ordinary people) is that a bed isn’t art. It can’t be because “It’s just an ordinary bed and I’ve got one like that”. Oh it would have been art if it was a painting or if she’d carved it in marble. You know, shown some skill. Well it is art - it is one of her chosen ways of conveying a life. And it is an effective one. Emin can paint but it is not what she chooses to do now. She is an artist to her fingertips.¹⁹

Although he defends Emin against the charge that her work is not an artwork, his argument implicitly accepts the importance of craft skills, as he calls to the aid of his argument Emin’s proficiency in a traditional artistic medium.

This defence of non-traditional artists on the grounds that they possess craft skills in a traditional artistic medium is evident in the review of the 2004 exhibition that appeared in *Craft Arts International*:

But if anyone felt like jumping up and down over these works and claiming that the concept of Fine Art was disintegrating, or that the artists had no skills, they would actually be mistaken. Much of the work by all four nominees (the Chapmans, like Gilbert & George of some years ago, count as

one) was extremely well crafted and set firmly in the mould of traditional art object. The cultural forebears are easily found.²⁰

In defending the craft skills perceived in the exhibits, the reviewer also defends their places within art traditions. In the discussion of artistic legitimacy, the point at issue is the value or otherwise of objects that are perceived as standing outside the traditional visual arts disciplines of painting, drawing and sculpture.

Anxiety about artists' use of non-traditional media is a common theme of critical reviews and this is something I will look at in depth later in this chapter. It is evident in the title of the article by the *Daily Telegraph's* art correspondent, Nigel Reynolds, on the winner of the 2005 Prize, Simon Starling and his installation *Shedboatshed*: 'Forget painting, Turner Prize is awarded to an old boatshed'.²¹ Starling's piece was indeed originally a boatshed that he had found on the banks of the Rhine; his piece involved dismantling the derelict shed and turning it into a boat, which he paddled down the river to the Kunstmuseum in Basel, where it was dismantled and then re-assembled as a shed.

However, before turning to the question of media, I will look at one final issue surrounding the question of craft or technical skills raised by Starling's piece. Although some commentators were sceptical about the artistic status of *Shedboatshed*, few could deny the craft skills involved in the making of the piece. In his *Frieze* review of the piece in the original Kunstmuseum exhibition, Mark Godfrey notes the centrality and visibility of the construction process:

From the outset, the subject of Simon Starling's work has been the labour expended to produce it. He displays the end result of carefully planned processes, and although the viewer only sees a reconstructed object, they are encouraged to consider the story behind its construction and transformation.²²

We have seen previous examples of commentaries in which the craft skill displayed in the making of the object is used to validate the work of art and, in those cases, even where there is disagreement between reviewers about whether or not those craft skills are present, there seems to be no dispute that such skills would tend to help a claim of artistic status. Craft skills are, to use Carroll's term, a 'good-making' feature; to borrow a phrase from Sibley, 'skilful' is a positively valenced term.

However, Guy Dammann argues that, in the case of Simon Starling's *Shedboatsshed*, the craft skills involved in the making of the piece actually put in question the claim that it is an artwork.

Prominent in our encounter with Starling's £25,000 nautical shack, in other words, is awareness of its craftwork - an awareness, that's to say, of precisely the element of artistic production and consumption that the conceptual art movement took it upon itself to excise, for better or worse.

I'm not saying, of course, that this means Starling's stuff is no good. But if I'm not entirely sure whether it counts as art (and neither is he, I might add, on the evidence of his interview in yesterday's *Guardian*), I'm dead certain that it's not conceptual art. Then again, however, in just raising these questions, maybe it is.²³

Dammann's review lends support to Carroll's argument that it is impossible to formulate common evaluative criteria for different genres of art, but it also underlines the difficulties this study would face if it relied upon a criteria-based definition to define the limits of its case study.

In many commentaries that express scepticism about the art status of particular works, the artist's choice of medium has a bearing on that judgement. In the course of his critique of *Deadpan*, David Lee comments: 'McQueen is neither better nor worse than many artists who try their hand at a spot of video'. In part this criticism is of dilettantism; Lee argues that the production values evident in McQueen's films do not meet professional filmmaking standards. This critique is echoed by Richard Dorment, who commented in the *Daily Telegraph*: 'I've often noticed that people who don't have the talent to make a TV commercial have no trouble passing their static black and white films off as high art.'²⁴ The critique is twofold: of the artists who fail to meet professional standards, and of the institutions that ignore such standards when appraising film in an art-world context. This is not the complaint of an art-world outsider; Dorment had been a member of the Turner Prize jury in 1989.

Lee articulates another common critique of the Prize: discontent over the increasing presence of non-traditional media on the shortlist. Controversy over artists' use of non-traditional media is not new; it has been a theme in reviews since the earliest days of the open shortlist. Brian Sewell commented in 1992:

No sculptures of the human body, no figurative or landscape painter, no one whose skills and subjects might be recognised by Rodin, Michelangelo or Moore, by Constable or by the very Turner whose name lends the prize its only distinction.²⁵

But in 1999, two factors served to amplify this particular debate. The first was the fact that none of the artists on the shortlist chose to exhibit paintings, drawings or traditional sculptures, nor were any of them known for that kind of work. In addition to McQueen and Emin, the other nominees were the video artists Jane and Louise Wilson, and Steven Pippin, whose installation for the exhibition involved photography and constructions made of launderette washing machines. The second factor was the media attention given to the Stuckists, a group of artists who regarded such work as non-art and denounced the institutions that (in their view) foisted it on the public. Founded in the summer of 1999 by painters Charles Thomson and Billy Childish, the Stuckists rejected what they call the ‘conceptualist’²⁶ approach to art, which was seen as dominating the contemporary art scene in general and the selection of Turner Prize nominees in particular. From its very formation and launch, the focus of their criticism was the Young British Artists (YBA), many of whom had been contemporaries of theirs at Goldsmith’s College of Art in the 1980s, and whose work was sometimes referred to as ‘Brit-art’. Thomson own account of Stuckism underlines how, even through its naming, the group was defining itself in opposition to the YBA and its approach to art; he explains that he had coined the name ‘Stuckist’ from ‘an insult to Childish from his ex-girlfriend, Brit artist Tracey Emin, who had told him that his art was “Stuck”’.²⁷ Two months after the 1999 shortlist was announced, the Stuckist manifesto specifically attacked the Turner Prize for embracing non-traditional media. Items 4 and 5 in the manifesto read:

4. Artists who don’t paint aren’t artists.
5. Art that has to be in a gallery to be art isn’t art.²⁸

The Stuckist manifesto both asserts the primacy of painting and criticises the power of curatorial practices that underpin the art of the found object or installation. The second point is elaborated upon, using Emin’s work as an example, in the open letter written by Thomson and Childish to Tate Director Nicholas Serota:

It should be pointed out that an everyday object e.g. a bed, in its normal environment, i.e. a bedroom, must always remain only a bed. Indeed it would still be only a bed even if it were displayed in a department store window or thrown into a canal. Furthermore we assert that the hapless bed would remain no less of - yet no more than - only a bed if it were suspended from the top of the Eiffel tower or somehow landed on the moon. It seems that the said bed ceases to be only a bed and somehow becomes art when placed in the 'contextualising' space of a gallery. We deduce that the credit for this stupendous metamorphosis should therefore be credited to the gallery owner. In today's art world it is the gallerist who performs the miraculous transformation of the mundane into a work of genius!²⁹

The passage offers a perfect counter-example to Kennick's warehouse theory and its final sentence not only lampoons the art world, but serves as a neat burlesque of the institutional approach to the definition of art championed by Dickie. If the problem with criteria-based definitions is that they may exclude work that we might wish to call art, the problem with the institutional definition is that it places no limit whatever on what the art world might designate an artwork. Writing in *Modern Painters*, Giles Sutherland agreed Emin's work could not stand on its own, but needed the context provided by curatorial gloss:

... the art of which Emin's *My Bed* appears representative relies on concepts and explanations: words are often needed to inject any sense into the object itself.³⁰

Different writers may disagree on whether or not *My Bed* is art, but clearly it is not *self-evidently* art; without the contextualisation of verbal explanation or gallery location, it would not be easy for the person in Kennick's warehouse to identify it as an artwork.

The second Stuckist manifesto, produced the following year, continued the attack on what they called 'conceptual art' and again asserted the primacy of painting. Items 4 and 5 of that manifesto read:

4. Turner did not rebuild launderettes. He did not take photographs. He did not make videos, nor, to our knowledge, did he pickle sheep or construct concrete casts of negative space.
5. It should be pointed out that what Turner actually did was to paint pictures.³¹

The Stuckists invoked Turner to support their claim for the primacy of painting; since the inception of the Prize, some had argued that, as it was using the Turner bequest and the Turner name, the Prize should focus on painting. This may to some extent account for the omission of any mention of drawing and sculpture from both the first and the second manifesto. Drawing in particular is a curious omission; in art education and training it is often considered a fundamental skill.

Item 4 refers to the work of Steven Pippin, but also to two previous winners of the Prize. Rachel Whiteread had become celebrated and notorious in 1993 for *House*, a concrete cast of the interior space of a demolished Victorian terrace. When she won the Turner Prize later that year, the *Daily Mail* called her cast of a room ‘a disaster in plaster’.³²

However, the reference to pickled sheep identifies a still more notorious figure. The preserved animal installations of Damien Hirst had been a source of controversy when he was first nominated in 1992, and by the time of his second nomination 3 years later he was regularly attacked or ridiculed in the press. His exhibition featured two of his animal pieces, *Away from the Flock* and *Mother and Child Divided*. Interviewed by the *Independent*, Brian Sewell, art critic of the *London Evening Standard* gave his view of Damien Hirst’s *Away from the Flock*:

I don’t think of it as art. I don’t think pickling something and putting it into a glass case makes it a work of art. You might as well try it with a tea-cosy or milk bottle. It is no more interesting than a stuffed pike over a pub door. Indeed there may well be more art in a stuffed pike than a dead sheep. I really cannot accept the idiocy that ‘the thing is the thing is the thing’, which is really the best argument they can produce. It’s contemptible.³³

For Sewell the lack of ‘making’ is a problem; Hirst has not, in his view, represented a subject, he has merely presented an object. In his review of the shortlist in the *Daily Mail*, Anthony O’Hear’s reaction to *Mother and Child Divided* reflected the views of many commentators in finding the aesthetics of Hirst’s work most objectionable:

In the Tate Hirst is showing *Mother and Child Divided*, which consists of a cow and a calf each dissected at the spine and placed in neighbouring tanks. Politically correct as ever, the Tate assures us that the animals died from natural causes before Hirst got his hands on them. That explanation

however is hardly reassuring to those concerned at Hirst's butchery of artistic taste in this country, or the dishonour his shortlisting does to the name of Turner, our greatest and most vibrant painter.³⁴

O'Hear argues that *Mother and Child Divided* is not 'true art'; the emergence of artists like Hirst is a symptom of the general decadence of art. The piece, in his view, exemplifies the progressive abandonment of acceptable standards of artistic taste that has been in train from Duchamp onwards:

The time has surely come to look for a renaissance of true art. We must insist at the very least that art reintegrates itself with public taste, and once more subscribes to generally recognisable canons of taste and beauty.³⁵

Scepticism about whether Hirst's work can be considered art has continued throughout his subsequent career. Writing about Hirst's retrospective exhibition, Julian Spalding in the *Guardian* said:

Some people argue that Damien Hirst is a great artist. Some say he is an execrable artist, and others put him somewhere more boring in between. They are all missing the point. Damien Hirst isn't an artist. His works may draw huge crowds when they go on show in a five-month-long blockbuster retrospective at Tate Modern next week. But they have no artistic content and are worthless as works of art.³⁶

It might be worth at this point summarising some of the arguments against work such as Damien Hirst's animal pieces and Tracey Emin's bed being considered artworks. O'Hear points to deviation from traditional aesthetic standards. Sewell points out that, in these kinds of pieces, objects are not being represented, merely presented. The Stuckists point out that these works cannot stand on their own, but are dependent on the context supplied by their location within an art exhibition space or the gloss of curators. We have also seen that the perceived lack of technical skill involved in creating these installations is often cited as the reason for denying that they are artworks.

However, this raises a question, for we have seen that critics such as Lee and the Stuckists have bracketed this kind of installation work together with media such as film and photography in their category of 'art falsely so called'. In his review of *Deadpan*, the criticisms Lee makes

are specific to McQueen's work, but, in *Artforum* earlier that year, Lee had already expressed his view on the dominance of video, photography and installation, arguing that the jury had concentrated on such new media 'at the expense of anything that can be called art'.³⁷ The implication is clear: that Lee is, at the very least, more sceptical about assigning art-object status to works that are in non-traditional media than he is about assigning it to paintings, drawings or sculptures. The reasons given for such scepticism about installations are various, as we have seen, but the reasons for placing film and photography in the same category are not so obvious.

It is far from clear that the objections that have been levelled at the work of Emin and Hirst would necessarily also apply to those using photography. Take, for example, Hannah Collins, who appeared alongside Rachel Whiteread on the 1993 shortlist. The art historian Rachel Barnes described her work in the *Guardian's* guide to the shortlist:

She photographs a wide range of subject matter; landscapes, cityscapes, interiors, still lives and the figure. She favours black and white and prints her work on canvas. Her best work is very strong and it is clear that although she attempts to create emotional drama, she is also drawn to the purely aesthetic potential of photography.³⁸

As Rachel Barnes suggests, Hannah Collins' work shows concern for traditional aesthetic qualities and (in O'Hear's phrase) 'subscribes to generally recognisable canons of taste and beauty'. As Virginia Button points out, her work 'frequently refers to the themes and imagery of the great art of the past'.³⁹ It would be hard to deny that Collins' work shows considerable technical expertise, and I would argue that her large-scale black-and-white canvas prints would be likely to be selected from Kennick's warehouse. The kinds of criticisms that are frequently levelled at installation art just do not seem to apply to Collins' work.

However, Stuckist objections to photography and video are categorical, rather than based on any individual judgement of technical skill or aesthetic quality. When, in 2000, the Prize was first won by a photographer, Wolfgang Tillman, the *Guardian's* art correspondent Maev Kennedy reported on a Stuckist protest:

This year's shortlist was a poor platform for Stuckist protests, with Glenn Brown working in oil on canvas with a technique described as "old

masterly”, and Michael Raedecker’s delicate figurative landscapes in paint and embroidery. But Tillmans’s success was a gift to them. “Art is art and photography is photography,” snarled co-founder Charles Thomson, a painter.⁴⁰

If the particular objections often made about installation art do not necessarily apply directly to photographic art, the reviews offer evidence of a number of other possible explanations for this reluctance to assign art-object status to the photograph. One is that, although artists such as Collins may show technical skill in their work, it is, from the point of view of some commentators, the wrong kind of skill. The Stuckists are keen to insist on the primacy of painting; for them, while mastery of the traditional skills of painting acts to validate the artist, a similar level of expertise in using the technology of film and photography does not have that validating power.

Another reason for this tendency to exclude photography may be its ubiquity in an age when huge numbers of high-definition still and moving images are shot every day by untrained members of the public on mobile devices, photographic and video. Art critic Jonathan Jones offers this view:

Photography is not an art. It is a technology. We have no excuse to ignore this obvious fact in the age of digital cameras, when the most beguiling high-definition images and effects are available to millions. My iPad can take panoramic views that are gorgeous to look at. Does that make me an artist? No, it just makes my tablet one hell of a device.⁴¹

Jones presents photography as mere manipulation of advanced technology. His *Guardian* colleague Sean O’Hagan, writing in response to Jones in an article entitled ‘Photography is art and always will be’, disagrees with him:

A great photographer can make a great photograph whatever the camera. A bad one will still make a bad photograph on a two grand digital camera that does everything for you. It’s about a way of seeing, not technology.⁴²

Of course, traditional painting itself requires mastery of technology, knowledge of pigments, of solvents, of lacquers, of their different methods of application to a range of different materials. But although

techniques and materials have constantly developed, the roots of those techniques date back to an era that is pre-industrial, arguably even pre-historic. That opens up another possible reason for the rejection of photographic work as art: the relative novelty of the photographic image in the art museum.

In Sean O'Hagan's reply to Jones, we can see the importance he places on establishing the right of photography to exist within the museum, by invoking key examples from the art historical canon:

If anything is anachronistic, it's the "photography is not art" debate. Warhol's Polaroids and Ruscha's deadpan photography books put it to bed years ago.

When the 2010 shortlist was announced, the *Daily Telegraph's* Alastair Sooke put forward a similar argument when discussing the work of one of the nominees, sound artist Susan Philipsz:

It seems churlish to revisit the old "But is it art?" argument in the case of Scottish sound artist Susan Philipsz, when sound art has been mainstream for years now.⁴³

Sooke indicates acceptance of sound art as a valid form of artwork and the reason he gives for doing so implicitly acknowledges that the novelty of a medium has a bearing on the issue, and that acceptance can come with the passage of time. It is certainly true that not all of those who bemoan the 'death of painting' are opposed to non-traditional media in principle. When Philipsz went on to win the Prize later that year, Sooke's *Telegraph* colleague Richard Dorment wrote a scathing review of her work, which was given the headline, 'Telegraph art critic Richard Dorment reveals why this medium of art means nothing to him'. Dorment had already made his opinion of Philipsz's work clear when he reviewed the shortlist in October:

I blame the judges. There are folk dancing societies all over London she is welcome to join, but please, don't inflict this stuff on the rest of us.⁴⁴

Dorment had not changed his view when Philipsz was announced as the winner 2 months later. However, although the sub-editor's headline

suggests a wholesale rejection of sound art as a medium, in truth Dormont seems to contradict this in the review itself:

As an art critic I'm not the ideal person to comment on the quality of work in a medium that means nothing to me. It's not that I don't like music, or even that I don't appreciate sound installations. One of my favourite works at Tate is a sound installation, Janet Cardiff and George Bures-Miller's 'Forty-Part Motet' – their reworking of 'Spem in Alium' by Thomas Tallis. The problem is that I loathe the kind of think-me sensitive tuneless stuff Ms Philipsz sings.⁴⁵

Although Dormont is forthright in his evaluation of Philipsz's work, when it comes to the medium there is a real confusion, one that is exacerbated by the sub-editor's choice of headline. Dormont talks about 'a medium that means nothing to me', but also cites a sound installation as a favourite. The self-contradiction within the review suggests that, as a critic, Dormont's acceptance of sound art as a valid medium is not straightforward or uncomplicated.

One other possible reason for the reluctance to accept film and photography as art may be the common use of both media in non-art and certainly non-high-art contexts. Most photography that we encounter is commercial photography; most films are the product of the commercial film industry. When Tillmans won the prize in 2000, the *Daily Telegraph* described him as a 'former style and fashion photographer, whose claim to be an artist is challenged by some critics'.⁴⁶ Clearly Tillmans' highly successful career as a commercial photographer was an issue for some; he had made his reputation on commissions for youth, lifestyle and fashion magazines such as *i-D* and *The Face*. *Observer* critic Matthew Collings wrote:

I had no idea why Tillmans is supposed to be an artist. If he wins, the message will be that the Tate, like a youth-friendly vicar, wants to get down and boogie in an embarrassing way with youthful airheads who read *The Face*.⁴⁷

In *Art Monthly*, J.J. Charlesworth approved of the Turner jury's selection of the photographer and argued that his style and subject matter, informed as they are by his commercial work, offer an artistic vision that reflects contemporary society:

Wolfgang Tillmans' success at last year's Turner Prize emphasises the extent to which photography has become a dynamic medium between contemporary art and the preoccupations and interests of the broader cultural sphere. It is little surprise to find art photography flirting wildly with other genres and their attendant contexts, notably photojournalism, fashion photography and digital simulation.⁴⁸

When Tillmans was nominated, Patrick Burgoyne, editor of the *Creative Review*, a magazine that focuses on commercial art and design, celebrated the recognition of Tillmans' photographic work in an editorial entitled 'Yes, But is it Art?' The article directly addressed the divide between commercial and fine art:

The news that Wolfgang Tillmans has been shortlisted for the Turner Prize throws up some intriguing issues for the creative community at large. ... In choosing to shortlist him, the Turner Prize press release praised the way that Tillmans "challenges the boundaries between art and photography" but a far greater challenge is made by the act of choosing Tillmans itself for, if he can qualify for the Turner Prize, what about all the other practitioners of the "communication arts" who similarly "engage with contemporary culture", as the Turner people put it? ... The difference between what they do and what "artists" do is...well, what exactly? Of course, most of the people that we write about create work for a paying client which would normally exclude them from being termed "artists", but it is also the case that most produce a great deal of personal, non-commissioned work. Often, this is the heart and soul of what they do, the client-based work coming afterwards as a result of someone seeing a piece and asking the creator to adapt it for commercial use (as many "artists" have). And if "art" is about ideas, there are ideas every bit as profound, or indeed, every bit as banal in the work of "our lot" as there are in the work of the YBAs et al. The "creative community", i.e. the subject and target of this magazine, has long been treated as second class citizens by the "art world": perhaps that is about to change.⁴⁹

The defining feature of art, which Burgoyne identifies and questions in his editorial as a factor, is economic rather than intrinsic to the medium of photography; work that has been commissioned by and produced for a client is 'normally' disqualified from artwork status. Burgoyne complains that, in the hierarchy of visual culture, it is those who produce visual imagery in the commercial world who have the lower status, but he, to some extent, accepts the central proposition that work produced

for a commercial client is not art, arguing that it is the ‘personal non-commissioned’ work that is worthy of consideration by the art world. Burgoyne uses the term ‘art photography’; it is a medium whose status seems to need special pleading. The term ‘art’ when attached to photography or film carries specific implications about the nature of the work, necessary in order to distinguish it from commercial work; it has not been necessary to coin the term ‘art painting’. It is the success of photographic technology, the ubiquity of photographic images in advertising and journalism, which makes it necessary to identify the sub-category.

As Burgoyne points out, the line between commercial and fine art is not a clearly drawn one and perhaps it never has been. At the time when the notion of the artist, as distinct from the artisan, first emerged, the great Renaissance masters were producing their most famous works to satisfy the commissions of clients. The modern concept of the artist as disconnected from the world of commerce and the demands of clients was perhaps forged in ideas about the nineteenth-century French Impressionist movement, but Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters for the Moulin Rouge are just one example of commercial art that has been accepted into the fine art canon. Incorporation (or plundering) of popular culture goes back to long before Warhol and Rauschenberg, certainly to Dada and early Cubism. Likewise, the incorporation (or plundering) of ‘high art’ for popular culture products is also well established; Gillian Wearing, who won the Turner Prize in December 1997, complained that a TV commercial made by Charles Saatchi’s advertising agency had plagiarised one of her video pieces, a piece that had been bought by Saatchi himself.⁵⁰ Some artists have been able to work successfully in high-art and commercial environments; both McQueen and Sam Taylor-Wood, the 1998 Turner Prize nominee, have subsequently found success in the mainstream commercial film industry. The art status of the films McQueen showed in the 1999 exhibition is strongly questioned by David Lee, yet the films clearly tick all the boxes under Dickie’s institutional definition. Lee does not offer a direct explanation for a non-art object being nominated for a major art prize, but his rhetoric implies one that is offered more explicitly by other commentators and that offers a direct challenge to Dickie: that ‘artworld’ institutions are foisting non-art objects on the public.

This kind of claim is frequently made by critics of contemporary art, and Lee’s comments highlight two associated criticisms specific to the Prize: lack of transparency and the use of obfuscatory language. Lee asks

what qualities the jury saw in McQueen's work and criticises what he sees as a lack of explanation or justification given for their decision:

The judges' bluster about Epoetry and the other all-purpose drivel they trotted out in defence of their choice is unhelpful to those of us who remain bewildered. It would have been educative for the entire nation to have been flies on the wall of the Tate director's office when the judges were deliberating. We would have learned the criteria used for judging such work and not have had to take on trust the mindless paeans uttered by those snake oil salesmen from the Tate's Department of Interpretation. As it is we are none the wiser.⁵¹

Lee's comments are an example of the suspicion expressed concerning the workings of contemporary art institutions in general, and the Turner Prize process in particular. A sizable body of opinion in the editorials and on the letters pages held that the kind of work appearing on the Turner shortlist was not real art, but worthless stuff being passed off as art. The response of US magazine *New Criterion* to *My Bed* is an example:

In recent years, the £20,000 prize has been given to a rogues' gallery of artistic charlatans: Gilbert and George, Damien Hirst, the Chapman brothers, among others. This year, the chief contender is a woman called Tracey Emin.⁵²

Those who, like Lee, are angered or bewildered by the Turner Prize shortlists offer a range of possible explanations for the state of the contemporary art being offered for approval. At one end of the range is what might be called 'the Emperor's New Clothes hypothesis', in which curators, critics and buyers of contemporary art are naively bamboozled by art-world tricksters (who might be the 'artists' themselves or, in other versions, cunning dealers). As in the Hans Christian Andersen story, they are too afraid to break ranks with a received view and so risk ridicule or being seen as undiscerning. Lee's comments, however, suggest that he favours an explanation at the other end of the range, involving sophisticated collusion or conspiracy; this kind of explanation I will call 'the Ebony Tower' after the novella by John Fowles, the title of which refers to an opaque and impenetrable academic art establishment.

Julian Spalding, the former director of the Glasgow Museum, told the *Daily Mail* that he was excluded from the private view of Damien

Hirst's exhibition at the Tate precisely because he had pointed out the Emperor's nakedness:

I had dared to say what many of my colleagues secretly think: Con Art, the so-called Conceptual Art movement, is little more than a money-spinning con, rather like the emperor's new clothes. That goes for the 'artist' Carl Andre who sold a stack of bricks for £2,297. It goes for Marcel Duchamp, whose old 'urinal' was bought by the Tate for \$500,000 (about £300,000). It goes for Tracey Emin's grubby old bed. And, of course, it goes for Damien Hirst.⁵³

Rachel Cooke in the *Observer* reviewed the 2007 shortlist. That year the exhibition was held not in London but at Tate Liverpool. The winner was Mark Wallinger, who showed a film, *Sleeper*, a live piece that the artist had performed at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin:

The Turner Prize has travelled outside London for the first time in its 23-year history, and you can't help but notice that this daring excursion is making its organisers feel just a little anxious. In the capital, you see, there are enough pseuds on hand: types in architectural spectacles who are perfectly at ease ignoring the emperor's-new-clothes element of the competition, and who wouldn't be remotely embarrassed about discussing, in sombre tones, a film of a man in a bear suit prowling an empty art gallery. But what about Liverpool, soon to be European Capital of Culture? Won't its citizens simply laugh out loud at the 'art' that has been so kindly delivered to them?

In my view, it would be to their credit if they did, but this is obviously not quite the reaction the Tate is after.⁵⁴

The contrast made between London and Liverpool underlines the class issue being raised here. Cooke clearly identifies contemporary art as an elite phenomenon. She hopes the simple, honest citizens of the northern provinces will see through it; this 'art', she implies, cannot withstand scrutiny outside an environment in which it can rely on the support of metropolitan 'pseuds'.

Although the Emperor's New Clothes and the Ebony Tower might seem to be mutually exclusive hypotheses, some critics of the Prize have incorporated elements of both. When Tate Director Nicholas Serota

was re-appointed in 2008, art historian Bevis Hillier was quoted in the *Independent* opposing the appointment:

I have nothing against him but he seems sincerely misguided, and sincerely sold on all that rubbish that the likes of Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst produce consisting of filthy beds and misspelt words. There is a conspiracy within the art world to commend this sort of work between artists, art dealers and critics, and I think Nicholas Serota stands at the top of his unspoken conspiracy.⁵⁵

The suggestion that Serota heads art-world conspiracy does not, for Hillier, exclude the possibility that the director of the Tate promotes this kind of work because he genuinely holds it in high regard.

However, in 2002 Ivan Massow, then head of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, implied more sinister motives. Describing what he called 'concept art' as 'pretentious, self-indulgent, craftless tat that I wouldn't accept even as a gift', Massow argued that the conspiracy that supported the boom went wider than the art world:

Totalitarian states have an official art, a chosen aesthetic that is authorised and promoted at the cost of other, competing styles. In the Soviet Union, the official art was socialist realism. Working in any other mode was considered - and treated as - an act of subversion. In Britain, too, we have an official art - concept art - and it performs an equally valuable service. It is endorsed by Downing Street, sponsored by big business and selected and exhibited by cultural tsars such as the Tate's Nicholas Serota who dominate the arts scene from their crystal Kremlins. Together, they conspire both to protect their mutual investments and to defend the intellectual currency they've invested in this art.

Massow emphasises the power and influence of those who have invested in the work, comparing the boom in contemporary British art with the recent stock market bubble:

The parallels between advocates of conceptual art and the dotcom pirates who plundered our pension funds are clear. The arts elite (and that includes the critics) who witnessed the conceptual revolution have invested so much of their reputation in defence of this kind of art that they find themselves unable to criticise it. Moreover, it is supported in so many ways and so thoroughly by the likes of Nicholas Serota and Charles Saatchi, as

well as other, less high-profile investors, that those who speak out against it are derided as “past it”.⁵⁶

This presents a more coercive picture than that of curators and collectors naively duped into believing they see the Emperor’s clothes. It is one in which those who are not in thrall to the art-world group-think face attacks from powerful interests within the Ebony Tower of a dominant elite.

In his book *Con Art – Why you ought to sell your Damien Hirsts while you can*,⁵⁷ Julian Spalding, like Massow, points to the investment art institutions have made in the work of artists like Hirst. Spalding, however, refers not only to the intellectual investment but also the financial one, and he sees the perceived investment value of contemporary art as a motivating factor in a conspiracy to promote found objects as art. Writing in 2012, he made the comparison to a more recent example of the bursting of a financial bubble:

Why did the idea that anything could be art catch on? Con artists, cashing in on Duchamp’s scam, chose a few found objects and sold them to gullible collectors as gilt-edged investments, with the help of a small coterie of dealers and museum curators who wanted to be at the forefront of art no matter what the public thought. The bubble that is Con Art blew up, like the sub-prime mortgage business, in the smoke-and-mirrors world of financial markets, where fortunes have been made on nothing.

None of these explanations involving conspiracy or gullibility can be entirely discounted, even if they to some extent contradict each other. The Tate has sought to address media and public criticisms by opening up the process; from 2002, nominations were invited from the general public, with nomination forms appearing in a national newspaper rather than in specialist art publications. From 2005, there was a move to widen membership of the Prize jury, which had been, up to that point, composed entirely of what might be called art-world insiders: critics, curators, art historians, collectors and patrons. If appointing journalist Lynn Barber to the jury for the 2006 prize was intended to dispel any ideas of an Ebony Tower conspiracy, it was not wholly successful. When the shortlist exhibition opened, Barber published an account of her experiences in which she describes attending the announcement of the 2005 prizewinner:

I had confidently told all my friends that Jim Lambie was bound to win because he was by far the best; I almost fainted when the winner was announced as Simon Starling, the man who turned a shed into a boat into a shed. When I asked my fellow juror Andrew Renton why Starling had won, he said: 'Because he was by far the best.'

That night, I wrote in my diary: 'For the first time, I find myself seriously wondering - is it all a fix? I loathe the idea that even by posing the question I am giving sustenance to the Brian Sewell contemporary-art-is-all-a-con-trick school of thought, but I do find it strange that I am halfway through my year as a juror and absolutely no nearer understanding what I am meant to be doing. ... after six months in the art world, I feel as adrift as on the day I started, thoroughly demoralised, disillusioned, and full of dark fears that I have been stitched up - that actually the 'art world' [whatever that is] has already decided who will win the 2006 Turner Prize and that I am brought in purely as a figleaf.'⁵⁸

Barber clearly felt herself to be the outsider in a group of jurors (chaired by Nicholas Serota) whose other members were gallery directors Margot Heller and Matthew Higgs, and the director of curating at Goldsmiths College, Andrew Renton. Her account tells of her nominations being 'brutally rejected' and some of her accounts of the jury's deliberations suggest that reasons she offered in support of her evaluations were at odds with the approach of the rest of the jury; she describes how, in arguing in favour of her nominees, she 'made the mistake of saying one of them was a beautiful colourist'. Barber also claimed that the Tate's invitation to the general public to make nominations was a sham:

Incidentally, the public is always invited to send in nominations for the Turner Prize. People can send them as much as they like but they might as well drop them straight in the bin. I kept asking when we could see the public nominations, thinking that if any looked interesting I would follow them up. I was given a bald list of names just a fortnight before we had to choose the shortlist, so if there had been any shows I needed to see, they would have been long gone. ... It is wrong of the Tate to suggest that the public's views will be taken into account when they are not.⁵⁹

Barber's article provoked predictably strong reactions from both supporters and critics of the Turner Prize. Yet, later, Barber expresses surprise and dismay on finding that the Stuckists had seized upon her comments as evidence of corruption and conspiracy:

I was horrified to be greeted enthusiastically by a crowd of demonstrators on the steps. They were the Stuckists who always turn up for the Turner Prize but this time they were carrying placards saying 'Is it all a fix? Lynn Barber.' No! The words were taken completely out of context ... but now I am stuck with being a hero of the Stuckist tendency.⁶⁰

Barber made an unlikely Stuckist pin-up; in the first paragraph of her article she refers to her friendship with Tracey Emin and her fellow YBA Sarah Lucas. She goes on to declare herself a supporter of contemporary art and criticises those who dismiss it:

It always infuriates me when people claim to be art lovers just because they go to every Monet, Constable, Caravaggio exhibition and then make crappy jokes about unmade beds and pickled sharks. And, unlike most people in the art world, I do warmly approve of the Turner Prize, the whole vulgar, crowd-pulling, bookie-pleasing razzmatazz of it.

Barber's first account of the judging process makes it plain that, for her, considerations other than inherent quality were relevant to the selection of the shortlist.

I also felt a mission to find a painter to nominate. I don't believe that painting is intrinsically 'better' than video or any other kind of art, but I know the majority of people think it is and I don't see why their wishes should be ignored, especially when the prize commemorates Turner. But the more paintings I saw, the more I came to feel it was a lost cause... Luckily, we did find one good painter, Tomma Abts, to go on the shortlist, but she is a rarity.⁶¹

For Barber at least, there was a sense of the Prize being in a dialogue with the public at large and its critics in particular. The Stuckists were not mollified by the presence of a painter on the list (when Abts was awarded the Prize, Charles Thomson called her paintings 'silly little meaningless diagrams that make 1950s wallpaper look profound'),⁶² but her work was not denounced as non-art as had been that of many a previous nominee.

Barber's support for the Prize and for contemporary art in general only added weight to the criticisms she voiced about the process of selection and judging. The fact that she published the article before the winner had been selected made it both more newsworthy and more

damaging. In her book *Seven Days in the Art World*, Sarah Thornton records the reactions of Barber's fellow jury members:

The Tate's officials were privately furious. "Lynn's article will make it more difficult for the jury to work together," admitted Serota. "In the past, people have been able to speak their mind feeling pretty confident that what they say will not be written down and used in evidence against them."⁶³

Interviewed by Thornton, Serota dismissed Barber's specific claims about public nominations for the Prize:

One of Barber's accusations was that the jury didn't seriously consider nominations from the public. Serota disagreed. "The jury do take those nominations seriously." He raised his eyebrows and chortled silently. "But not to the point of doing deep investigations into an artist who has shown once in Scunthorpe!"⁶⁴

Matthew Collings, in his review of Thornton's book, is in no doubt that on this point Barber is right. He writes of Serota 'making it absolutely clear that the jury would never remotely consider taking nominations for the prize from the ordinary public, while somehow sounding as if he's saying the exact opposite'.⁶⁵ Clearly, Serota's comment can be seen as being characterised by a patrician disdain for the views of the public. However, Barber's article does not lend support to the idea of an art-world conspiracy dominated and controlled by the Tate's director:

The shortlist meeting was held in May, chaired by Nick Serota. Several people had told me I really shouldn't worry my little head because by some mysterious wizardry Serota would choose the shortlist himself. However, this wasn't what happened at the meeting; he barely intervened.⁶⁶

The other members of the jury did not rush to support the views Barber expressed in her column. Thornton's account suggests that, although this may in part have been because her article was seen as a breach of trust and confidentiality, it was also because her colleagues genuinely felt that she showed a lack of judgement in her nominations:

The other judges were dismayed as well. One of them, Andrew Renton, who runs the curating programme at Goldsmiths and also manages a

private contemporary art collection, told me, “I fear she has shot her load. She has sidelined herself as a judge by going public before we have finished the process”. Renton also said that Barber’s inexperience had led her to put forth nominations that the others felt were “beyond premature”. The Turner prize, like any other award that aims to stand for something coherent, needs to be controlled at the right time. As Renton explained, “to give the Turner nomination to someone who is straight out of art school is utterly irresponsible.”⁶⁷

Barber herself reviewed Thornton’s book in the *Daily Telegraph*. Her highly critical review began, ‘Sarah Thornton is a decorative Canadian with a BA in art history and a PhD in sociology and a seemingly limitless capacity to write pompous nonsense’,⁶⁸ and went on to claim factual inaccuracies and poor journalistic practice. Thornton’s subsequent action for libel and malicious falsehood against Telegraph Media Group was successful.⁶⁹

Barber’s later article, after the announcement of the winner, Tomma Abts, contains evidence of the fallout from her first piece, but also maintains a positive view of the Prize. She gives a brief account of her own process selecting the winner:

I must say Tomma Abts didn’t appeal to me at the shortlist stage - I thought she was far too Anita Brookner-ish and restrained - but her work has grown and grown on me with every viewing. Having moved here from Germany 12 years ago, she must have ploughed a very lonely furrow, being a painter and not attached to any fashionable school or group. The other shortlisted artists all had vociferous supporters (Tracey Emin told me she would kill me if Rebecca Warren didn’t win) but Tomma Abts came through purely on the strength of her work. Her Turner Prize room is truly thrilling.

However, she also told her readers, ‘Nick Serota made me promise not to reveal the details of our deliberations so, sorry folks, the secrets of the curia are sealed’, before concluding, ‘nevertheless - for all my complaints - I am very proud to have been a Turner Prize judge’.⁷⁰

Barber’s articles provide evidence that can be used by both critics and supporters of the Prize. While it is clear that it was difficult for an art-world outsider to have great influence on the shortlisting and selection process, her account clearly falls short of providing evidence of a ‘fix’

and Barber disavows the implication that arose from her own use of the word.

In his 1999 book *High Art Lite*, Julian Stallabrass describes the Brit-art scene, documenting the promotion of artists through sophisticated public relations and the coincidences of interest between publicly funded institutions and private dealers or collectors. He also gives examples of the subtle and unsubtle pressures exerted by art-market interests on curators and critics. Such forces have, of course, been in play since the earliest development of the modern art market, but, clearly, the remarkable rise in contemporary art prices over the last three decades has heightened the commercial pressures. As a result, the contemporary art world Stallabrass describes would be instantly recognisable to anyone familiar with the commercial film or music industries. However, while some of this may provide a critique of the operation of the cultural industries, I would argue that none of it amounts to evidence of a conspiracy to pass off non-art objects as art. Even if we were to accept the existence of a conspiracy to promote, for entirely cynical reasons, the work of certain practitioners, it is not clear what motivation the conspirators could have for choosing to promote work that was not art rather than work that was art.

Nevertheless, it is the nature of conspiracies to hide the true motivations of their instigators; what if nonetheless the art world is indeed in the grip of a conspiracy to foist non-art objects on the public? Or, alternatively, what if, rather than being sanctioned by an Ebony Tower cultural elite, these works are evidence of an art-market bubble resulting from the collective naivety of those same curators, critics and dealers? In either case I would argue that it would make the case for the inclusion of commentaries on the disputed work stronger rather than weaker. If either phenomenon is in operation, then analysing the reasons critics give for their evaluations of these works should provide clues to its nature.

Besides, there is another problem with these various claims that parallels the central problem of evaluative criteria: that of getting any agreement on the precise nature of the conspiracy. Massow damns the empty conceptualism of the Turner Prize, but in the same article describes Martin Creed as a genius; Brian Sewell dismisses Damien Hirst, but elsewhere praises the Chapman Brothers. The use of the institutional definition is open to the criticism that it fails to indicate or limit the grounds on which the conferral of art status on an object can legitimately be made. However, even if the selectors of the Turner Prize shortlist

could be shown to be perversely including objects that were not art, there would still be value in analysing the commentaries on that work. Conversely, the opposite risk, of excluding artworks from the study because we suspect them of being ‘art falsely so called’, has no upside.

It must be conceded that to base this study on commentaries on the Turner Prize implies a de facto acceptance of Dickie’s institutional definition of art. I set out my defence of that state of affairs, not by arguing for the correctness of Dickie’s approach but by arguing for its utility. The adoption of Dickie’s approach ensures that reviews of objects that are generally recognised as artworks are not excluded from the study. Moreover, the adoption of the institutional approach ensures that critiques of the theory itself are included in the case study; in a meta-critical study we should not fail to scrutinise the reasons given for evaluative judgement of objects whose very claim to be artwork is in dispute.

Tilghman, Cohen and other critics of the institutional approach argue that the term ‘work of art’ necessarily carries with it an evaluative implication. However, Dickie sees the evaluative sense of the term as a different usage, one that is separable from the classificatory sense of the term.

When using the term ‘work of art’ as a classificatory term, we might routinely describe paintings and sculptures (although perhaps not films, photographs or found objects) as works of art, regardless of their perceived quality. Used in the evaluative sense, we might praise a particular work as ‘truly a work of art’. But as Arthur Danto pointed out, ‘Any term can be normativized in this way, as when pointing to a certain handsaw we say, “That’s what I call a handsaw”, meaning that the tool ranks high under the relevant norms.’⁷¹

In examining the commentaries of those who doubt the art status of a particular work, it is frequently the case that the critiques primarily operate as evaluative criticisms of the work. That is not to claim that such critiques are merely rhetorical condemnations or that their authors are not in earnest when they claim that a particular piece is not art, or that a certain practitioner is not truly an artist. In many cases where an object is condemned as non-art, this is simply an intensified version of condemning it as poor art. However, there is a real difference in the strength of the language and the fact that it comes with the implication of the artist acting in bad faith. The focus is often on the artist’s *motives* in producing art objects of a kind that the writers do not approve of, or do not recognise as legitimate forms of art. If the artistic motives for producing work of that kind seem unfathomable, then, for some commentators,

that raises the suspicion that artists are acting out of cynicism, or are self-deluded, or are part of a conspiracy.

However, aside from the implication of bad faith, the negative criticisms that are levelled in such cases are not very different to the kind of critiques that might be offered by one who did not doubt that a work is art. To say that a work shows a lack of skill, originality or visual appeal is the sort of comment that we might make about art that is poor. As Dickie points out, allowing the distinction between an evaluative and a purely classificatory or descriptive meaning of the term ‘art’ enables us to discuss value within the classification; without that distinction, to speak of ‘bad art’ would be redundant.⁷²

Julian Stallabrass discussed the implications of that distinction in an anecdote recorded in *High Art Lite*:

My father, looking at a picture in a Damien Hirst catalogue recently of some cigarette butts on a shelf, asked if such a thing could be art. It is a question that people in the art world tend to be impatient of, hearing it too often from outside (though never from inside) that world, because it is not a question about the definition of art but about the definition of quality in art; and because it is often asked not as a genuine question but rhetorically, as an accusation. The other reason, of course, that people get upset about it is because it is a very difficult question to answer – especially so, when as in many theoretical circles, the issue of quality is ruled out, for an obvious move in answering would be to say that we can be relaxed about our criteria for what is and is not art, so long as we are not relaxed about what counts as good art.⁷³

Critics of Dickie’s approach point to a certain emptiness or circularity in the institutional definition of art: art is what is presented as art by the art world. For the purposes of this study, the validity or otherwise of such critiques is not an issue. If we intend to study the evaluative judgments of art critics, we must not exclude reviews of works whose status as artworks is in dispute. To do so would be to skew the evidence base; indeed, one result would be to exclude the very commentaries that are most hostile to the institutional approach to the definition of art. The utility of Dickie’s approach in this case is its very emptiness, its silence on the question of the grounds on which the art world makes its judgments of what is art and what is not.

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